

# **LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN STUDY ABROAD (SA) CONTEXT AND RELATIONSHIP WITH INPUT AND INTERACTION IN SLA**

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## **Abstract**

Language learning can occur anytime and anywhere (context). In terms of context, language learning can take place whether at home context or at a study abroad context. This article presents the necessary background to existing literature and previous research about language development in various contexts, more specifically in a study abroad (SA) context. Language learners who are studying abroad can lead to language development from a number of perspectives. Research findings revealed that language development can take a variety of forms including grammar, vocabulary, fluency, communicative skill, etc. These research findings will be reviewed in order to have a clear understanding about this issue. Then, this article continues to give a brief explanation on the role of input and interaction in SLA with some views on it.

**Keywords:** *language development; study abroad; input; interaction; second language acquisition*

## **Introduction**

It is fundamental to understand the nature of a native or L2. One should have knowledge about some areas or aspects in that language. There are a number of aspects of language that can be described systematically. Linguists have divided language into different areas of knowledge including lexicon (vocabulary), phonology, syntax (grammar), morphology, discourse, semantics, pragmatics of language and fluency. Almost all of the language aspects have been the focus of the research

in second language acquisition (SLA) and its connection to various language learning contexts. Most of the research is concerned with how ESL learners' proficiency of spoken skills, vocabulary, syntax or grammatical structure, morphology, discourse, and pragmatics may have or have not been improved and developed by particular learning contexts.

There have been many previous studies that have been performed with varying scopes of measurement variables typically within and across various contexts of learning, comparing between learners who are studying at home (AH) and in a study abroad (SA) contexts on language gains. Every year, thousands of students worldwide leave home to study abroad. There are a variety of reasons for students to study abroad, for example to improve their foreign language skills; to gain cultural knowledge; to pursue academic qualifications and so forth. With growing interest of SA for language purposes, there has also been growing interest among researchers in studying and investigating the language benefits from a SA context. However, it is still unknown what linguistic benefits increase to learners as a result of spending time in contact with the target community in an education program. According to Ferguson (1995), there is a 'myth' that there must be exposure to natural setting to successfully acquire a L2; however it has not been explored systematically.

For many people, the experience of residing in a country other than their own country may result in their learning the language of that country. To what extent they learn, the accuracy with which they use this language and the style and dialect they acquire depend on numerous variables. According to Freed (1995), who provided the first collection of studies on SA experience, the context of learning has been identified as one of the crucial variables in second language learning. Much of this research has identified the similarities and differences in L2 acquisition between those who are learning a target language in an at-home formal instructional setting as opposed to those learning L2 in a target language community, either in an immersion program or in a study abroad context.

It has long been assumed that the combination of immersion or SA context integrated with formal classroom learning creates the best environment for learning a second language. The strength of this statement according to Freed (1995, p.5) is

related to some belief shared by students and teachers, parents and administrators, that students who study abroad will attain an ultimate proficiency and specialization in a L2. However, there have been relatively few empirical studies which have addressed the linguistic impact of study abroad in a carefully controlled and in an in-depth manner. It is worth noting that some studies have discussed the general benefits from SA such as the study by Coleman and Rouxville 1993; Freed, Segalowitz et al 2004; Collentine 2004; Segalowitz and Freed 2004. These studies (as cited in Freed, 1995, p. 5) examined issues such as preparation for the study abroad experience, program assessment, student evaluations, general policy issues, and the benefits from a study abroad experience.

Furthermore, do adult second language learners benefit when they use a lot of time to interact with native speakers compared to others? Recently, there have been a number of empirical studies and investigations on the effects of language learning context on second language acquisition. Surprisingly, however, the question remains unanswered as to what specific evidence there is for interlanguage development in the study abroad context. The studies by i.e. Collentine & Freed (2004), Collentine, (2004), Tanaka (2004), Diaz-Campos (2004) and Magnan and Back (2007) are amongst the few investigations that explore the linguistic benefits of a SA context. For example, the study by Collentine (2004) identified the effects of learning contexts on morphosyntactic and lexical development. He compared and investigated two groups of learners studying Spanish in a formal classroom or at home (AH) setting and in a study abroad (SA) context on their developing grammatical and lexical abilities. In order to get the data, he used an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) before and after the experimental period. The results indicated that the AH group of students were better at the acquisition of grammatical and lexical features. In contrast, a SA context showed a great improvement in narrative abilities in comparison to the AH group. He assumed it may be that daily interactions within the target community allow SA learners to practice speaking more in narrative way.

Another worthwhile investigation involves identifying the factors that might influence the development of L2 proficiency. Tanaka's (2004) study, for instance, revealed that proficiency gains during studying abroad was affected by learners' belief

about language learning and opportunities that helped them transform the beliefs to the actual learning behaviours. When learners are in a context where interaction occurs with a more expert speaker, they notice new or correct structures and utterances produced by native speakers of a language (Donato, 1994). He also adds the notion of “scaffolding” in order to describe the process by which the L2 learners develop their interlanguage through interaction. In other words, scaffolding allows learners to notice a mismatch between what they know about the language and what native speakers produce.

By and large, there is a considerable variation in the language learning experiences in a study abroad context. On the surface, study abroad offers learners with plenty of opportunities for interaction, to notice the gap and to engage in scaffolding (Isabelli 2006, p. 232). In addition, Schumann (1976) claims that ‘the environment in which the learners interact, the opportunities to use the language, learners’ motivation and attitude positively influence their successful in SLA’ (Schumann 1976, as cited in Isabelli 2006, pp. 232-233). Therefore, language opportunities such as interaction together with learning differences in a learner’s personality will give a better gain in language learning.

It is worth noting that the amount of language contact and interaction play a crucial role in language gain. Language contact is one aspect of learning a target language as it offers opportunities to interact with native speakers or competent users. In addition, opportunities to interact and to observe everyday life interactions help learners notice the differences between their own output and that of native speakers, so they can modify their language according to the native speakers’ utterances. The researchers whose research interest is in SLA including Dewey (2004), Freed (1995), Freed, Segalowitz & Dewey (2004), Segalowitz & Freed (2004) have informed us about the direct correlation between the amount of language contact and language gains. They analyzed some areas of language gains including oral fluency, speaking ability, reading, listening, grammar, and vocabulary acquisition. In order to get the data, they used a questionnaire called a ‘Language Contact Profile (LCP)’ to document various aspects of learners’ language contact and use. LCP is a self-reported questionnaire to measure language contact outside the classroom

(Freed 1990, p.463) Those aspects such as the amount of time per week learners spend using four basic language skills namely speaking, listening, writing and reading is then related to language gains. In line with this, some studies revealed that learners in a SA context benefit more at an overall enhanced fluency (Freed, 1995) and greatly enhanced communicative skills (Lafford, 1995). They speak more fluently with fewer gaps and pauses. Moreover, a study by Milton and Meara (1995) and Davidson and Ginsberg (1995) also provided some evidences that the SA context may be an important aspect in the vocabulary acquisition. This is partly because students attended several programs and skills enhancement during their study. Additionally, Freed, Segalowitz and Dewey (2004) compared the development of oral proficiency gains among three groups of learners studying French as their L2; those remaining at home; those enrolled in a domestic immersion program; and those in a study abroad context. The results showed that the immersion students improved most on oral fluency and reported significantly more L2 contact hours.

Similarly, there are two other previous studies that have been conducted to measure second language acquisition and fluency in L2 learners. Freed & Segalowitz (2004) studied the role of context of learning in oral performance gains in second language acquisition. They compared two contexts namely learners of Spanish in a study abroad context and learners in an "at home" context. In addition, oral proficiency interviews (OPI) were used with both groups of learners before and after the program. The results revealed that learners who studied abroad made a significant improvement in oral fluency than "at-home" learners. This result was measured by the speed rate and lexical access (word recognition) and automaticity of lexical access. However, the results obtained from LCP (language contact profile) do not provide a positive correlation between language contact and language gains.

In another study, Dewey (2004) compared the relationship between reading development and the amount of language contact between two Japanese groups of L2 learners; those who were in a study-abroad context and those who were in a domestic immersion context. He used self-assessed reading to measure any group differences in both pre-test and post-test reading gains. This study reported that SA students spent much more time reading and interacting with others in L2 Japanese

than those in the immersion contexts. However, based on self-assessment score and correlation data, there were no links between the amount of L2 contact and reading gains.

Perdue and Klein (1992) have investigated and provided data about the effects of the types of the discourse in which learners were engaged in naturalistic and uninstructed conditions of grammatical and lexical acquisition. They examined two subjects learning English in the United Kingdom over two years. They reported that one of the learners had great progress in subordinating and the emergence of verbal inflection because of his desire to be expressive. Moreover, the learner was able to employ complex morphosyntactic strategies to achieve certain topicalization effects. Whereas, the other learner did not develop his morphosyntactic abilities because he/she was oriented to speech acts, for example in requesting food, direction and so on.

The fact that the experience of language learners who are studying abroad can lead to language acquisition can be seen from a number of perspectives. This is similar to what Churchill and DuFon (2006) pointed out from their study that abroad experience leads to language acquisition. Their study revealed that student' grammatical development shows less gain from study abroad than from an intensive program, however there was a great improvement in oral proficiency and pragmatic abilities. Moreover, Freed (1998, as cited in Collentine & Freed, 2004. p.158) suggested that

“the linguistic benefits for these learners included ability to speak with greater ease and confidence, expressed in part by a greater abundance of speech, spoken at a faster rate and characterized by fewer dysfluency-sounding pauses. [Such students]...display a wider range of communicative strategies and a broader repertoire of styles...and their linguistic identities extend beyond the expected acquisition of oral skills to a new self-realization in the social world of literacy”.

Researchers have continued to examine the effects of the SA context on grammatical and lexical development (e.g., Collentine 2004). DeKeyser (1991) and Regan (1995) failed to show any advantage for gains in syntactic control for students in the SA context. By contrast, Isabelli (2000) identified grammatical features that appear to benefit significantly from the SA experiences, such as tense, aspect, and a

certain degree of agreement features. Additional research (Schell, 2000) suggested that the learner experiences a significant period of time when various inflectional features compete in apparent free variation during the initial stages of acquisition abroad and that lexical development helps to consolidate such variation.

Vocabulary is the most important area of L2 knowledge to be acquired by second language learners. According to Saville-Troike (2006), vocabulary knowledge can be acquired through many different stages and degree. First of all, learners may recognize any words they hear or see. Then, those words can be produced in limited context. Eventually, they can control their accurate and appropriate use of words.

Residence in an L2 environment is thought to contribute favourably to L2 learning in general and to L2 vocabulary learning in particular. It provides learners with massive input and with ample opportunities for challenging their linguistic resources through everyday use of the language. However, researchers do not know what length of residence indeed makes a difference in the activation of a learner's passive vocabulary (Laufer & Paribakht, 1998).

Grammar or mainly speaking is known as syntax refers to the knowledge we have of the elements in a sentence. According to Tallerman (2005, p.1), linguists use the term of grammar to refer to all its organizing principles such as information about sound system, form of words, how to adjust language according to context and so on. Much of the work on grammatical acquisition has been done recently by some linguists and researchers. Several methods also have been used to collect grammatical data to examine the acquisition of features such as subject verb agreement, tense and aspect.

It is widely accepted that language development normally occurs during a study abroad. The study conducted by Carroll (1967) was the pioneer study in analyzing the benefits of study abroad. The data shows that time spent abroad is one of the predictors of success in target language proficiency (Meara, 1994; Carroll, 1967). The work of Brecht and Robinson (1993) and Brecht, Davidson and Ginsberg (1993) covered the broader view of the language process. They statistically analyzed the relationship between learners' characteristics and pre and post program assessment on speaking, listening and reading abilities. They discovered that

study abroad is an effective context for improving speaking and listening skills. In contrast, DeKeyser (1991) stated that the results of some studies (Moehle, 1984 & Raupach, 1984) indicate that grammar did not change in any significant way as a result of several months spent in the target language speaking community.

Regan's (1995) investigation does provide information with respect to the improvement of the linguistic aspect of negation in French. The study indicates that the subjects, who spent an academic year in France and Brussels, not only acquired the use of negation in French but also acquired the sociolinguistic of native speakers' norm of variable negation use.

Segalowitz and Freed (2004) stated that interaction with native speakers improves acquisition. Nonetheless, researcher such as Teichler (1991) argues that interaction with native speakers unlikely to improve proficiency. He mentions that too much time spent interacting with native speakers will hinder the proficiency development (Teichler, 1991, as cited in Back & Magnan, 2007, p. 44). This statement was supported by Ball (2000) and Allen and Herron (2003) that L2 learners tend to be dependent on other English speakers because of the high linguistics demands during their studies and anxiety that may limit their interaction with NS (Ball, 2000; Allen & Herron, 2003, as cited in Back & Magnan, 2007, p. 44).

However, according to Collentine (2004, p. 228), the research on grammatical and vocabulary development in different learning contexts has only captured few available data. He has identified some problems why we know little about grammatical and lexical development in different learning contexts. Those problems are due to the lack of data precision and small sample sizes which then lead to not being able to generalize the available data. Based on those problems, the further precise research needs to carry on shedding light and generalizing the findings. In summary, research to date has contributed data towards understanding many aspects of SLA in the SA context.

In the following, I will discuss the effect of input and interaction in the second language acquisition.

## Input and Interaction in SLA

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a complex field where researchers try hard to understand the learning process. SLA can be affected by many factors. Isabella (2001) mentions that SLA is affected by many external factors, such as, social variables, input, interaction and internal factors such as, language transfer from learners' L1, cognitive variables and linguistic universals.

It is widely recognized that input is essential for language acquisition. Input constitutes the language to which the learner is exposed. It can be spoken or written (Ellis, 1986). In addition to input, interaction also plays a crucial role in the process of learning a second language. Ellis (1986) defines interaction as the discourse jointly constructed by the learner and his interlocutors. There is a relationship between these two conceptual factors of SLA. Since the early 1980s, the roles of input and interaction have been recognized as important in understanding how an L2 is learned. It is worth noting that no one can learn a second language without some sort of input, such as second language grammar, vocabulary, speech sound and so forth. Input has been characterized differently in different theories of second language acquisition ranging from Krashen's monitor model, input as a major form of comprehensible input and so on (Krashen, 1980; 1982; 1985, as cited in Gass, 1997).

Accordingly, second language acquisition is a complex and complicated area to be discussed even among the researchers. According to Gass (1997), in order to be able to understand how one learns a language is to understand how various theories relate one to another. Some Nativism researchers claim that the learners comes to the language task with structural knowledge in their mind or innateness which allow learners to construct a grammar of the language being learned based on the limited data. Similarly, a Universal Grammar (UG) approach views input from a different perspective. Input is regarded as an internal linguistic system and new syntactic knowledge grows up rather than being learned (Schwartz, 1993).

On the other hand, Ellis (2002) strongly argues for the importance of input. He relies heavily on input that learners extract from frequency of input. Another view, an interactionist perspective, states that language acquisition and social interaction

is mutually interdependent, they cannot be separated. Someone cannot understand the development of grammatical knowledge unless one focuses on the way the knowledge itself interacts with other aspect of the learning situation. Moreover, the main point concern of this view is interaction. Interaction through negotiation of the meaning helps learners to get additional information about the language and focus their attention on particular parts of the language. Although the theories differ as to its views, both have its merit in L2 learning.

Communicative competence is everything the learners need to know in order to communicate appropriately within a particular community. This knowledge consists of the knowledge of language which defines as linguistic competence and communication skill (Ellis, 1985). In addition, Saville-Troike (2006, p. 135) states that this knowledge can be achieved by learners' previous cognitive development and social experience. L2 competence is typically much more restricted when SLA take places in a foreign language setting. For most students and people who are learning a L2 language need an extra effort to acquire the L2 structures and how to communicate with NS. There are many reasons for learning a L2 or foreign language. In considering the purpose for which people learn second and foreign language, Saville-Troike (2006, p.135) has divided two fundamental types of communicative competence that is academic competence and interpersonal competence.

According to Tallerman (2005, p.2), it is much easier to learn language that are closely related or similar to our own language and share the common features, such as Greek, Swahili or Mohawk. But, this becomes a really hard for those whose languages have different features or word order with the target language. In this case, the learners need to do extra efforts to learn it.

Their acquisition of L2 or foreign language grammatical points might be influenced by their first language (L1) or their variety of linguistic learning background. Not only classroom language instruction is needed but also the exposure to the target language and involve in the interaction with native speakers or fluent speakers. Klein and Perdue (1993: 30) suggest that "learners develop a particular way of structuring their utterances which seems to represent a natural equilibrium" (Klein &

Perdue 1993, cited in Huebner, 1995, p. 173). They also mention that, for example, learners whose first language uses zero anaphora might take longer to maintain topics with pronouns, while some learners from pronouns language would have to struggle to learn to use a zero anaphora. Thus, the interaction explanation suggests that learners who have more opportunities for meaningful interaction would learn the target language patterns more readily than those in classroom instruction. It can be concluded that interaction may help learners to acquire L2 grammar patterns, and other sorts of linguistic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic areas, communication skills and so forth.

## Conclusion

To sum up, learning a second or foreign language is not an easy task. The learners need extra effort to succeed or to achieve proficiency in that language. Many factors may contribute to language development. One of them is learning language in the country where the language is being spoken or in study abroad (SA) context. This of course may give a plenty of meaningful input and interaction with the native speakers or fluent speakers. However, there is no agreement amongst researchers to what extent and what linguistic aspects develop during study abroad.

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