KEY CONCEPTS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS/*CONCEPTOS CLAVE DE LA LINGÜÍSTICA APLICADA*

Second Language Acquisition and Study Abroad Learning Environments //

La adquisición de una lengua extranjera y los entornos de aprendizaje en el extranjero

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In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), much research has focused on university language-learners. This is due to the numerous learners that study abroad and the ease of collecting data from subjects in which there is much development to measure. It is common practice to recommend students to complement their traditional language learning experience with an immersion experience in a more naturalistic environment. In this learning environment, there are numerous opportunities to engage with native speakers in various contexts and, as a result, improve their

communicative competence. These immersion environments include study abroad (SA) and to attain "advanced levels of L2 ability...the operative factor may not so much be location...as the nature and breadth of learning opportunities" (Brynes, 2009, p. 3). This belief is reflected in the effort at many universities to internationalize their curricula and in the number of students that go abroad each year to learn and acquire a second language.

One expected consequence to this trend is to assess the benefits of the SA environment and analyze what aspects of the experience lend themselves to provide opportunities to improve students' language systems in all that it entails (syntactic, morphological, phonological, semantic, pragmatic, cultural, to name a few) and to examine what the successful language learners are doing in the immersion context that may explain their development. One of the goals is to learn what learners do differently abroad and how it may affect their acquisition/learning of the target language. Most frequently, SA research focuses on the intermediate language learner and the factors that explain the jump they make from learning the language (**langue**) to using the language (**parole**) and, moreover, how they come to be advanced speakers of the target language. This is a frequent issue U.S. educators see in third- and fourth-year language classes as well as program managers of university language departments. According to Lord and Isabelli-García (2014), one of the more difficult language learning goals to reach is the advanced competency level that is "typically assumed to be present in the language learner in order to be a functioning, professional member of a second-language, global, workplace" (p. 157). The authors also note that SA is commonly thought to provide the **high-impact practice** (AAC&U, 2013) of experiential learning, and help to meet the Modern Language Association's (MLA, 2007) call for **transcultural** and **translingual competence**.

Given the stakes of SA, the scale of the enterprise, and the significant involvement of interested parties, there is a clear need for strategy, informed by data on a number of empirical questions (Ginsberg & Miller, 2000). To measure what is learned abroad entails measuring the progress in language acquisition of students who spend a significant amount of time studying a language while immersed abroad and compare it to SLA in traditional language classes. Freed's (1995) seminal publication sparked research

attempting to answer her question concerning the linguistic benefits of time spent abroad, "Is it improved accent, greater use of idioms, improved accuracy, expanded discourse strategies, greater improved listening comprehension, improved oral or written communication, greater syntactic complexity, or broader sociolinguistic range?" (p.17). Recent research has extended beyond the linguistic development of the learner to include "changes in learner identity and agency and student perspectives about language learning that inform development of intercultural/transcultural competence (e.g., MLA 2007; Jackson 2010, 2013; Beaven & Spencer-Oatey 2016)" (Isabelli, Bown, Plew, & Dewey, in press).

Successful integration into their new surroundings is important to the SA students because it is in this situation that they can take advantage of the opportunity to hone their language skills with meaningful interactions with members of the host culture, in a way promoting SLA. These interactions, which frequently occur in informal relationships contracted by the learner (referred to as social networks [Milroy, 1987]), may influence the acquisition process. In other words, to know what promotes SLA means understanding how impenetrable our students find the new culture to be, the strategies they use to create, maintain, and expand their social networks, and the impact their efforts have on their language acquisition at the more advanced level. Within a language socialization framework, studies have documented that learners experience different ease of access or acceptance to these informal relationships (see Norton & McKinney, 2011). Alternatively, they may be embraced by new communities but "not be fully invested in learning particular community ways…or they may want to retain an identity that is distinct from a particular community (Bronson & Watson-Gegeo, 2008)" (Duff & Talmy, 2011, pp. 97-98). SA students must learn strategies to build new social networks and share opinions within that group of acquaintances, a vital aspect of maintaining a network. These interactions within extended, or meaningful, social networks provide little opportunity to avoid certain topics that are difficult to express in a second language. Participating in interactions with native speakers encourages the development of second language knowledge and communicative competence. Because of the difficulty for students to create networks with native speakers of the target language abroad, accessing appropriate input becomes a significant barrier (Bryam & Feng, 2006; Collentine, 2009;

Isabelli-García, 2006; Pérez-Vidal, 2017). Therefore, to successfully measure SLA we need to understand the transcultural experiential learning situation in which the students find themselves.

Research in this field differentiates studying abroad from other types of foreign travel in which a second language is typically learned. These include, for example, those that are working abroad or simultaneously working and studying abroad. Knowing the learner's motivation for being abroad is necessary to forewarn researchers of the varying ways that learning occurs abroad and suggest that research design be in line with sojourner characteristics (Badstübner & Ecke, 2009; Laborda & Bejarano, 2008; Patron, 2007; Pellegrino-Aveni, 2005; Wolcott, 2013). Mixed-methods research designs have proven to give an ample picture of how learners' individual differences play a role in language development (Briggs, 2016; Jackson, 2016; Kinginger, 2008; McManus, Mitchell & Tracy-Ventura, 2014; Tracy-Ventura, Dewaele, Köylü, & McManus, 2016). Theoretical approaches that have been seen more recently in SA research are those that include a sociocultural perspective and tend to lean more towards a dynamic systems approach in which SA is viewed as a "social ecosystem" (de Bot, Lowie & Verspoor, 2007) where dynamic, interacting factors shape SLA. Researchers applying the approach take interacting, internal, dynamic subsystems into account to explain the SLA process. The complex, dynamic systems theory encapsulates this and "allows us to merge the social and the cognitive aspects of SLA and shows how their interaction can lead to development" (de Bot et al., 2007, p. 19). This approach puts into play the fact that students abroad are receiving more diverse and complex input than their counterparts at home via **situated practice** (Bronson & Watson-Gregeo, 2008; Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo, & Valentiere, 2009; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2010) as well as **via extended social networks** (Dewey, Belnap, & Hilstrom, 2013; Dewey, Bown, & Eggett, 2012; Dewey, Ring, Gardner, & Belnap, 2013; Duff & Talmy, 2011; Kurata, 2011; Shiri, 2015).

SLA conclusions collected in the SA learning environment, such as syntactic, lexical, phonetic, morphological and semantic development, as well as development in the four language skills, have been inconclusive (Sanz, 2014). An aspect that is listed repeatedly in publications as an area

for further study is in regard to capturing data from the growing number of students studying abroad to areas besides the popular destination of Europe in addition to students of diverse ethnic heritages studying abroad in countries of their ancestry. Also present are suggestions to push forward the SA research agenda by taking into consideration the host family perspectives, implementing and assessing suggestions for learners to engage in abroad as a means to promote gains in communicative competence. Recent studies have documented the importance of understanding the varied nature of host family placement (see Lee, Wu, Di, & Kinginger, 2017). They have also uncovered the role that the decline in U.S. households of "eating dinner together" may have on the SA experience (Ochs & Beck, 2013, p. 49). That is, if more and more U.S. students are coming from homes in which eating meals together is challenging then we may need to reevaluate the value that is placed on SA host family connections that are expected to be made during meal times. In addition to the nature of host family placement, they have underscored the benefits of service learning projects apart from the academic advantages but also as a tool for fostering extended/relevant interaction with native speakers (Shively, 2013).

With the aid of the aforementioned sociocultural theoretical approach, SA research has shed light on how study abroad gains may be a result of characteristics such as the language learner's personality type, cognitive abilities, and styles. Sociocultural and sociolinguistics factors such as gender, stage in the acculturation process, and investment in learning the target language have also been made. Mendelson (2004) states succinctly that there is a "need to respect the voices of individual students, beyond the statistics, in order to better understand their learning process on both an academic and personal level" (p. 44). Kinginger (2009) also suggests future researchers to create more robust research designs that include better control groups or use more reliable means to measure language gains as well as in the areas of discursive, pragmatic, and sociocultural competencies. There is a need to continue to cover the multiple facets of study abroad with the goal to push forward the research agenda as well as to frame it within particular theoretical perspectives to create robust research designs.

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