

Changes in Oral Production Measures for Graduate-Level Second Language Learners

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Abstract

It has been traditionally thought that study abroad enables the learner to see noticeable improvements in oral production. Although many studies have found significant improvements for fluency measures, the picture is less clear for the spoken measures of accuracy and complexity. To address a lack of studies looking at both how these three variables change during a study abroad, and to analyze data from more advanced learners, this study takes fluency, accuracy and complexity measures at three times for students who are studying on an academic preparation course for a graduate program at a university in the UK with a duration of nine-weeks. No significant changes were seen in this period on fluency and complexity, but one significant change was noted for accuracy. This study concludes with possible reasons for these unexpected results.

Introduction

There are many learners that challenge studying abroad to improve their language skills around the world. For example, the number of foreign students coming to the UK for a complete British higher education qualification increased by 23% in 2011, and that equates to one-sixth of all students taking UK higher education qualifications (Times Higher Education, 2013).

At some point all of the students preparing to embark on study abroad programs would have bought into the mainstream belief that studying abroad bestows great benefits to the learner. These benefits are that the learner will become more proficient in the second language than by staying in their home country.

The beliefs of positive language outcomes come from the assumption that the study abroad setting provides the right conditions to improve learner's second language ability. These conditions comprise of lots of meaningful input from native speakers in the second language setting (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004). If that meaningful input is sufficiently large enough, learners may enhance the automatization of already proceduralized linguistic knowledge. This is further dependent on whether learners pursue such opportunities for practice or can find themselves in a situation where the conditions for quality and quantity of practice are met (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004).

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However, despite the claims and common sense that tells us that study abroad settings are beneficial to language growth, research carried out over the past thirty years has shown that not all gains in proficiency are realized from study abroad. That includes gains in oral production, for which most of the research is reported (Collentine & Freed, 2004). It seems as though the seemingly clear picture is a lot more complicated than first believed (DeKeyser, 1991). Firstly, learners may not always seek out the opportunities for interaction found in the study abroad context. Further, learners could be overwhelmed by the amount, speed and complexity of the native language which surrounds them, particularly when native speakers don't adjust their message to fit the second language learner. Indeed, some researchers suggest that opportunities to communicate and be exposed to quality input may be scarce. This may lead to less than expected gains in proficiency and an oftentimes considerable gap between what conditions learners hope will prevail and those conditions students may actually find themselves in during study abroad (DeKeyser, 2007).

When considering ways to measure the outcomes of study abroad, research has formed two distinct groups. One group deals with how the study abroad experience has changed affective states in the learner such as motivation, beliefs and attitudes towards the target language culture (Dörnyei & Schmitt, 2001; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). These studies have tended to show positive outcomes in non-linguistic gains. The other branch of research concentrates on the use of the oral production constructs of fluency, accuracy and complexity (CAF). These measurements have been major research constructs in applied linguistic research, and as a consequence, study abroad research. This is based on the assumption that study abroad drives acquisition. CAF variables have been used as both performance descriptors for oral and written assessment of learners and as a way of indicating proficiency underlying learners' performances (Housen & Kuiken, 2009). Results from CAF in studies have been less concrete in nature, and have tended to find improvements in mainly fluency, rather than accuracy and complexity (See Freed, 1995; 1998).

Much of the study abroad research has been centered around native-English-speaking learners of French and Spanish (e.g., Freed et al., 2004; DeKeyser, 2010) who stay anywhere up to one academic year in the target language culture. Typically, the participants in the studies are part of sheltered SA programs in foreign institutions where program participation is not compulsory. Further, such students often travel, live, and study together (with learners of the same culture) and possess a level of proficiency in the target language that precludes them from being able to communicate fluently with native speakers (Kinging, 2007). Plus, it has been found that learners tend to both associate with only peers from the same country and use their first language (Tanaka, 2007; Wilkinson, 1998). However, each context has the potential to yield different results, so it is clear that more research into the study abroad phenomenon is needed.

Literature Review

This short review looks at studies involving fluency, accuracy and complexity in study abroad

contexts, as well as the starting proficiency before study abroad.

Fluency

Fluency has been the most highly researched variable for oral production. Skehan (1996) sees fluency as concerning a learner's capacity to produce language in real time without undue pausing and hesitation. However, what is termed oral fluency can refer to smoothness of language use (Freed, 1995), but other researchers see it as a multidimensional construct with conflicting meanings (Freed, Segalowitz, Dewey, 2004).

In general, study abroad research has found that undergraduate students have shown modest but significant gains in fluency that relate to less pauses in speech and temporal variables compared to those students who stay in the at-home context (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004, Trenchs-Parera 2009). However, the gains in study abroad were often not as high as those in the immersion setting.

In explanation of the gains in fluency, researchers posit that high-ability learners can seek out more contact with native speakers and increase their fluency, but lower proficiency students often have limited contact with native speakers, so improvements in oral proficiency are fewer (Mora & Valls-Ferrer, 2012). However, other researchers have found that contact with native speakers or amount of classroom hours did not correlate with language gains (Freed et al., 2004, DeKeyser, 2010). Generally, research shows that increased opportunities available to learners in the SA context do not necessarily result in oral performance gains over the study abroad period.

Accuracy

Accuracy is seen as freedom from error in speech production. It is often measured against an external standard that is usually an idealized native speaker. However, both the rise of non-standard Englishes and the large variability in Englishes, not only second language learners, but also native speakers (Lord, 2009), means that the variable is complicated in nature.

Studies into grammar in study abroad research have found that the study abroad environment does not always have clear-cut advantages over the at-home context (Isabelli & Nishida, 2005; Collentine, 2004; DeKeyser, 2010). Some studies have even found that at-home students showed superior grammatical accuracy over study abroad students (Collentine, 2004). Research has found that unless students have a basic level of grammar, they will not benefit from study abroad. As DeKeyser (2010) claims, grammar needs to be first understood, then practiced, then automatized. His study of US students in Spain showed that after six weeks students' weak grammar knowledge and lack of proceduralized knowledge made it impossible for that sample to speak accurately after study abroad, even for basic structures.

Researchers have been forced to admit that less is known about how study abroad affects changes in accuracy. There are, however, several arguments to explain the lack of gains in accuracy, and most have centered on the notion that due to increased communicative demands whilst being abroad,

meaning is primary and accuracy is secondary (Lord, 2009).

Complexity

Along with fluency and accuracy, complexity is also important for language production. Complexity requires that students work from a limited range of meanings to be able to restructure what they know in order to make it more complex. It has been defined by Ellis (2003) as the extent to which the language produced is elaborate and varied (p. 340). Complexity is rarely studied by itself, and of the three production variables is the most complex, and least understood (Housen & Kuiken, 2009).

Fluency, accuracy and complexity together

This short section looks at how the three oral production measures are related to each other and how they change together over time. It is believed that oral performance in complexity, accuracy, and fluency requires both attention and working memory. The Trade-Off hypothesis claims, therefore, that committing attentional resources to one of these can have a negative impact in the others. In support of the Trade-Off hypothesis, task-based research in the field of second language generally found that tasks with familiar information and clear structure produce higher accuracy and fluency; interactive tasks produce higher accuracy and complexity; and where information is manipulated in tasks can lead to higher complexity (Skehan, 2001). Other research has looked at the effect of planning on oral production. It has been found that a degree of pre-task planning resulted in greater fluency, but on-line planning (in real time) brought learners' attention to accuracy, but meant less fluency (Yuan & Ellis, 2003). In teacher-led planning both complexity and accuracy were raised (Foster & Skehan, 1999). The Trade-Off Hypothesis in the previous studies usually means the improvement of two of the oral production measures, but to the detriment of, or without a clear improvement in, the third.

Much research has addressed changes in oral fluency, but very few studies have actually addressed how fluency, accuracy and complexity have changed over a period of time. One of the few studies that does address changes in all three variables for study abroad was by Mora & Valls-Ferrer (2012). They measured fluency, accuracy and complexity changes by interviews in English of 30 advanced level Spanish students over the course of three months. They hypothesized gains in fluency and little or no gains in accuracy and complexity because they claim that real conversational exchanges in the study abroad environment require the learners to produce relatively accurate language with low structural complexity, delivered in a fluent manner (p. 610).

Overall, participants showed some significant improvements for fluency and accuracy measures, with fluency seeing the most gains, but despite a slight trend toward native-like performance for some of the measures, none of the complexity scores significantly changed at the end of the study abroad. Also, correlations among fluency, accuracy, and complexity at the end of the course were relatively weak and largely nonsignificant, but those that turned out to be significant suggest that more fluent learners were also found to produce more accurate and complex language. This may suggest that learners producing longer speech runs were also producing longer and more complex units of speech.

On the other hand, learners who produced more errors were also found to pause more and be less fluent overall.

Level of proficiency

In general, it is thought that learners gains are based on what they know already when they leave the classroom. It could be that the more learners know, the more they can take advantage of using what they know through practice and adding new knowledge through input and interaction. Students that start their study abroad experiences with lower levels of proficiency tend to see larger gains than more proficient students, but on the other hand, students need a degree of L2 proficiency initially because most novices can only participate in simple language activities, like ordering a meal outside of the class (Kaplan, 1989). Studies have found that even after three months advanced level students can see gains in overall performance, (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Trenchs-Parera 2009, Taguchi, 2011; Mora & Volla-Ferrer, 2012). However, despite the above research, a group that has received less attention in research has been high proficiency learners (Coleman, 2009) because, presumably, the impact of learner gains at lower levels of proficiency makes a more compelling argument for the benefits of study abroad. Mora & Valls-Ferrer (2012) state that advanced learners do see gains, but more research is needed.

This study measures changes in fluency, accuracy and complexity of the under-studied group, advanced learners, to build a better picture of how study abroad affects oral production on top of research that has tended to favor gains in fluency over accuracy and complexity. The following research questions will be addressed:

1. What is the relationship between fluency, accuracy and complexity for the sample?
2. How do fluency, accuracy and complexity change over the course of nine weeks for the sample?

Method

Participants and setting

The setting for this study is a university in the south of England, which will be referred to as PU in this paper. As well as the undergraduate courses, PU also offers an academic preparation course to help potential students reach the required level of proficiency to gain entrance onto the graduate course. This course lasts for 9 weeks, and will be the source of participants for this study.

Most of the students on that pre-graduate course come from Asia, especially from Chinese universities, with which PU has established strong relations. However, there are other students from the Middle East and a few from Europe. Many students go on to degrees in subjects like architecture and business. During their future degrees students will need to interact with domestic students and be more independent in their learning. This study will focus on the participants in one class chosen because of the ease of data collection. The participants' formed an n-size of 23, which is broken down as follows: For the gender, 31% were female and 69% were male. Next, for nationality 61% were

Chinese and 39% were other nationalities predominantly nationalities from the Middle East, including one student from Turkey and one from Greece. In English qualifications, namely IELTS, most students were at 6 and 6.5 level, with the mean at 5.8, and, lastly, most students had been abroad before, including 3 students who had been in the UK for at least 6 months at the time of the study, but had not been studying.

During the academic preparation course students take classes in reading, debate and listening. There are two teachers that teach all the students on the nine-week course. These teachers both use communicative methods to improve the academic level of the students, and have taught this course for the past five years.

Procedure

The data for this study was collected three times over the nine-week period that the academic preparation course lasts for. Time one was after week two, time two was after week five, and time three was in the final week, nine. For times one and two the author prepared a discussion task relevant to the topics in class that the students had encountered up to that point. The tasks included a brief scenario followed by three discussion questions about the topic. For time three the students were free to discuss any topic that they wanted with their partner for which they were given a couple of minutes before the task to decide some main themes. Students spoke in the tasks for between fifteen to thirty minutes, but for this study a random 10-minute sample was used for investigating the oral production measures. Partners were paired with students of similar ability, so one speaker could not dominate. Participants were also told to be natural and hold the floor for as long as possible.

Individual measurements for each student during the sessions were as following:

- 1) Fluency was measured by total words per minute (Perez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2011). Variables that measure speech rate have been found to positively correlate with other measures of fluency such as pause length (Segalowitz & Freed 2004).
- 2) Accuracy was measured by the number of errors over a specific time (Mehnert, 1998). In this case, the total errors were averaged out over the total talk time. The errors counted included grammatical, lexical or pragmatic. Global errors were chosen over specific types of errors because of the considerable variability found among native speakers with certain structures (Geeslin & Guijarro-Fuentes, 2006). Pragmatic errors included utterances that were grammatically or lexically correct, but pragmatically inappropriate in a situation.
- 3) Complexity was measured by the number of words per c-unit (Mehnert, 1998), again, averaged out to get the c-units length as a product of the total number of words. A c-unit is defined as “independent utterance providing pragmatic meaning” (Foster & Skehan, 1996, p. 310). That is a phrase, that may or may not be complemented by a verb and carries a communicative value. An example is the response to “Where are you going?”, the elliptical answer “out”, would count as a c-unit. C-units can preserve more interaction than competing measures like the T-unit by including stereotypical

single word utterances and other non-clausal units that accompany a question or request.

The data from three times was used as comparison in line with other studies that have compared the three production measures from the same participants over a period of time during the study abroad course (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2009; Mora & Valls-Ferrer, 2012).

Results

The SPSS version 18.0 statistics program was used to analyze descriptive statistics, correlations between the variables, and t-tests to measure changes in variables between the three times. The descriptive statistics can be seen in Table 1 below. The skewness measures the degree of asymmetry around the mean of an item's scores, and kurtosis measures the peakedness of the normal distribution of an item. The standard check for skewness and kurtosis is the standard error of measurement (SE) divided by the skewness / kurtosis value, which gives a Z score of standard error of skewness / kurtosis. Values above or below ± 1.96 are considered significant values / negative values, and break the assumptions of normal distribution. In this data set, the only significant value was for the negative kurtosis value for time 3 of the error rate, indicating a flat distribution of scores for that variable.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Fluency, Accuracy and Complexity for 3 Time Periods

	Mean	SD	Skewness	SE	Kurtosis	SE
words per min 1	112.82	43.90	2.690	.481	9.597	.935
error rate 1	16.25	6.01	1.565	.481	3.620	.935
comp rate 1	9.82	1.80	.603	.481	.579	.935
words per min 2	108.79	51.63	3.336	.481	13.461	.935
error rate 2	15.13	4.82	.437	.481	-.615	.935
comp rate 2	9.72	2.12	-.003	.481	-.401	.935
words per min 3	100.56	24.37	1.206	.481	3.044	.935
error rate 3	24.02	9.83	.358	.481	<u>-.447</u>	<u>.935</u>
comp rate 3	9.84	3.47	.738	.481	-.824	.935

After the descriptive statistics, correlations of all the fluency, accuracy and complexity measures were analyzed for each time. Table 2 shows that for all times the accuracy measures were not correlated with any of the complexity measures. Also, the accuracy measures were significantly correlated with fluency in time 3, so when students chose their own topics it was more fluent and more accurate. On the other hand, for time 1 and 2 on the discussion tasks, fluency was positively correlated with complexity, so when the topic and questions are set, the advanced level students' output was more fluent and complex. It could also be that in this situation output is both lacking in fluency and complexity.

Lastly, T-tests were carried out to analyze the differences in means for fluency, accuracy and complexity measures for all three times. In Table 3, it can be seen that the only significant differences

were found for accuracy (error) between times 1 and 3, and 2 and 3. In time 3, there was an error on average every 24.02 words, so time 3 speech was more accurate.

Table 2. Correlations for Fluency, Accuracy and Complexity for 3 Time Periods

	error rate 1	comp rate 1
words per min 1		.505*
error rate 1		
comp rate 1		
	error rate 2	comp rate 2
words per min 2		.560**
error rate 2		
comp rate 2		
	error rate 3	comp rate 3
words per min 3	.688**	
error rate 3		
comp rate 3		

*=>.05; **=>.01

Table 3. T-Tests Comparing Means for Fluency, Accuracy and Complexity for 3 Time Periods

	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Sig. diff.
error rate	16.25	15.12	24.02	1,3;2,3
complexity rate	9.82	9.72	9.84	
words per min.	112.82	108.79	100.55	

Discussion

The first research question was concerned with the relationship between fluency, accuracy and complexity for the advanced L2 learners of English in this study. Accuracy and complexity were not correlated at any of the three times. This result goes against other studies that found higher accuracy and complexity correlated in interactive tasks (Skehan, 2001). On the other hand, for time 1 and 2, where the task was teacher-led, fluency and accuracy were highly correlated, and in time 3 the student-led discussion saw correlations in fluency and accuracy. It seems that familiar tasks elicit accuracy and fluency, but less familiar tasks influence fluency and complexity. This result might be because the task characteristics were unmanipulated and this meant that it was not possible to explore the relationship between fluency, accuracy, and complexity longitudinally from the perspective of the trade-off hypothesis (Skehan, 2009). It may also be that the traditionally held view that fluency, accuracy and complexity have co-linear development may also need more investigation (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Indeed, Norris & Ortega (2003) claim that the relationship between these three variables could be a lot more dynamic and non-linear in fashion.

The second question looked at the changes in fluency, accuracy and complexity over a nine-week period for the learners. The only significant difference was between time 1 and 2 compared to time

3 for accuracy, but this may have been a product of the task type rather than the improvement in accuracy itself. This means for these high proficiency learners nine weeks was not enough to improve their oral production.

There are a number of possible reasons for this result. Firstly, being that there were two main cultural groups, Chinese and Arabian in the study, it could be that students tended to only stick in their respective cultural groups out of class, and therefore the lack of meaningful exposure to the English language could be one reason for limited gains (DeKeyser, 2007). Secondly, it may be that the task type used in this study was not efficacious in drawing out higher levels of fluency, accuracy or complexity (Skehan & Foster, 1999; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Thirdly, a lack of gains may have been related to operationalization of the three measures in this study and studies in general (Housen & Kuiken, 2009). Lastly, this study looked at only objective measures, it could be that attitudes and individual differences in the way learners engage in language learning affected the results (DeKeyser, 2010). It may also have been related to motivational issues during the study abroad, which could have hindered learning opportunities during the study abroad (Dörnyei & Schmitt, 2001; Dörnyei, 2005).

Conclusion

This study suffered the obvious limitation of a small n-size. However, the results indicate that despite claims that study abroad can enhance fluency, especially, and accuracy and complexity, this study found few changes in oral production measures for the target group; a result matched in other studies (DeKeyser, 1991; Collentine, 2004). It can't be said that study abroad is a waste of time, but perhaps at advanced proficiency levels other production measures are more pertinent (Skehan, 2009). This study also relies only on data from oral production measures, so it has only a partial view of the situation. In the future, study abroad research should combine both quantitative and qualitative longitudinally to understand more completely what takes place during study abroad (De-Keyser, 1991; Freed, 1998; Dufon & Churchill, 2006).

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第2 言語を学ぶ大学院生に対する会話の度合いの変化

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要旨

過去の研究報告によると、一般的に留学することによって、学生は会話を重ねるごとに能力は向上するといわれています。その当時の研究報告によって出たのが fluency が向上し、文法 (accuracy と complexity) などの向上の変化などはあまり見られないというものでした。そして私の二つの研究目的は、1 つ目は留学中における fluency、accuracy と complexity 向上の変化。2 つ目は留学期間中の上級者の能力向上。この研究によるデータは、イギリスの大学に留学している大学院を目指す大学生 23 人 (多国籍) に 9 週間のコースを受けてもらい、9 週間のコースの間にどのような変化が見られるか、23 人の学生ひとりひとりに 3 回のデータを取りました。その結果、以前から言われていた研究結果とは異なり fluency と complexity には変化がなく、accuracy は微々たる変化しか見られませんでした。