

〈研究ノート〉

Second language learning in overseas contexts: a summary of research and its implications for student mobility programs in Japan

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Abstract

Several factors are driving the upward trend in international student mobility, among them a desire to study other languages in overseas learning contexts. In the present study the findings of empirical research on the assumed benefits of study abroad (SA) in native speaker contexts for second language acquisition are first discussed, and some gaps in the research that merit more investigation identified. Subsequently, the wider implications of the research for study abroad program planning and assessment at Japanese colleges are considered; firstly, the need for preparatory, in-session and post-hoc components in SA programs, and also the need for planners to embrace a holistic frame of reference for SA assessment that takes account of both the linguistic and psychological transformations that are witnessed.

[Keywords] Study abroad, second language acquisition

Introduction

Student mobility has been one of the defining trends in higher education during the past four decades. Since the mid-1970s, year on year, the number of students choosing to spend at least part of their study career learning overseas has steadily multiplied. According to UNESCO's Institute for Statistics (2019), in 1975 there were around half a million enrolled international students; as of 2016, there were just over 4.8 million (*ibid*), with that number predicted to increase in subsequent years. Among several factors driving this trend is the desire to study other languages. One reason is that a view of SA as a 'magical formula' (Kinginger, 2011:58) for language learning has been encouraged, one in which SA is portrayed as a convenient and guaranteed route to L2 proficiency. While many earlier studies on SA offered support for this maxim, more recent research indicates a much more complex picture, in which a whole host of factors relating to the learner and the learning environment influence the outcomes of the process. This has prompted some scholars (Ferguson,

1995; Wilkinson, 1998) to talk of a ‘language myth’ arising from the notion that SA will automatically lead to language acquisition because of the sheer number of hours students are exposed to the language. Other researchers (e.g., Coleman and Cafer, 2010, Lafford, 2006) also question some of the assumptions that have been made about SA, and which continue to influence the decisions made by participants in overseas language study programs, on the basis of both their own findings and questions over the underlying validity of earlier studies.

Given the wide range of choices that are now available to those who wish to study other languages abroad, and the investments of time, effort and money that are invested by them, it is important for stakeholders in SA programs to make thorough assessments of their true value for L2 acquisition (Dirkx, 2019). To this end, we have the insights provided by three decades worth of scholarly research, which has sought by various means to establish empirically the nature of both the linguistic transformations, as well as the psychological transformations, which are understood to take place as a result of study in overseas contexts. The purpose of this article is to provide a broad summary of these findings and to consider the wider implications of the research for planning and assessment of SA programs in Japan.

Review of the literature

After a half century of scholarly study in second language acquisition, it is now generally understood that successful learning depends on both internal and external cognitive, sociocultural and linguistic factors (Ellis, 2005; Krahnke and Christison, 1983; Nation and Macalister, 2009). It is the complex interplay of these factors that determines the speed and facility with which the new language is learned. Internal factors are those that individual language learners (age, personality, intrinsic motivation, experiences, cognition, native language) bring to the particular learning situation. The external factors are those that characterize the language learning environment, and include such variables as curriculum design, instruction, culture and status, and extrinsic motivation, and the study setting.

Spolsky (1989), drawing on the work of Wolfgang Klein (1986), has suggested that for L2 acquisition to take place, learners need access to a set of opportunities. These include the opportunity for analysis of input, opportunity for recombination of elements of input into larger units, the opportunity to learn how language is

embedded in linguistic and non-linguistic contexts, the opportunity to match knowledge and output with that of native-speakers or other target performers, the opportunity to memorize, and the opportunity to practice. Considered in terms of Klein and Spolsky's proposals, the notion that studying a second language in a target language context is preferable is because, intuitively, such contexts provide more of the opportunities they propose as necessary for acquisition. Namely, the opportunities for contextual embedding, for matching, and for active, intentional practice (particularly the opportunity for interactions in the target language with native speakers, which affects in particular the oral/aural aspects of language acquisition).

Since the 1980s, a large body of research has been conducted on second language acquisition in a learning abroad setting to test empirically the notion that living or studying in a target language country is a requisite for language proficiency to develop. To date these studies have followed broadly developments in applied linguistics. Early studies focused primarily on measuring gains in general language proficiency as measured by tests. Subsequent to that, researchers began to look into the influence of SA on individual aspects of linguistic knowledge, including fluency, knowledge of syntax and lexis, composition skills and learning strategies, while other research threads have focused on the role of individual differences, and another on extra-linguistic factors including SA duration, culture shock, living conditions, social networking and interactions with native speakers.

General oral proficiency

The principle focus for research on the effects of SA on linguistic knowledge has been on the development of aspects of oral proficiency, and the majority of these studies (e.g., Allen and Heron, 2003; Freed, So and Lazar, 2003; Segalowitz et al., 2004; Diaz-Campos, 2006) have found that SA is effective in improving both fluency and pronunciation. Segalowitz et al (2004) found that among a group of forty-six US students of Spanish, the twenty-six who studied abroad improved more than those who studied at home in terms of fluency and vocabulary. In another study with forty American learners of Spanish by Segalowitz and Freed (2004), the researchers also found the SA group made significant progress in oral fluency after one semester, which was not explained by exposure to the language nor the opportunities for

interactions but by individual learning abilities. Diaz-Campos' (2006) study with forty-six American learners of Spanish focused on the effects of SA on pronunciation also found the SA group (n = 26) 'tended to produce more target-like variants' (ibid: 36) but, unlike Segalowitz and Freed (2004), attributed this to their informal interactions with native speakers.

Grammatical knowledge

Regarding the development of grammatical knowledge, the findings have been less conclusive. Some studies, including that by Walsh (1994) with fifteen Irish students of German who studied the language for a year in Germany, found that SA leads to gains in fluency but at a cost to accuracy. Comparative studies by Collentine (2004), Isabelli (2004) provided conflicting results; while the American students (n = 46) in Collentine's study who studied Spanish abroad for one semester in Alicante did not make significant improvements in grammatical knowledge in comparison to those who studied at home, Isabelli (2004) found that through studying in Spain for a year, her thirty-one American students of Spanish were able to make significant gains in terms of both knowledge and use of grammar. Focusing on a narrow selection of grammatical features, some researchers have found evidence that SA leads to improvements in grammatical knowledge, whereas others have not. Isabelli and Nishida (2005) found improvements in knowledge of modality in Spanish among a group of twenty-nine US-based learners of Spanish after a one year SA program in Barcelona; the SA group in Howard's (2005) study with Irish university students of French made better progress in learning to mark past tense and aspect.

Lexical knowledge

In terms of the effects on lexical knowledge, there is some research-based evidence to suggest that SA does have a positive effect on vocabulary learning and expansion. However, Dewey's (2007) study with fifty-six American learners of Japanese found by comparing learners in three learning contexts (abroad, at home, and immersion at home) that those in immersion programs made greater gains in lexical knowledge than those who studied at home in regular classroom settings, or the Institute for International Education of Students (IES) Study Abroad Center in Tokyo. This supported the findings of a previous study by Dewey (2004), in

which it was revealed that the students an immersion program (n = 15) in which they were forced to speak Japanese with their peers attained a higher level of lexical learning than the SA group (n = 15).

In the context of this study, perhaps the most intriguing research trajectory has focused on investigating abilities related to social interaction, and the development of sociolinguistic competence, as it is in this domain that ‘the most significant advantages of SA become evident.’ (Kinginger, 2011:62). Iwasaki’s (2010) study with a group of five English-speaking American learners of Japanese who studied in Japan for one year found that, on their return, the group was able to learn and to use the polite forms of Japanese, which is essential to developing proficiency but also problematic for many students of the Japanese language. Meanwhile, in a project by Taguchi (2008) with a group of forty-four Japanese learners on a study English program at a US university, participants were found to have developed improved accuracy for interpreting indirect refusals.

Individual differences

In summary, as Kinginger (2011) points out, the outcomes-based research projects outlined above demonstrate that SA can be effective in enhancing every aspect of language proficiency. However, they do not account for the significant differences between outcomes among individual learners that were found in many studies. Since 2000, much research has therefore focused on the role of individual differences such as the use of learning strategies (e. g., Adams, 2006; Lafford, 2004), students’ beliefs/dispositions (Amuzie & Wink, 2009; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003) and age (Llanes & Munoz, 2012).

Regarding learning strategies, Lafford found that during a sojourn in the target language country a group of US learners of Spanish (n = 26) became progressively less dependent on the use of certain communicative strategies to ‘bridge’ the gap in their abilities. In another research by Paige, Cohen & Shively (2004), this with two separate (n = 42, n = 44) mixed groups of US learners of French and Spanish, it was found that both the range of learning strategies and the frequency of use had increased among the groups who had been given pre-departure instruction in strategy use before embarking on their SA in various target language countries.

Turning to students’ beliefs abroad, Tanaka & Ellis’ (2003) study with a group of

one hundred and sixty-six Japanese students of English who studied at an American university for fifteen weeks is of particular significance in this context. Their findings where that major transformations had occurred in the student's beliefs in regard to self-efficacy, capacity to learn, and approaches to learning, accounting for the increases in linguistic knowledge and competence that were observed. Their findings were supported by a study involving seventy international students in the US by Amuzie and Wink (2009), which found that changes had occurred in students' beliefs about learning, particularly regarding the need for autonomy in learning and the role of the teacher.

Extra linguistic factors

Within the body of research on SA, another thread has sought to examine the influence of extra linguistics factors such as length of stay, the living conditions, and the quantity and quality of interactions.

The time that students spend studying abroad may range from just a few weeks to a full academic year. Many of the studies in this area have found that advances occur in several areas of linguistic knowledge as well as in learner's communication skills regardless of the duration. In Allen and Heron's study (2003) a group of American students (n = 25) of French who took a summer course in France made significant improvements in terms of fluency, while the SA group (n = 26) of Spanish learners in Segalowitz et al's (2004) comparative study made greater gains than the students who studied at home in terms of both fluency and lexical knowledge. Meanwhile the Spanish students of English (n = 24) in Llanes and Munoz (2009) were able to make clear advances in both aural comprehension and fluency even after a relatively short time in the UK. Notably, what has been observed is that longer periods of study offer learners more opportunities to practice using the target language through interactions with native speakers, and also help them develop more confidence in their proficiency.

A range of accommodation choices are available to SA participants, including in dormitories, hostels, halls of residence, and with host families. The latter is often considered most beneficial for language learning because of the opportunities it provide is assumed to for interaction. In a study by Allen, Dristas and Mills (2006) that compared American junior high and high school students second language

learners (n = 189) living in halls of residence, in shared bedrooms and with host families in France, Italy and Spain for 4-5 weeks, it was reported that the experience of living with a host family was the most effective in developing linguistic knowledge and intercultural knowledge. On the other hand, it has been reported (e.g. Frank, 1997; Pellegrino, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998) that living with a host family is not always a positive experience for some learners and much depends on the nature of the relationship that develops between the host and guest. Where the host allows the student to integrate into the family, the experience is more likely to be positive than when the guest is treated simply as a paying guest. Furthermore, while the supposed opportunities for interaction are one of the most appealing aspects of homestay accommodation, some studies (e.g., Isabelli-Garcia, 2006; Lafford & Collentine, 2006) have shown that such opportunities may be infrequent, unproductive and ultimately of little benefit for language learning.

Social networks and interactions with native speakers

While there is general agreement that opportunities to use a target language through interactions outside the classroom with native speakers are a key factor for success in L2 acquisition, another research trajectory has sought to clarify the nature of and opportunities for such interactions during SA. The findings have created some debate, in particular over the notion that SA will inevitably give rise to increased opportunities for interaction. Wilkinson (1998), Lafford, (2006) and Coleman and Chafer (2010) have questioned this line of reasoning, suggesting that in many contexts real possibilities to interact with native speakers and create social networks may be limited. Outside the classroom, the SA group in Lafford's (2004) study with American university students of Spanish engaged in the kinds of activities during their home stay sojourn in Alicante, Spain that did not require the use of the target language. In the context of Wilkinson's (1998) study, she found that for her group of four American students of French studying in France for one summer, the second language was usually not the language of choice, and the students had difficulties communicating with native speakers. Coleman and Chafer (2010), meanwhile, found that having access to online messaging, online social networks, and other media provided a means for British students of French studying in French-speaking Senegal, West Africa, to keep in touch with their own culture through the internet, so

that many did not identify a need to interact socially and participate actively in the local culture. According to Schumann's Acculturation Model (1978), this presents a barrier to the process of acculturation that is necessary in order for learners to assimilate the values and cultural behaviors of the L2 community.

A final observation regards the scope of the research on SA, which has focused principally on study in target language contexts. Writing in 1983, Teresa Pica highlighted three paths that learners could choose to achieve their language learning goals. SA in target language contexts, moving to the target language country, and studying at home. To that we can now add a fourth path because, while English language learning in so-called inner circle contexts is still preferred, the globalisation of language education means that it is also possible to study English (or indeed through the medium of English) in countries where it is not the native language, but a *lingua franca*. Currently, a plethora of SA options is available to EFL learners in Japan, and many are now choosing to study English in alternative locations (i.e., The Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia). While it is likely that extra-curricular opportunities to use English as a *lingua franca* manifest themselves in such SA contexts, we still lack any published studies on the effects of studying in these contexts on L2 acquisition.

Discussion

In order to test the assumptions about the influence of SA on L2 acquisition, research has followed several trajectories. The following considers what general conclusions can be drawn from the research and the implications for both the planning of and assessment of English SA programs in Japan.

The positive effects on oral proficiency and pronunciation that have been found in many studies on SA are especially notable because these are the aspects of oral communication in which Japanese learners are typically less proficient. The obvious conclusion to draw is that for Japanese learners, SA presents opportunities to actually use the language that are so often lacking in the classroom.

However, what must also be taken into account is the fact that, while fluency, pronunciation and sociolinguistic knowledge evidently benefit from informal social interactions, there is no evidence that there will by default be increased opportunities for such interactions outside the classroom. Particularly, as both Lafford (2006) and

Wilkinson (1998) found, when studying in the company of one's peers, when the living conditions do not facilitate such opportunities, and when participants do not try to engage in the communicative practices of the host community. This tendency to avoid social interaction may be familiar to those who have accompanied Japanese students on trips overseas and was observed in Tanaka's (2007) study on a group of Japanese students who spent three months studying in New Zealand.

In sum, it is clear that SA does not offer Japanese students a 'magic formula' (Kinginger, 2011:58), or steadfast guarantee, for improvements in second language proficiency. Much depends on both the individual, notably the extent to which they try to interact and create opportunities for learning. There are also many extra linguistic factors relating to the study environment that are of significant influence and must be given consideration.

Implications for program planning and assessment

In practical terms, in order to create maximum program value for learners, planners need to include preparatory, in-session and post-session components in the SA curriculum. As they prepare for their overseas sojourn, above all it seems imperative that students are provided with guidance in choosing programs that give priority to language learning, that they are made aware of what and how they can learn, and the benefits that derive by immersing themselves in the language and creating opportunities for themselves to use it.

In terms of helping students choose courses appropriately, students firstly need to have clear understanding of their own abilities, and their goals. This is especially important for students who are studying aboard for short periods, and who wish to see improvements in their language proficiency. They also need to be aware that group tours do not always offer opportunities for output as participants will naturally have recourse to using their native language. This phenomenon is witnessed at many schools and colleges abroad, where international students form their own mono-cultural cliques.

There is also evidence that well-planned immersion programs in domestic contexts can deliver results that are at least as good as or better than those of SA programs in several key areas of linguistic proficiency including in developing grammatical knowledge, and lexical knowledge. For study program managers, the

implication is that well-planned grammar and vocabulary focused immersion programs might be a useful lead-in for SA. At the same time, it is important also that participants understand how essential sociolinguistic, discourse, and pragmatic abilities develop through contact with expert speakers, and that grammar and vocabulary study alone are insufficient for the development of social interactive abilities. Therefore, courses that enhance language awareness, so that they become conscious of and sensitive to the forms and functions of language, and an understanding of pragmatics, might also be a logical inclusion in the preparatory component of a SA program.

Computer based communication technologies offer an additional means for preparing students for SA. Video conferencing software (e.g., Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts) provide opportunities for students to engage with their peers in target language countries and to practice informal, intercultural dialogues. Meanwhile tools such as Google Earth allow learners to take part in a virtual tour of one's destination, and to familiarise themselves with their study and living environment.

In session activities can also help to enhance the SA experience. As Kinginger (2011) observes, SA students adopt the same methods for language learning (observation, participation, reflection) as those used in ethnographic observations. Pre-departure training in ethnographic techniques can help a learner gain insight into what a speaker needs to know in order to communicate appropriately within a speech community, and thereby provide guidance on how to learn while abroad through observing communicative acts, participating in acts, and reflecting on their input to these acts.

Conclusion

The present study examined the findings of research on second language acquisition in target language contexts, and the implications of this research for SA program planning in Japan. While this article has been limited only to research on the development of linguistic knowledge, ultimately it is clear that assessment of SA should not focus solely on such linguistic transformations, but on a broad range of transformations including development of intercultural competencies. However the arbitrary and inconsistent application of SA assessment in some contexts has, in recent years, led several scholars (e.g., Dirx, 2019) to call for more comprehensive

and structured approach. Also, for the purpose of both planning, and as part of the effort to work toward more comprehensive, formalized schemes of SA assessment, it is important to examine carefully and thoroughly the assumed advantages that study in NS contexts have on L2 acquisition compared with the myriad of other opportunities that are now available to the EFL learner.

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