

Motivation and Extended Interaction in the Study–Abroad Context: Factors in the Development of Spanish Language Accuracy and Communication Skills

Introduction

This study examines the impact of a one–semester study–abroad experience in Argentina on the second language acquisition of five American university Spanish learners. The goal is to relate patterns of social contact via analysis of social network logs to development in language proficiency as measured by gains in linguistic accuracy and oral communication skills over time. I submit that the two vital factors that lead to acquisition gains in the study–abroad context are motivation and significant extended target language interaction with native speakers in social networks. Those who had high motivation were those that had more extended networks, which correlated with gains in linguistic accuracy and development in discourse functions.

An extension of Milroy's (1987) theory of social networks of people in their native communities to learners in a study–abroad context is posed by the investigator and provides the framework of social networks for this study. Learners in the host country who do not interact with the host culture but rather form closed or dense, multiplex networks with other English–speaking learners will interact mostly within this English–speaking territory. On the other hand, study–abroad learners who have open personal networks, moving outside the L1 English–speaking territory of their fellow study–abroad acquaintances, will attain contacts in the host culture, presumably with native speakers. The open network tie is understandably uniplex since they have just arrived to a country where they have to build relationships within a new social network, usually starting with one member at a time. "Network zones" are important to understanding the role that social networks play in successful interaction. The persons who are directly linked to X are characterized by Milroy as "belonging to his [or her] first order network zone" (p. 6). Each of these people may be in contact with others whom X does not know, but with whom X could come into contact with via the first order zone. These more distantly connected persons form X's "second order zone." Milroy discusses these zones to demonstrate to future fieldworkers why creating a link with the local networks is important in collecting reliable ethnographic data. I extend this framework to study–abroad learners.

Figure 1 Low–density network showing first and second order zones. (Milroy, 1987: 48)



The learners in the extended networks with native speakers, as opposed to those in the closed networks of other study–abroad English–speaking learners, will acquire a set of linguistic norms that are enforced by exchange with those native–speaker contacts. The notion of obligation is contingent on that of exchange. If the individual wishes to protect social relationships, these obligations must be honored. The establishment of social networks in a new environment may be a difficult undertaking, considering that learners have to deal with elements of a host culture that they never had to deal with in their own country. The maintenance, however, of second order zone, closed social networks with native speakers

of the host culture may be more difficult if the learner does not wish to or know how to foster the new social relationship. The negligence or care of social relationships by the learner is caused by many factors, but in the study–abroad context, the learner’s cultural awareness plays an important role.

Methodology

The data collection was carried out over a period of six months in Argentina. The participants for this study were selected from a group of study–abroad students who were part of a consortium among three North American Universities. The conditions of participation were to fill out weekly network logs, keep a weekly diary, consent to being recorded five times, and take an oral pre– and post–program oral proficiency interview. The participants’ only study–abroad experience was the semester of study in Buenos Aires. One student lived with a host family and four lived in student apartments with between one and three roommates from different parts of the world.

Data collection Instruments

The simulated oral proficiency interview and informal interviews

The quantitative measurements for this study were derived from a Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI) and five informal interviews. The sole purpose of the SOPI was to have quantitative data on pre– and post–program proficiency performance with a controlled measurement. The informal interviews were used to elicit functions to be analyzed later for specific oral communication skills and linguistic accuracy. All interviews were conducted exclusively in Spanish. These 15–minute interviews were conducted once a month, for a total of five times over the course of the study.

Diary entries and network contact logs

One means by which learners can record their thoughts, feelings, achievements, problems, strategies, and impressions of the culture is through diaries. To this end, the participants were given notebooks in which they kept their weekly diary entries. The diary entries were written in English so that no subject material would be avoided due to limited linguistic capabilities in Spanish. Writing in English also allowed the participants to express themselves in as much detail as they desired. The investigator operationalized and measured the learners’ social attitudes based on culture–specific comments from their diaries and informal interviews that included positive or negative aspects.

The learners’ motivational orientation was obtained by two means. One means to decide if their motivation was labeled as intrinsic, instrumental, or integrative was based on comments in the initial, pre–program questionnaire that consisted of: (a) personal opinions based on their experience as a whole; and (b) explanations for taking certain actions. The second means of determining motivation to learn the language was by translating the learners’ positive or negative attitude to a high or low motivational orientation, respectively. This manner of determining the learners’ motivation is more reliable than implementing the usual self–report medium.

After interviewing the participants and collecting the network logs and weekly diary entries, the investigator then identified the learners’ social networks in their study–abroad environment. The participants were each given seven daily log sheets to fill out in which the students recorded: (a) the activities they were involved in; (b) the name of the person with whom they carried out the activities; and (c) in which language, Spanish or English, the interaction occurred. These log sheets were filled out at three different times during their stay abroad and returned to the investigator during the first, eighth, and fifteenth week.

Quantitative Results

Simulated oral proficiency interview

A trained SOP1 rater scored the SOP1s to determine the pre- and post-program oral proficiency ratings of the seven student participants. Following a modified version of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (1986), the SOP1s were double-rated for reliability according to the criteria described for the following four levels: Intermediate Low; Intermediate Mid; Intermediate High; and Advanced. The proportion of pre-program SOP1 scores was 2 (SD = .71) whereas the proportion of post-program scores was 3 (SD = .71). A paired samples *t*-test was conducted to assess the statistical significance of the mean difference in proportions of rates across the two tests. The *t*-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the two sets in proportions of scores, $t(4) = 3.16, p < .034$.

Linguistic accuracy

The learners' informal interviews were transcribed and analyzed for: (a) tense selection of present vs. past; (b) imperfect vs. preterite aspect selection; (c) person-number (subject-verb) agreement; and (d) gender-number agreement. Slopes were calculated through SPSS linear regression tests using the linguistic elements under study as the dependent variable and the month as the independent variable, showing the relationship between these two variables. A slope that was closer to zero represented linguistic development with much variation in accuracy across the five months while a slope distant from zero indicated linguistic development with small variation in accuracy across the five months.

The average slope for all the linguistic elements studied here in the discourse of all the learners is a positive slope of 2.28. Most development in linguistic accuracy was seen in Tense Selection, while Gender-Number and Subject-Verb Agreement showed slight development. The difficulties that the learners had in Tense Selection in the earlier interviews were attributed mostly to use of the present tense when a past tense was required.¹ Distinguishing Aspect proved more difficult for the learners, a phenomenon that has been frequently noted in research (Andersen, 1990; Breiner-Sanders et al., 2000). In other words, the learners' development of linguistic accuracy overall is positive and steady. The proportion of errors for Subject-Verb Agreement for all learners at Month 1 was .05 (SD = .02) whereas the proportion of errors at Month 5 was .02 (SD = .01). A paired samples *t*-test was conducted to assess the statistical significance of the mean difference in proportions of errors across the two months. The *t*-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the two months' proportions of errors, $t(4) = .89, p < .009$. The proportion of errors for Tense Selection at Month 1 was .09 (SD = .03) whereas the proportion of errors at Month 5 was .03 (SD = .02). The *t*-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the two sets in proportions of errors, $t(4) = 9.79, p < .001$. Backsliding in the four linguistic elements occurred but did not hinder the overall development of their linguistic accuracy. The development in accuracy of these elements shows that learning a language abroad takes work and that the linguistic variable change does not improve in a linear fashion. This finding provides negative evidence for five to six-week summer study-abroad programs that claim that acquisition takes place.

Oral communication skills

The learners' narrative passages were categorized into six functional categories (Simple and Detailed Description, Simple and Detailed Narration, and Giving and Supporting an Opinion). The learners' development in oral communication skills varies depending on the learner. Some used more advanced speech functions whereas others maintained their use

¹Alternation between the past tense and the historical present in order to draw the listener's attention to certain events and serve as an internal evaluation was not counted as an error of appropriateness of present versus past tense.

of intermediate functions. The oral communication skills that are most often developed and practiced in a one-semester study-abroad program are mostly those corresponding to the Intermediate High proficiency level, suggesting that another semester abroad would bring the learner to the Advanced level. A closer intimacy with members of a larger social network would seem to allow for more practice of advanced-level functions, since one does not usually give elaborate descriptions, narrations, and evaluations to those that one does not know well. There was no uniform development in the use of Detailed Descriptions and Narrations (Advanced functions) or Simple Descriptions and Narrations (Intermediate functions) among the learners. The development in the use of more complex speech functions is not regulated and learners will advance with time and practice if they are willing to interact with the host culture.

Qualitative Results and Analysis: Attitudes and Social Networks

The learners' lack of development with the more advanced discourse functions of narrations correlates with the learners' little overall development made in their accuracy of Aspect Selection. In a one-semester abroad experience, this area of oral communication skills is just becoming developed; more interaction time is needed abroad for learners to practice and learn to use the more advanced speech functions. This conclusion is derived from an analysis of the social network data for first and second order zone membership (Milroy, 1987). The two learners in this study that interacted in a multiplex second order zone social network were the only two that showed significant development in their speech functions. This second order zone was the only way that the study-abroad learners could interact in a "real" social network, meaning that the network did not consist only of acquaintances, none of whom interacted with each other. Rather, the learners became part of a closed, multiplex network where opportunities to observe and participate in prolonged interaction was increased, giving them the opportunity to practice speech functions beyond that of supplying the superficial information. They were in social situations as a friend, and as such they were asked to embellish descriptions or felt obligated to give more evaluative comments so that their stories became a valued exchange to reinforce their friendship. The influence of extended social networks has not been researched in second language acquisition.

It was seen that the type of motivation the learners had in learning the target language, the attitude that they maintained toward the host culture in their diaries, and the strength of their social networks were all connected. This aspect is important to explain one crucial reason why variation exists among the individual learners' processes in second language acquisition. All learners invariably felt frustrated at one point or another during the program but it is interesting to note how these situations were dealt with in different manners depending on the individual learner. Providing an inside look at the learners' thoughts and opinions toward the new host cultural experiences, an analysis of the breadth of their social networks through Network Contact Logs indicated that the positive or negative aspects of their thoughts and opinions played a role in their desire and drive to build a new social network. Those students who were involved in broader social networks had a tendency to implement more Advanced functions such as telling Detailed Description and Detailed Narrations. The students with stronger social networks were able to practice those functions with more frequency than those with a small or weak social network, which resulted in a significant development in their oral communication skills. The learners' attitudes toward the host culture usually corresponded to their language choice in social situations.

Concluding Remarks

Studies carried out to investigate the role that social interaction plays in language acquisition have produced contradictory conclusions, some providing evidence that suggests that infor-

mal contact does not necessarily enhance acquisition (DeKeyser, 1991), and may even hinder it (Higgs & Clifford, 1982). One of the goals of this study was to describe and account for the regularities and the variations in the social attitudes of language learners in the study-abroad context. The data show that development of linguistic accuracy and oral communication skills correlates with the learners' motivation and attitude toward the host culture and the breadth of their social networks.

The motivation of the learner towards learning the target language does affect the language learning process. It was shown that the learners with high motivation, as opposed to low motivation, developed more extensive social networks with Argentinians. The data show that the learners' continued motivation to learn the target language was not directly influenced by their second language achievement or vice versa. Instead, their motivation was influenced by their success in incorporating themselves into social networks. The interaction with native speakers that took place in the social networks fostered opportunities for negotiation, attention to gaps in feedback, and restructuring in the interlanguage. In other words, there is a conduit between motivation and language acquisition in the study-abroad context, which is interaction in social networks.

The difference in learner progress through stages of cultural awareness is linked to their experiences, motivation, personalities, and abilities to handle difficult new situations. The learners who remained at the state in which they preserved the hegemony of their culture over the new host culture maintained a negative attitude toward the host culture. This attitude invariably influenced with whom they chose to interact, most likely an American. Because they spent much time with fellow Americans and interacted regularly in English instead of Spanish, there was a lack of development in their linguistic accuracy and oral communication skills in Spanish. Being in the study-abroad environment for an extended period of time allowed the learners opportunities to create, foster, and maintain motivation and social networks with the target-culture. This experience allowed the learners to recognize, minimize, and finally accept cultural differences, which resulted in an impetus for learning, providing the learners the chance to work their way to understanding and to interaction. The findings of the present project show that study abroad offers opportunities to build social networks and interact with native speakers and those that take advantage of this opportunity and seek to use the target language are the ones who make the most progress. The learners that had high motivation were those that had more extended networks, which correlated with gains in linguistic accuracy and development in discourse functions and fluency. On the other hand, those with low motivation had weak social networks that correlated with no development in functions.

Within an second language multiplex network in which all acquaintances deal with each other in more than one capacity, the native speaker friends want elaboration of certain experiences or opinions, drawing the learner into the network's mesh of exchange and obligation relationships and increasing the learner's participation in prolonged interaction. Learning to share opinions in a new social network is an important aspect of maintaining a network that provides little opportunity to avoid certain topics that are difficult to express. Participating in prolonged interaction pushes oral communication skills to develop. At the same time, the input that the learner is exposed to in such interactions at first is often beyond their comprehension, leading the learners to negotiate the meaning by asking clarification questions. Through this interaction the learners may also notice gaps in their production by comparing it to what their native counterpart is saying. Not only do the learners notice gaps and improve linguistic accuracy but they also may apply more advanced communicative skills to their developing interlanguage through scaffolding strategies.

From the data in this study we have also learned that learners are sometimes rebuffed by a

new group of acquaintances. Some learners give up while others persevere, trying and trying again, learning strategies to align themselves with people of a different culture in order to be more easily accepted into a social network of friends. The learners who incorporated themselves into social networks were the ones who aligned themselves to the new culture through volunteering at a local church, traveling long distances to visit with friends of friends, and becoming tolerant of cultural annoyances. In this study, the learners that were self-motivated to maintain extended social networks and that practiced linguistic and oral communication skills not otherwise allowed them, are evidence that informal, out-of-class contact can greatly enhance acquisition.

According to our data that have yet to be tested on a larger population of learners, high motivation and positive attitudes do not correlate to development in linguistic accuracy but they do correlate to development of discourse functions. It is quite evident that attitudes, motivation, and environment play a significant role in the second language acquisition process. Such research instruments as social network logs and personal diaries provide a window into the actions and feelings of those study-abroad participants in the process of acquiring the target language. It is important to observe successful learners who take advantage of participating in native social networks and what the impact of a lack of such participation is on their language acquisition process. By uncovering this information, learners can be instructed before going abroad of the importance of perseverance in creating and maintaining social networks of the people of the host culture.

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