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Document downloaded from:

<http://hdl.handle.net/10459.1/59476>

The final publication is available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2009.03.001>

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A short stay abroad: does it make a difference?¹

A short stay abroad (journal's running headline)

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Abstract

Given that summer abroad programs are becoming more and more popular, the aim of the present study is to find out whether foreign language proficiency can be significantly improved during a summer stay of 3-4 weeks. The present study examines learners' linguistic gains through oral fluency and accuracy measures as well as a listening comprehension task. Learners' oral fluency is examined in terms of syllables per minute, other-language word ratio, filled pauses per minute, silent pauses per minute, articulation rate, and length of the longest fluent run. The accuracy of learners' oral production is measured by means of the ratio of error free clauses and the average number of errors per clause. In addition, learners' errors are classified into 4 categories: morphological errors, syntactic errors, lexical errors and covered errors. Results reveal that these short stays do indeed produce significant gains on most measures, and that proficiency level strongly affects the intensity of learners' progress.

Keywords: Accuracy, Foreign language (FL), Listening comprehension, Oral fluency, Second language (L2), Study abroad (SA)

1. INTRODUCTION

Study abroad (SA) programs are very popular all over the world, but they have been the focus of interest of relatively few researchers (see Freed 1995, 1998; Huebner, 1998). Furthermore, most existing studies have examined language gains or attitudinal changes in groups of college students who usually spend from 3 to 6 months abroad. The interest of collecting data from different populations, and in particular from younger students, who are increasingly participating in SA programs or in L2 immersion programs has motivated the study reported in this paper. The study has also been motivated by the interest of gathering evidence from the amount and type of gains that may be obtained by means of periods of immersion that are shorter than those of the typical study abroad. The examination of learners' individual characteristics and their use of the L2 while staying abroad can also throw some light on the variability that has been observed in previous research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Much research in SA programs has focused on intercultural competency and affective and psychological aspects of the experience (Cubillos, Chieffo and Fan, 2008), but there is a dearth of studies on how the FL immersion setting might affect specific aspects of language learning (Segalowitz, Freed, Collentine, Lafford, Lazar and Díaz-Campos, 2004). Among the latter, most studies have focused on speaking skills, and research has found these to benefit the most during the SA experience (Freed, 1995; Freed, Segalowitz and Dewey, 2004; Lapkin, Hart and Swain, 1995; Lennon, 1990; Riazantseva, 2001; Segalowitz and Freed, 2004). Freed, Segalowitz and Dewey (2004) compared several fluency variables of 28 English native-speakers studying French as a

foreign language (FL) in three contexts in an at home institution (AH), in an immersion setting (IM) and abroad in France (SA). Their results reveal that the IM group made the greatest gains in oral performance, followed by the SA group, and last the AH group. This finding is not surprising given the fact that IM students reported that they wrote and spoke the FL more hours per week than the other groups. Segalowitz and Freed (2004) investigated the same set of variables of 40 English native-speakers studying Spanish as a FL. Their results show that in terms of hesitation and temporal phenomena, SA participants outperformed AH participants. Lennon (1990) reached a similar conclusion after his exhaustive analysis of several temporal and pausological variables of four students spending six months abroad. Similarly, studies of pronunciation skills have found greater improvement in students who stayed abroad than in students who stayed at home (Díaz-Campos, 2004), although perceptual phonetic ability has been also found to benefit more from formal instruction than from a SA experience (Mora, 2007).

In contrast, fewer studies have focused on listening comprehension skills. These studies have mostly shown significant gains (Brecht et al., 1995; Kinginger, 2008). For example, Allen (2002, cited in DeKeyser, 2007) reported a medium-effect size in listening skill gains for 25 English-speaking learners of French after six weeks abroad. However, in a recent study, Cubillos et al. (2008) found that a group of 48 English-speaking intermediate students of Spanish who participated in a five-week program abroad did not obtain greater gains than their peers on campus, with the exception of the subgroup with initial higher proficiency level.

Carroll's (1967) study was the first macro study to offer a wide perspective of global FL learning (see also Huebner, 1995). In Carroll's study, 2 782 seniors majoring different FLs underwent a series of specific tests to cater for different gains. An important finding of this study was that SA favours weaker learners, which has since been confirmed by a

large number of researchers (Brecht, Davidson and Ginsberg, 1990, 1995; Brecht and Davidson, 1991; Brecht and Robinson, 1995; Díaz-Campos, 2004; Dyson, 1988; Freed 1995, 1998; Ginsberg, 1992; Lapkin, Hart and Swain, 1995; Marriott, 1995; Regan, 1995; Siegal, 1995).

Studies about language gains in a stay abroad context have frequently analyzed subjects who spend three or more months abroad, the assumption being that shorter periods may not produce any significant change in subjects' second language proficiency. Moreover, a few studies that have focused on programs of a short length of stay have been concerned with the participants' perspectives of their experience or the participants' openness to diversity (e.g. Ismail, Morgan and Hayes, 2006; Jackson, 2006; Tarp, 2006). Only a small number of recent studies have focused on the impact on language gains of short stays abroad (Cubillos et al., 2008; Evans and Fisher, 2005; Granget, 2008). Evans and Fisher (2005) analyzed the listening comprehension, oral proficiency and written proficiency of 68 students (aged 13-14) who had only spent from 6 to 11 days in a SA program. They concluded that participants in their study significantly improved their listening and writing skills and that the participants' listening improvement was still remarkable two years after their SA. Interestingly, Cubillos et al. (2008) report that their study on the impact of a five-week program abroad on listening comprehension skills was motivated by the recent growth in popularity of short-term programs among American SA students and the dearth of research on them.

A different type of short experience in which more and more European learners engage (often several times during their learning trajectory) is language learning programs during the summer. These are very often undertaken privately, that is, not within an institutional context, and as a consequence they have not been so much researched. Therefore, it seems crucial to conduct empirical studies that focus precisely on these

short stays abroad and that can throw light on the type of gains learners may expect to obtain in those situations.

To finish, research in this area has revealed a great deal of variability, which may be partly explained by the extent to which participants take advantage of the opportunities for language practice that the SA environment offers them (DeKeyser, 2007). Furthermore, studies that have looked at the correlations between the amount of language contact and language gains have provided somewhat mixed findings, which suggests that the relationship is rather complex and calls for further empirical investigation (Taguchi 2008). Therefore, the time spent using the L2 by the learners is also included as an important factor in the present study. In sum, this study aims at analyzing the language gains obtained during a short stay abroad, as well as the effects on those gains of the participants' individual characteristics (proficiency level, age, length of stay, and previous experience abroad), and of their use of the L2.

3. THE STUDY

3.1 Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do short stays abroad (3-4 weeks) improve FL proficiency as shown by listening comprehension, oral fluency, and accuracy measures?
2. Are individual differences such as proficiency level, age, length of stay, and length of previous stay/s abroad related to students' progress in the SA context?
3. To what extent is amount of L2 use during the SA experience associated with the learners' language gains?

3.2 METHOD

3.2.1 Participants

Twenty-four Catalan/Spanish-L1 students of English as a FL participated in this study, nine of them males and fifteen females. The participants were students of different ages (from 13 to 22), who spent from 3 to 4 weeks in an English-speaking country. Eleven participants had already spent time abroad to improve their proficiency in English before the summer when this study was carried out, and fourteen had not. All of them had studied English at least for 5 years before, with three of the participants listing English as a major. Most participants enrolled in a summer course in the FL country and spent 3-4 hours per day in formal English classes and 2-3 hours per day engaged in other activities, usually sports. Two participants went to the FL country to work and spent 8 hours a day at their job. Of the total group, only three participants lived in a hall of residence during their time abroad and the remaining twenty-one lived with a family (see Appendix 1).

3.2.2 Procedure

The learners in this study performed two tasks during the week prior to their departure to the host country (pre-test) and the same two tasks during the week after their arrival from the host country (post-test). In both data collection situations, the participants were engaged in a 10- to 15-minute oral interview in English with the researcher which was audio recorded. The interview began with a series of biographical questions that served as a warm-up and led to a picture-elicited story task. In this task the participants were asked to narrate or describe (when their proficiency level did not allow them to perform a narrative) a series of 6 pictures in which two children are getting ready for a picnic, their dog gets inside the picnic basket, and later the children realise that their dog has

eaten all their food. This task provided the data for the analysis of the learners' oral fluency and accuracy gains obtained during the stay abroad.

In the same sessions, the participants were asked to perform a listening comprehension test that contained 21 pre-recorded utterances produced by an English native-speaker. Each sentence was related to three pictures and the participants had to choose the picture that best suited the sentence they heard (see Appendix 2).

In addition, during the pre-test session, participants were given a notebook in which they were asked to keep a daily record of the time they spent listening, speaking, reading and writing in English as well as their daily use of another language (and which this other language was). It was expected that the analysis of the learners' records would provide important information about the amount of input the learners received and the output they produced during their stay abroad.

3.2.3 MEASURES OF ORAL FLUENCY

In this study, a construct of oral fluency based on measures of temporal and hesitation phenomena which have been previously used by other scholars in research of oral fluency has been adopted (Lennon, 1990; Riggenbach, 1989). Following Freed (1995), the term oral fluency has been used "to refer to those aspects of oral performance having to do with the fluidity or "smoothness" of language use" (cited in Segalowitz and Freed, 2004: 175). In the present paper, fluency has been operationalized in terms of 6 measures:

3.2.3.1 Syllables Per Minute (SPM):

SPM is the number of syllables of the pruned words, including pauses. The syllable count carried out in this study excluded all the researcher's interventions. Furthermore,

any repetitions performed by the learner were counted only once. In the case of false starts and rephrasings, the same principle was applied and the only syllables that were computed were the ones in the final clause. This measure was calculated by dividing the total number of syllables by the total time of speech (in minutes).

3.2.3.2 Other Language Word Ratio (OLWR):

The OLWR is the number of words in any other language that was not English, including made-up words. Although not always, in most of the cases it was the participants' mother tongue or first language (L1), in this case Catalan or Spanish. This measure was calculated by adding the number of words in the L1 or in any other language to the total number of words in English. Then, this number of words was divided by the number obtained in this sum.

3.2.3.3 Filled Pauses Per Minute (FPPM):

A filled pause takes place when the speaker fills his/her speech with nonlexical fillers such as *mmm*, *ah* or *um*. This measure was calculated by dividing the total number of filled pauses by the total time of speech (in minutes).

3.2.3.4 Silent Pauses Per Minute (SPPM):

Following Freed (1995) and Freed *et al.* (2004), a silent pause was considered to be 0.4 sec. or longer. This measure was calculated by dividing the total number of silent pauses by the total time of speech (in minutes).

3.2.3.5 Articulation Rate (AR):

The AR is the number of words per minute, subtracting the total duration of all the silent pauses. All the silent pauses' duration was measured and the result of this

operation was subtracted from the total time of speech. The total number of words was divided by the number obtained in the mentioned subtraction.

3.2.3.6 Longest Fluent Run (LFR):

It is the number of words in the longest uninterrupted run of speech. Uninterrupted means without any pause, either filled or silent. Silent pauses occurring in clause-boundaries were not taken into account as they were not regarded as dysfluent. To carry out this measure calculation a second rater was needed. This second rater reviewed 15% of the data and then results were compared with those obtained by the researcher. A minimum of an 80% coincidence was needed. When this 80% was not achieved, which only happened in one case, the case was discussed until both raters agreed on the mark.

3.2.4 MEASURES OF ACCURACY

Two quantitative measures of accuracy were computed in this study: the ratio of error free clauses per number of clauses and the average number of errors per clause. Due to the fact that many participants had a low proficiency level, it was decided to segment their speech into clauses rather than into T-units or AS-units. Once this was done, they were classified depending on whether they were correct or not. In addition, errors were classified into four different types.

3.2.4.1 Error Free Clause Ratio (ErrFreeCl)

This calculation was obtained by dividing the number of error-free clauses by the total number of clauses. The ratio obtained in the pre-test was compared to the ratio obtained in the post-test.

3.2.4.2 Type of Errors

Errors were classified into four main groups following the classification of errors

proposed by Bardovi-Harlig and Bofman (1989): ²

3.2.4.2.1 Morphological errors (*merr*): nominal morphology, verbal morphology, determiners, articles, prepositions, derivational morphology

3.2.4.2.2 Syntactic errors (*serr*): word order, absence of constituents, errors in combining sentences, verb complementation

3.2.4.2.3 Lexical errors (*lexerr*): idiomatic expressions or words

3.2.4.2.4 Covered errors (*cerr*): lack of accuracy (e.g. *the mother* instead of *their mother*); the word or expression may be contextually incorrect or a lexical approximation (e.g. *bag* instead of *basket*).

For each type of error (morphological, syntactic, lexical, and covered) ratios were calculated relative to the number of words produced in the pre-test (generally shorter length) and in the post-test (generally longer length), respectively: ***MerrR***, ***SerrR***, ***LexerrR***, and ***CerrR***.

3.2.4.3 Average of Errors per clause (ErrPerCl)

The average number of errors per clause was calculated by dividing the total number of errors by the total number of clauses.

3.3 RESULTS

3.3.1 Language gains

A series of tests were performed in order to see whether there were significant differences between the scores of the quantitative measures in the pre-test and the post-test. First, a one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was carried out in order to check the normality of the sample. All the measures passed the test and as a consequence it was

decided to use parametric tests on these data, but with a confidence level of 90% because of the low number of subjects ($n = 24$).

In Table 1 the mean scores in the pre-test and in the post-test are presented followed by the range and the standard deviation in parentheses. The bottom row in Table 1 shows the gains obtained in each measure estimated as the difference between the pre-test and the post-test scores; standard deviations appear in parentheses as well. As can be observed in Table 1, standard deviations are very high due to the large variation in proficiency level of the learners. In most measures, higher scores were expected in the post-test than in the pre-test, whereas in a few of the variables (FPPM, SPPM, ErrPerCl, MerrR, SerrR, LexerrR, and CerrR) lower results were expected in the post-test.

Table 1

As conveyed in Table 1, for listening comprehension skills the post-test mean is higher than the pre-test mean. As for the oral fluency measures, the majority of the participants did better at the post-test, as shown by the respective expected increase or decrease in the score. Of the two general accuracy measures, the ratio of errors per clause showed a decrease whereas the ratio of error free clauses per clause showed an increase from the pre-test to the post-test, both of them showing participants' improvement. The ratios of morphological, syntactic, and lexical errors decreased in the post-test, while the ratio of covered errors slightly increased in the post-test. (The total amount of words was 2466 in the pre-test and 3026 in the post-test.)

Table 2 shows the results of a one-sample T-test that was estimated on the gains to check that the difference did not equal zero ($p < .10$). It can be seen that most measures have experienced significant gains, except for FPPM, SPPM, MerrR, SerrR and CerrR.

Table 2

3.3.2 Individual differences and language gains

In order to answer the second research question concerning the relation of individual differences such as proficiency level, age, length of stay and length of previous stay/s abroad, to students' progress in the SA context, it was necessary first of all to assign a L2 proficiency score to the participants. Two of the variables from the pre-test were chosen: SPM1 and ErrPerC11 (Freed, 1995; Kormos and Dénes, 2004). Once these were found to be reliable (Cronbach's Alpha = .888), L2 proficiency was estimated as the principal component of the two variables.

Proficiency level, age, length of present stay abroad, and length of previous stay/s abroad were selected as predictor or independent variables. First of all, a correlational analysis was carried out in order to see if there were significant relations between the predictors (collinearity). L2 proficiency was seen to have significant relations with age and with length of previous stay/s abroad.

A multiple linear regression analysis (OLS) was run to see whether the independent variables selected could account for the variance in the language gains obtained by means of the stay abroad and to see the relative predictive importance of the independent variables. The dependent variables were the gain measures (see Table 1). In what follows a summary of the results is presented with only those variables that could be predicted by one or more of the independent variables. Age did not account significantly for the variance in any of the language gains once proficiency was partialled out.

3.3.3 Proficiency level

Proficiency level alone is seen to explain a proportion of the variance in the gains in SPM, OLWR, and LexerrR significantly. As for the first measure, those participants

with a lower proficiency level show a higher increase of syllables per minute (see Table 3), that is to say they improve their fluency further than participants with a higher proficiency level (8 more points)

Table 3

Similarly, participants with a lower proficiency level decrease their ratio of words in other language (L1) further than participants with a higher proficiency level (4.5% more) (Table 4).

Table 4

Last, also the ratio of lexical errors of participants with a lower proficiency level decreased significantly more than the ratio of lexical errors of participants with a higher proficiency level (1.7%) (Table 5).

Table 5

Proficiency level and length of present stay abroad explained a proportion of the variance in the gains in ErrPerCl. It can be observed that when the length of stay is kept constant, participants with a lower proficiency level show a greater decrease in the average of errors per clause than participants with a higher proficiency level (.28 points on average). At the same time, when the proficiency level is kept constant, participants who stayed for 4 weeks showed a greater decrease in the number of errors (.32 points on average) (Table 6).

Table 6

3.3.4 Length of stay

Length of stay (3 or 4 weeks) was the only predictor of the gains obtained in the measure SPPM. Specifically, participants who stayed for 4 weeks showed a reduction of 3.75% of their silent pauses per minute in relation to participants whose length of stay was 3 weeks (Table 7).

Table 7

As seen above, length of stay could also contribute to explain the gains in the measure ErrPerCl, explaining a decrease of 0.32 points in the average of that measure. It also contributed to account for the gains in ErrFreeCl together with length of previous experience/s abroad (see below).

3.3.5 Previous stay/s abroad

The length of previous stay/s abroad together with length of stay could account for the variance in the gains of error free clauses (proficiency appeared to be a much weaker factor and since it was not independent of length of previous stay/s abroad the latter was selected). Specifically, when the length of stay is kept constant participants with shorter or no previous stay/s abroad show a higher increase of error free clauses (1.8% per week) with respect to those participants with longer previous stay/s abroad. Moreover, when the length of previous stay/s abroad is kept constant, participants who stayed for 4 weeks show an increase in the ratio of error free clauses of 16.6% (Table 8).

Table 8

In addition, length of previous stay/s abroad was a strong predictor of the participants' gains in LFR (proficiency was a weaker predictor and since it was not independent of length of previous stay/s abroad the latter was selected). The regression analysis shows that an extra week increases participants' longest fluent run in .771 points (Table 9).

Table 9

3.3.6 L2 use and language gains

To estimate the averages of the time participants spent listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English, the minutes they reported to have devoted to each one of these activities were added up and divided by the number of days that contained entries in their notebooks. Notebooks that did not contain entries of at least 75% of the length of the stay were eliminated from the count. Table 10 displays descriptive information concerning the time spent using the L2. On average, the time spent per day using L2 was 553.67 minutes, while the time spent per day using another language (usually the L1s) was 315.46 minutes.

Table 10

Last, in order to investigate the possible relationship between time spent using the L2 and language gains during the stay abroad, we examined the influence of the factors MinList, MinSpeak, MinRead, and MinWrit on the gains of the measures studied here corrected by the effect of the control variables that were previously determined. That is to say, the gains in the measures that showed a significant effect of one or more predictors in the previous analysis were replaced by the residuals of those regressions (expected gains corrected by the control variables) in the correlational analysis. These were SPM, OLWR, ErrPerCl, and LexerrR (proficiency level); SPPM, LFR, and ErrFreeCl (length of stay); LFR and ErrFreeCl (length of previous stay/s abroad).

Four significant correlations were found in the analysis, two positive and two negative ones. The former pointed out that participants who spent more time listening had more gains in the ratio of error free clauses ($r = .596$, $p = .019$); and participants who spent more minutes writing and participants who spent more minutes reading showed a higher decrease in the ratio of covered errors ($r = .749$, $p = .001$ and $r = .698$, $p = .004$, respectively). On the other hand, negative correlations pointed out that participants who

spent less time reading reduced the ratio of L1 words most ($r = -.445$, $p = .096$) and participants who spent less time reading and participants who spent less time writing reduced the number of filled pauses per minute more than those participants who spent more time in those activities ($r = -.591$, $p = .020$ and $r = -.601$, $p = .018$, respectively).

4. DISCUSSION

The first research question of this study enquired to what extent short stays abroad of 3-4 weeks improve foreign language proficiency as shown by listening comprehension, oral fluency, and accuracy measures. It has been found that even in as short period of time as 3 or 4 weeks learners improved on several of the measures analyzed, which is important because most studies that have reported significant improvement were concerned with longer periods of time. Notwithstanding the difficulty of generalizing across programs and participants' characteristics, the findings from the present study suggest that short stays abroad during the summer holidays can be valued as positive complements to regular courses that lack a study-abroad component.

Specifically, participants' scores in the listening comprehension task were significantly higher after their stay abroad, confirming the findings of previous studies (e.g. Brecht et al., 1995; Kinginger, 2008). Likewise, differences between pre-test and post-test scores turned out to be statistically significant in four of the six measures of oral fluency analyzed: syllables per minute, other language word ratio, articulation rate, and longest fluent run, as documented in previous studies as well (e.g. Freed, 1995; Lennon, 1990). While gains in listening comprehension and oral fluency have frequently been reported in research in this area, gains in accuracy have not been so widely attested. Furthermore, earlier studies have not found significant gains (Collentine, 2004; DeKeyser, 1986, 1991), which might be explained by the fact that these studies examined discrete grammatical points while the measures used in the present study were more sensitive to

general improvement as revealed by a decrease in the amount of errors per clause and in the proportion of error-free clauses. The comparison of the learners' performance on the two occasions showed that lexical errors decreased significantly after the study abroad experience, in line with previous studies (Ife et al., 2000; Milton and Meara, 1995). More interestingly, covered errors were slightly more numerous at the post-test, suggesting that after the experience abroad learners may produce more lexical approximations because they attempt to produce more words in the target language. Hence, the analysis of covered errors in this study may be considered an innovative measure of the kind of fluency that is enhanced by the immersion experience.

The second research question asked whether individual differences such as proficiency level, age, previous experience abroad, and length of stay are related to students' progress in a stay abroad context. The participants' proficiency level turned out to be a key variable in their progress. Specifically, participants with lower proficiency level showed comparatively greater gains in using L2 words (and hence in acquiring vocabulary) and in producing more accurate and fluent speech. These findings seem to confirm those of previous research which reports that learners with lower initial proficiency level benefit more from a stay abroad than more advanced learners (among others, Brecht and Robinson, 1995; Díaz-Campos, 2004; Freed 1995, 1998; Marriott, 1995; Regan, 1995). This recurrent finding has at times been interpreted as a phenomenon consistent with an S-shaped learning curve (e.g. Brecht et al. 1995). In the case of L2 acquisition, the advanced learners' apparent stabilization might be explained by the fact that they may have enough language resources at their disposal to cope with their communicative needs. Alternatively, it may be argued that advanced L2 learners experience growth in areas that are not so commonly measured, such as certain types of grammar rules or sophisticated vocabulary, and in skills that are more difficult to

quantify such as effectiveness in conveying the intended message (see Collentine, 2004). In contrast, the weaker learners may have made the quickest progress in gains that are better reflected by the instruments and measures used in this study (Freed, 1998).

Two temporal variables were also analysed in this study: previous experience abroad and length of stay (both in weeks). The length of previous stay(s) abroad was observed to have a substantial predictive power in relation to two measures: longest fluent run and error-free clauses. Length of stay also appeared to explain the improvement in these measures, as well as in the measure of silent pauses per minute. Those participants who stayed for 4 weeks performed the oral task with greater fluency (showing a reduction of 3.75% of silent pauses and an average increase of the longest fluent run in .771 points); and with greater accuracy (an increase in the ratio of error free clauses of 16.6%), relative to those who stayed abroad for 3 weeks. The fact that an additional week makes a substantial difference in some measures does not, in our opinion, weaken the claim that short stays abroad are effective. On the contrary, it provides evidence that even just one week may yield an effective TL learning experience.

On the other hand, age was not shown to be a strong predictor of any of the measures studied here, once the effect of proficiency with which it was highly related was partialled out. This is an interesting finding because it provides empirical evidence that learners' proficiency level may have a greater impact than learners' age in a SA context, contrary to common expectations.

The third research question enquired about the extent to which time spent in contact with the L2 was associated with linguistic gains. Participants' entries in their diaries were not always complete or fully reliable, which casts some doubt on the data obtained

and on the corresponding results. For example, a negative relation is shown between time spent reading and time spent writing in English and a decrease of filled pauses per minute. This might suggest that as reading and writing are not oral skills, they are inversely related to the gains in oral fluency that result from a decrease of filled pauses per minute (and hence, of hesitations). On the other hand, a positive relation is shown between the amount of time spent listening to English and the ratio of error-free clauses, and between time spent reading and time spent writing in English and a decrease of covered errors; also a negative relation is shown between the amount of time spent reading in English and the reduction of L1 words. It is clear, however, that in general the participants in this study made a high use of their first language(s) (a mean of 5 hours per day), and that they did not very actively seek opportunities to interact and to provide output. This is an observation also documented in previous studies, and which goes a long way towards explaining the individual differences in achievement outcomes observed (see Kinginger, 2008).

5. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

An interesting contribution of this study is the finding that even a stay abroad of 3-4 weeks produces significant gains in all areas studied: listening comprehension, oral fluency and accuracy. Furthermore, the improvement is all the more remarkable given the fact that participants did not seem to have taken full advantage of the wide variety of opportunities that the stay abroad context may offer. A second finding concerns the finding that proficiency level is a crucial factor in the progress made in a short stay abroad. The faster progress of the participants with lower levels of proficiency has been significant in various oral fluency and accuracy measures used in this study, some of them related to vocabulary acquisition as well.

The present study also has a number of limitations. Some are common to most studies following a quantitative approach. This study in particular has focused on a number of quantifiable measures of linguistic performance that have not included areas such as communicative and pragmatic competence, in which participants in a SA experience have been observed to make greater gains than in an at-home context. In addition, a limitation of the design of this study is the impossibility of examining what learners *did* during their stay abroad and in particular their social networks (see Kinginger, 2008).

Neither has this study examined the personal and cultural gains afforded by such an experience, which may be considered even more significant than linguistic gains per se. The study also has limited generalizability, since the current status of English as a lingua franca sets it apart from other target languages in issues such as the type of motivation and availability. Finally, the study lacks a control group that had studied the target language in a classroom situation at home. However, this could only be made possible with a more homogeneous group of participants than the one in the present study.

This study has highlighted a number of areas for further research. First, it would be interesting for future research to seek to identify measures that could unveil the progress made at advanced levels during a stay abroad. Further work should also be invested in designing a more reliable instrument for measuring adolescent participants' language use during the stay abroad; an adapted simplified version of the Language Contact Profile (Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey 2004) may be a convenient starting point. More generally, further research integrating both qualitative and quantitative perspectives is needed in order to obtain a more complete account of the benefits that a short stay abroad may provide to learners of different ages and proficiency levels.

Finally, the study has several educational implications. From the perspective of language teaching and learning provision, the findings confirm the benefits of incorporating stays abroad, even if as short as 3-4 week-long, in secondary and tertiary education programmes; further research with primary school children is needed, however, in order to explore the benefits at an earlier age. From a pedagogical perspective, it appears crucial to prepare students appropriately for the stay abroad. This preparation should naturally include work on language knowledge and language learning strategies, as well as work on learners' attitudes. That is to say, students should be made more aware of the need of maximizing their contact with the target language by making use of all opportunities available for active target language use: for example, by intensifying the interaction with the host family (Paige et al, 2002). This may be particularly important in the case of young teenagers, who may be less inclined to make efforts for long-term investments in the linguistic, cultural and career-oriented domains.

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APPENDIX 1

Participants' information

Subject	Age	Gender	Length of SA (in weeks)	Previous SA	Accommodation Type	Purpose of SA
1	15	F	3	No	Host family	Study
2	15	F	3	No	Host family	Study
3	15	M	4	No	Host family	Study
4	17	M	4	No	Host family	Study
5	14	F	3	No	Host family	Study
6	16	F	4	Yes: 4 m	Host family	Study
7	15	M	4	No	Host family	Study
8	14	F	3	Yes: 3 w	Host family	Study
9	19	F	3	Yes: 1 m 3 w	Host family	Study
10	17	M	4	No	Host family	Study
11	13	M	4	Yes: 4 m	Host family	Study
12	16	F	4	No	Host family	Study
13	17	F	4	No	Host family	Study
14	16	F	4	Yes: 3 w	Host family	Study
15	15	F	3	No	Host family	Study
16	19	F	4	Yes: 4 m	Host family	Work
17	19	F	4	No	Hall of residence	Study
18	19	F	4	No	Host family	Study
19	14	M	3	Yes: 2 w	Host family	Study
20	14	M	4	Yes: 2 w	Host family	Study
21	14	M	3	Yes: 1 m 2 w	Host family	Study
22	20	F	4	No	Hall of residence	Study
23	22	F	4	Yes: 5 m	Hall of residence	Work
24	20	M	4	Yes: 2 m 2 w	Host family	Study

APPENDIX 2

Listening Instructions: You will now hear some words and sentences in English. Mark with a cross the drawing that corresponds to each word or sentence. You will only hear it once.

1. Walk to the blackboard
2. Put your hands on your head
3. The boy is wearing black shoes
4. There are three children in the garden
5. The bird is under the chair
6. Which elephant has big eyes and small ears?
7. The girl can't swim
8. The man is going to paint the wall
9. The girl's teacher is reading in the library
10. Mr. Green is at work today but he wasn't at work yesterday
11. The boy is going up the hill
12. Susan can see the garden when she's in bed
13. These people have just missed the train
14. The father is giving a watch to him and a belt to her
15. The man who was running to the bus fell
16. He's too weak to run upstairs
17. It may rain today
18. The boy is as tall as the girl
19. Dogs are not allowed in the restaurant
20. If it hadn't snowed, I would have gone to the zoo
21. She told me he was angry

TABLES

Table 1: Pre-test and post-test scores

	Listening	SPM	OLWR	FPPM	SPPM	AR	LFR	EFreeCI	ErrPerCI	MerrR	SerrR	LexerrR	CerrR
Pre-Test Mean	15.58 (9-21) (3.31)	98.83 (48-201) (43.40)	0.07067 (0-0.23) (.072)	3.6679 (0-17.42) (4.10)	19.856 (11.56-25.96) (3.78)	122.29 (58-193) (37.76)	22.04 (7-61) (14.56)	0.36458 (0-0.9) (.29)	1.1083 (0.1-2.5) (.74)	9.20 (0-21.56) (6.72)	1.73 (0-7.54) (2.07)	4.91 (0-17.18) (4.14)	1.32 (0-5.88) (1.66)
Post-Test Mean	17.54 (13-21) (2.54)	120.96 (72-215) (37.82)	0.02046 (0-0.111) (.03)	4.35033 (0-15.91) (4.30)	19.852 (11.075-25.47) (3.86)	138.33 (86-200) (34.13)	28.67 (6-108) (21.95)	0.47125 (0-0.86) (.27)	0.86167 (0.14-1.9) (.56)	9.08 (1.31-24.28) (6.98)	1.36 (0-5.15) (1.45)	2.22 (0-11.42) (2.51)	1.34 (0-0.721) (1.79)
Gains	1.96 (1.73)	22.13 (17.74)	.05917 (.066)	-.642 (2.85)	.01242 (3.85)	16.04 (17.25)	6.63 (13.02)	.10667 (.241)	.29083 (.423)	.1233 (5.98)	.3717 (1.55)	2.690 (2.92)	-.0254 (2.07)

Table 2: Significance of Gains

	Test Value= 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	90% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
ListGains	5.541	23	.000	1.958	1.23	2.69
SPMGains	6.108	23	.000	22.125	14.63	29.62
OLWRGains	4.383	23	.000	.059167	.03124	.08709
FPPMGains	-1.104	23	.281	-.642000	-1.84465	.56065
SPPMGains	-.016	23	.988	-.012417	-1.63683	1.61200
ARGains	4.556	23	.000	16.042	8.76	23.33
LRFGains	2.493	23	.020	6.625	1.13	12.12
ErrFreeGains	2.168	23	.041	.106667	.00489	.20844
ErrPerClGains	3.314	23	.003	.290833	.10929	.47237
MerrGains	.101	23	.921	.12333	-.19715	2.2182
SerrGains	1.169	23	.254	.37167	-.17337	.9166
LexerrGains	4.513	23	.000	2.6900	1.6684	3.711
CerrGains	-.060	23	.953	-.025424	-.74977	.6989

Table 3: Influence of proficiency level on gains in SPM

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		

1 (Constant)	22.125	3.303		6.698	.000
proficiency	-8.024	3.374	-.452	-2.378	.027

^aDependent Variable: SPMGains

Table 4: Influence of proficiency level on gains in OLWR

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.059	.010		5.845	.000
proficiency	-.045	.010	-.680	-4.348	.000

^aDependent Variable: OLWRGains

Table 5: Influence of proficiency level on gains in LexerrR

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	2.690	.492		5.464	.000
proficiency	-1.721	.503	-.589	-3.423	.002

^aDependent Variable: LexerrRGains

Table 6: Influence of proficiency level and length of stay on gains in ErrPerCl

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1 (Constant)	-.889	.511		-1.739	.097
proficiency	-.280	.067	-.651	-4.208	.000
length of stay	.322	.138	.360	2.327	.030

^aDependent Variable: ErrPerCIgains

Table 7: Influence of length of stay on gains in SPPM

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	-13.766	5.559		-2.476	.021
length of stay	3.751	1.504	.470	2.494	.021

^aDependent Variable: SPPMGains

Table 8: Influence of length of previous SA and of length of stay on gains in ErrFreeCI

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	-.430	.350		-1.227	.233
previous SA	-.018	.007	-.468	-2.433	.024
length of stay	.166	.096	.333	1.729	.098

^aDependent Variable: ErrFreeCIgains

Table 9: Influence of length of previous SA on gains in LFR

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	3.379	3.020		1.119	.275
L previous SA	.771	.398	.382	1.936	.066

^aDependent Variable: LFRGains

Table 10: Daily Average L2 Use

Skill	Hours (minutes)
Listening in English	3 h 57' (237 min.)
Speaking in English	3 h 34' (214 min.)
Reading in English	1 h 4' (64 min.)
Writing in English	42 min.

¹ This paper was sponsored by HUM2007-64302. We would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on this paper.