

LENGTH OF STAY AND STUDY ABROAD: LANGUAGE GAINS IN TWO VERSUS THREE MONTHS ABROAD

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ABSTRACT. *This study examines the effect of 'length of stay' on the written and oral development of two groups of Spanish-speaking students learning English in the UK through the Erasmus Program. Written and oral data were collected from 46 participants by means of a composition and an oral narrative after stays of two months (25 students) or three months abroad (21 students) in the target language country. The learners' written and oral samples were analyzed in terms of fluency, accuracy, lexical richness and complexity. The results of the statistical analyses suggest that there are no significant differences in the gains made by the two groups of learners; therefore, an additional month abroad may not be long enough to produce significant differences in learners' second language development in terms of the measures of written and oral production considered in this study.*

KEY WORDS. *Study abroad, length of stay, second language acquisition, oral production, written production.*

RESUMEN. *Este estudio examina el efecto de la duración de las estancias en el extranjero en el desarrollo de la competencia escrita y oral de dos grupos de universitarios españoles que aprenden inglés en el Reino Unido a través el programa Erasmus. Se recogieron datos de 46 participantes mediante una redacción y una narración oral después de pasar dos meses (25 estudiantes) y tres meses (21 estudiantes) en el extranjero. Los datos escritos y orales fueron analizados utilizando medidas de fluidez, corrección, riqueza léxica y complejidad sintáctica. Los resultados indican que no hay diferencias significativas entre los dos grupos de estudiantes. Por lo tanto, un mes adicional en el extranjero puede que no sea suficiente para crear diferencias significativas en la adquisición de la segunda lengua en relación a las medidas adoptadas en este estudio.*

PALABRAS CLAVE. *Estancias en el extranjero, duración de las estancias, adquisición de una segunda lengua, producción oral, producción escrita.*

1. INTRODUCTION

It has long been assumed that the most efficient way to learn a language is by spending time in the target language country, due to the multiple opportunities that students have to practice the foreign language (FL). Given that learners who participate in study abroad (SA) programs usually enroll in language courses, the combination of formal classroom learning and informal learning (out-of-class) seems to be the perfect setting to learn an FL efficiently. Moreover, this practice is becoming more and more popular in developed countries around the world. Clear evidence of this growth is the fact that, in 1987, 300 universities in Europe exchanged 3,000 students, while by the academic year 2007/2008, 162,700 students were involved in exchanges thanks to the Erasmus scholarships. The Erasmus program is the most popular mobility program for studying abroad within the European framework. Scholarships are awarded to European undergraduate students to enable them to study in a European country for one semester or for a whole year, improve their second language (L2) skills, and get to know another culture. In the United States, more evidence of this growth in students' mobility is provided by the Institute of International Education (<http://www.iie.org/>), which reports that the number of Americans studying abroad increased by 8% to 262,416 in the 2008/09 academic year. According to this institution, in the year 2006/2007, a total of 241,791 learners studied abroad, compared with 205,983 in 2005/2006 – a considerable increase if we compare the figures with the data available on participation in previous years: 154,168 participants in 2000/2001 and 160,920 in 2001/2002. Nonetheless, in spite of the increasing number of students spending one or two semesters at a university overseas, little research has been carried out on study abroad; most of the studies published to date are comparative and analyze whether learning an L2 in an SA context is more beneficial than learning an L2 'at home' (AH) in an institution in the learners' home country.

Some studies have examined the SA context itself, without comparing it to the AH context. Authors have analyzed how different individual variables affect the language gains that participants experience after spending some time abroad. Some of the variables which researchers suggest may play a role are L2 learners' age (Brecht and Robinson 1995; Llanes and Muñoz 2009), gender (Brecht and Robinson 1995; Díaz-Campos 2004, Adams 2006; Llanes and Muñoz 2009), initial proficiency level (Brecht, Davidson and Ginsberg 1995; Freed 1995; Lapkin, Hart and Swain 1995; Milton and Meara 1995; Llanes and Muñoz 2009), and length of stay (LoS) abroad (Ife, Vives and Meara 2000; Dwyer 2004; Félix-Brasdefer 2004; Llanes and Muñoz 2009; Sasaki 2009). The last of these variables, length of stay, has not received much attention in the SA literature, although some authors have stressed its importance in learners' L2 development abroad. Since previous studies have demonstrated that LoS plays a role in L2 acquisition and development, its relevance is crucial; given the popularity of SA programs all over the world, it is important to examine the effects of LoS, not only for research purposes, but also in view of the economic implications and the more practical

decisions that learners and institutions participating in SA exchanges need to take when organizing stays abroad.

The central object of this paper is to provide some empirical evidence on the effect of LoS on participants' L2 written and oral development. However, a review of the current existing literature on SA is in order before going on to analyze what some authors have found in terms of LoS.

1.1. *Study abroad vs. at home L2 programs*

Many language areas have been investigated in the SA literature, although some areas have received more attention than others. Dyson (1988) examined the listening (and speaking) skills of 229 British participants who spent one year in Germany, Spain or France. In the post-tests, considerable gains in both skills were perceived for all the languages. In a more recent study, Cubillos, Chieffo and Fan (2008) examined the listening comprehension gains of 48 North American undergraduates learning Spanish as an FL who enrolled in a short-term study in Spain or Costa Rica, and compared them with the improvement of 92 peers learning Spanish on the AH campus. Even though both groups experienced similarly significant gains, students with a higher listening comprehension score on the pre-test recorded higher gains during their SA. Cubillos *et al.* (2008) also reported that participants in the SA group showed higher levels of confidence and used different listening comprehension strategies from participants in the AH group.

The development of reading ability in an SA context has also been examined. Dewey (2004) investigated reading development during SA and compared the FL reading development of 30 American students studying Japanese as an FL: 15 participants in an immersion setting, and 15 in an SA setting. Assessing reading comprehension through free-recall protocols, vocabulary knowledge tests, and self-assessments, Dewey found that SA participants showed greater confidence when reading after their 11 weeks in Japan.

Writing development in an SA context has also attracted the attention of researchers. Freed, So and Lazar (2003) were the first to analyze written data among SA participants. The aim of their study was to compare oral and written fluency outcomes of two groups of undergraduate students learning an FL in SA or AH settings. They found that, whereas the SA learning context seemed to be crucial for the improvement of oral fluency, it did not necessarily enhance participants' written fluency. Sasaki (2004, 2007, 2009) also focused on written production, although from a different perspective. These studies examined the written production of undergraduate students learning English in the two contexts over a 3.5-year period (though in the SA group the length of stay in the target language country varied). Among the variables investigated, Sasaki found improvements in L2 proficiency, composition quality and writing fluency in both groups, although the SA group tended to show greater development of more qualitative variables such as writing strategies and writing styles. After exhaustive interviews, Sasaki attributed these gains to the greater vocabulary increase among the SA participants, who in turn felt more confident writing in English. In a recent study, Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) analyzed the L2 writing

development of a group of undergraduate students, and found that a period abroad plays a role in improving writing skills.

In terms of pronunciation development, Díaz-Campos (2004) examined participants' production of several target words in two groups learning Spanish, one abroad and one at home. One of the findings of the study was that the students who reported using more Spanish abroad showed more nativelike pronunciation patterns than AH students. Mora (2008) investigated phonetic perception and production of a group of students who spent three months abroad, and found that the SA context did not play a major role in improving their ability in these areas.

Other studies have investigated vocabulary acquisition in an SA context. Some show an advantage of the SA learning context over the AH context (Dewey 2008; Foster 2009), though not all (Collentine 2004). Collentine's study investigated lexical abilities and grammatical skills in 46 English native-speakers studying Spanish as an FL in AH and SA settings, and found that the SA group showed better narrative abilities and more sophisticated language; however, the AH group outperformed the SA group in terms of discrete grammatical points and lexical features. So in Collentine's study the SA context did not favor the development of lexical abilities.

Although all these language areas have received some attention in the SA literature, most studies have focused on oral fluency since it is in this area that learners in the SA context are believed to improve the most (Lennon 1990; Freed 1995; Lapkin *et al.* 1995; Freed, Segalowitz and Dewey 2004; Segalowitz and Freed 2004; Llanes and Muñoz 2009). Freed *et al.* (2004) compared several oral fluency variables of 28 English native speakers studying French as an L2 in three different learning contexts: a group studying in France (SA), a group studying in an immersion setting in their country (IM), and a group studying in a regular institution in their home country (AH). Their findings suggest that the AH group experienced fewest gains in oral performance, but that the IM group, surprisingly, achieved better performance than the SA group. The authors attribute this finding to the fact that IM students reported devoting more time to writing and speaking the L2 than the AH and SA groups.

Segalowitz and Freed (2004) investigated the same set of variables in their study of 40 native English speakers studying Spanish as an L2 in SA and AH learning contexts. Their results show that the SA group outperformed the AH group in terms of hesitation (they produced fewer and shorter pauses, either silent or filled) and tempo phenomena (delivering more words per minute and demonstrating a faster speech rate). Lennon (1990) analyzed the oral fluency development of four students spending six months abroad. After an exhaustive analysis of tempo and pausological variables, the author concluded that the SA context helped participants to improve some of the variables, namely speech rate, filled pauses per T-unit, and percentage of T-units followed by pause. Moreover, a panel of previously trained judges perceived these participants to be more fluent after their SA. Likewise, Llanes and Muñoz (2009) examined the oral development of a group of 24 Catalan/Spanish learners of English who spent 3 or 4 weeks abroad, and

found that even after such short a period of time, participants improved on most of the dimensions examined.

In general, then, even though all the different language skills have been investigated and compared in the SA and AH contexts, most researchers have focused on oral fluency. Although some studies have found advantages for the SA learners in areas other than oral production, the advantage of the SA context over the AH context for the development of L2 skills has not been clearly demonstrated, except in the area of oral fluency.

1.2. *Study abroad and individual variables*

In all the language areas investigated in the SA literature, variables such as gender, proficiency level, age, motivation and LoS in the target language country have been acknowledged as playing an important role in second language learning in an SA context (Freed 1998; Huebner 1998; Engle and Engle 2004). Individual variation is therefore an issue which must be considered in SA, since there are many interfering factors in the acquisition of the L2 in this context; this variability has been claimed to be higher for FL learning in SA than in AH programs (Freed 1995; Regan 1995).

One individual characteristic that may affect the acquisition of an L2 in an SA context is the students' personality, which will determine how much contact with the natives is sought (DeKeyser 1991; Kinginger 2008). Gender may also be a variable which affects language acquisition in the SA context. Some studies have reported that women make less progress than their male counterparts in countries where the women's role is highly different from the first language country, as in the case of American women in Russia (Brecht *et al.* 1995; Polanyi 1995). These studies report fewer language gains for women since they could not interact as freely as men in their program, due to the different roles that women have in the foreign country. Other individual variables which may affect language acquisition in an SA context include previous FL learning experience, which is assumed to be a facilitating factor in L2 learning in SA (Brecht *et al.* 1995). Students' age can also be an influential factor. In a study of the performance of Americans learning Russian in Russia over many years, Brecht *et al.* report that younger learners tend to make more progress than older learners.

Another predictor of L2 gains in an SA context is initial level of L2 proficiency. Several studies have found that it is harder for advanced learners to make progress after the SA experience than it is for intermediate learners. In their study of the acquisition of Russian by American students, Brecht *et al.* (1995) found that those with the highest initial level of Russian were less likely to make gains after staying abroad. Similarly, Lapkin *et al.* (1995) observed that, in an interprovincial exchange in which English-speaking Canadian adolescents spent a period of time in Quebec, the students who had made the most gains after the stay were those who scored lowest on the pre-tests. Additionally, in her analysis of fluency in French in the SA context, Freed (1995) reported that students who were rated as less fluent before the SA experience were perceived as having made the most progress in this area in the post-test. In an earlier

study, Freed (1990) also reported that intermediate students who studied French abroad for six weeks made more progress than their advanced counterparts. Moreover, she found that interactive out-of-class contact helped the students improve their French skills more than non-interactive contact. It has also been suggested that lower proficiency students demonstrate a higher improvement in vocabulary acquisition than advanced learners in the SA context (Milton and Meara 1995). Similar findings have been obtained for sociolinguistic competence, suggesting that advanced learners do not make many gains after some time in the L2 country (Regan 1995, 1998). As regards oral performance, Llanes and Muñoz (2009) found that SA participants with a lower initial L2 proficiency level experienced greater gains in oral fluency and accuracy. Therefore, although some studies have found no differences in FL learning in an SA context in terms of the students' initial L2 proficiency level (Ife *et al.* 2000 for vocabulary), it seems to be generally agreed that the students who benefit the most from an SA experience are those who already have a certain command of the L2 but are not advanced learners. Some authors have attributed this apparent lack of progress at advanced level to the types of test used. Ife *et al.* (2000) argued that measuring can be problematic at the upper levels if improvement in the L2 is analyzed as the percentage of items acquired (for instance, in the case of vocabulary): the more knowledge students have, the more difficult it will be for them to make proportionate gains.

1.3. *LoS in Study Abroad*

The few studies published to date on 'length of stay' (LoS) in a target language country mostly suggest that the longer the stay in the target language environment, the greater the participants' gains (see Ife *et al.* 2000 with regard to lexical improvement and overall proficiency level). These authors examined data from 36 British learners of Spanish as an L2, who spent either one or two semesters abroad. The study concluded that LoS is a key factor in the SA context, since participants who stayed in the target language country for two semesters experienced greater gains than those who stayed abroad for only one semester.

Another study that took into account the LoS variable is the one by Dwyer (2004), who examined the correlations between specific SA program features and the outcomes of several students. After comparing SA programs of different lengths (summer term, spring/fall term and full year), Dwyer concluded that full year students presented greater gains in their self-confidence in their linguistic abilities and tended to use the FL on a more regular basis than their counterparts in an AH context. Thus, the author's findings are in line with those reported by Ife *et al.* (2000): the longer the time spent abroad, the greater the improvement learners make.

Félix-Brasdefer (2004) also analyzed the effect of LoS on students' language gains in an SA context, focusing on whether the participants' abilities to negotiate and mitigate a refusal were related to the time they spent abroad. Four groups were formed according to the participants' LoS in the host country: 1-1.5 months, 3-5 months, 9-13 months and 18-30 months. The results were comparable to those reported by Ife *et al.* (2000) and

Dwyer (2004) since they suggest once more that ‘the longer, the better’: the learners who spent longer periods abroad showed a higher ability to cope with negotiating and mitigating refusals, and used strategies commonly used among native speakers.

The study by Sasaki (2009) reported above examined written production over a 3.5-year period in a group of Japanese undergraduate students learning English in an SA context and in an AH university, in Japan (the LoS in the target language country in the SA group varied from participant to participant). Sasaki found that the longer the time of residence in the target language country, the greater the participants’ gains.

Llanes and Muñoz (2009) investigated whether a week of difference in the target language country was enough to account for some oral gains between two groups that spent three or four weeks abroad. The fluency measures analyzed by these authors were syllables per minute, other language word ratio, filled pauses per minute, silent pauses per minute, articulation rate and longest fluent run. The accuracy measures were error-free clauses per number of clauses and the average number of errors per clause. Statistically significant differences were found between students in the 3-week and 4-week abroad groups, namely in silent pauses per minute, errors per clause and error-free clauses, all favoring the group with a longer LoS.

The minimum time spent in an L2 country that seems to make a difference in terms of participants’ gains is unclear. Additionally, except for the study of Llanes and Muñoz (2009), who examined the effects of LoS in the L2 global proficiency gains, the research has focused on areas of the L2 other than global proficiency. Since a difference of a week – the dimension examined by Llanes and Muñoz (2009) – proved to be significant, even though it seems too short a period of time to effect L2 proficiency gains, the time difference in the present study was raised to one month, a period of time that many would consider sufficient for gains to be recorded. This is, to our knowledge, the first study to analyze the impact of a one-month-difference in LoS on participants’ L2 global proficiency. In an attempt to fill the gap in the area of the effect of LoS on SA learners’ language gains, the present study aims to shed some light on whether a longer LoS (i.e. three months as opposed to two) influences written and oral development in the L2. To do so, we compared the written and oral production gains of two groups of college students who had spent two and three months studying abroad.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION

The literature suggests that the length of the study abroad program determines learners’ FL gains, and that it is the students who engage in longer programs and consequently spend longer in the target language country who record the greatest improvement. However, there is no consensus on how long these programs should be in order to enable participants to benefit from them. The present study seeks to answer the following research question:

Is a month enough to create a significant difference in the written and oral production of undergraduate students in a study abroad context?

3. METHOD

3.1. *Participants*

Forty-six learners ranging in age from 19 to 33 participated in this study. Spanish (and/or Catalan) was their first language in all cases. The first group of participants included 21 Erasmus exchange students who spent three months in the UK, from September to December. They attended classes at different British and Irish universities for an average of 12.25 hours each week. As regards accommodation, only one participant lived with a home-stay family during her SA experience; the rest of the participants shared apartments with other college students of different nationalities. In this group, the time elapsed between the pre- and post-test was three months. A second group of 25 Erasmus exchange students was considered in order to examine their linguistic gains in two months, even though they were staying in the UK for three months ($n = 11$) or for the whole academic year ($n = 14$). The time these students went to their university classes was similar to the other group (11.5 hours each week on average) and most of the SA participants stayed in apartments with other students (60%) although 20% stayed in a hall of residence and another 20% with a family. In this group, the time elapsed between the pre- and post-test was two months. So exposure to the L2, considering classes in English or the possibility to practice this language outside class was comparable in the two groups. In both groups students majored in different areas, all of them had studied English for a minimum of 8 years at the time of the data collection, and their L2 initial proficiency levels were similar. Therefore, the main difference between the groups was the LoS in the FL country: three months versus two months.

3.2. *Procedure and instruments*

This investigation has a pre-/post-test design. Participants who stayed abroad for three months ($n = 21$) were administered the pre-test at their 'home' university the week prior to their departure, and the post-test was carried out in the same place the week after their return from the host country. For practical reasons the pre- and post-tests could not be administered the day before or after their departure/arrival. This is unlikely to have affected the measures in the study, since the gains experienced in these areas can be assumed to endure for at least a week after leaving the L2 country. Participants were not informed of the kind of tasks that they had to complete; therefore, their performance was not affected by prior preparation or rehearsal of the tests. First of all, at both data collection times participants were given 15 minutes to write a composition entitled 'My life: past, present and future expectations'. Secondly, after a few warm-up questions, participants were asked to narrate a story orally while looking at a series of six pictures showing some children going on a picnic (Heaton 1966). (See Appendix 1 for the pictures).

Since Erasmus scholarships enable students to spend either one or two terms abroad, it was impossible to find participants who had returned to their home country

after two months. For this reason, we had to collect data from another group of participants in the target language country. Therefore, written and oral data were gathered from a group of 25 students at the university abroad during their first day of class (pre-test) and two months later (post-test). These participants performed the same tasks under the same conditions as the group who had spent three months abroad.

3.3. *Measures*

Following Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki and Kim (1998)'s recommendations for analytic measures, we used the following ratios to analyze development in writing. The measure words per T-unit (W/TU) was used to assess written fluency, and it was calculated by dividing the total number of words by the total number of T-units. Written complexity was calculated by dividing the total number of clauses by the total number of T-units (C/TU). Lexical complexity was measured by means of Guiraud's Index of Lexical Richness, calculated by dividing the total number of types by the square root of the total number of tokens (types/ $\sqrt{\text{tokens}}$). The measure of accuracy was the average number of errors per T-unit (E/TU), computed by dividing the total number of errors by the total number of T-units. See Appendix 2 for a coded written sample.

For comparative purposes, the same measures were chosen to analyze the oral data (except in the case of fluency, for which we used syllables per minute (SPM) instead of words per T-unit (WTU) or words per minute (WPM)). SPM was preferred to WPM because it provides more accurate information. To quote Griffiths (1991: 354): "Words per minute (WPM) are considered far too inexact to be used in the specialist literature". The SPM measure, however, has been successfully used by many researchers examining oral production (Yuan and Ellis 2003; Llanes and Muñoz 2009). In our study we did not consider all the syllables uttered by the learners, but only 'meaningful' syllables: that is, we excluded repetitions, hesitations, words in the learners' first language, and so on. Thus, SPM was calculated by dividing the total number of 'pruned syllables' (i.e. syllables which did not include repetitions, false beginnings, self-corrections, etc.) by the total time of speech. The ratio clauses per T-unit (C/TU) was chosen to account for oral complexity. This ratio was calculated by dividing the number of clauses by the total number of T-units. Lexical richness was also assessed using computed by means of Guiraud's Index of Lexical Richness, calculated by dividing the total number of types by the square root of the total number of tokens (types/ $\sqrt{\text{tokens}}$). Finally, accuracy was also computed from the average number of errors per T-unit (E/TU). See Appendix 2 for a coded oral sample.

4. RESULTS

Data were collected from 46 participants (25 in the two-month LoS group and 21 in the three-month LoS group). The descriptive statistics for the writing task, including the means and standard deviations, are presented in the following table.

	SA 2-MONTHS (N= 25)		SA 3-MONTHS (N= 21)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
	Pre-test			
Fluency (W/TU)	10.59	2.39	11.12	2.30
Syntactic Complexity (C/TU)	1.96	.415	1.88	.374
Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's I.)	7.40	.798	7.20	.754
Accuracy (E/TU)	.474	.299	.505	.367
	Post-test			
Fluency (W/TU)	11.62	1.94	11.24	2.66
Syntactic Complexity (C/TU)	1.90	.317	1.95	.418
Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's I.)	7.76	.850	7.46	.851
Accuracy (E/TU)	.610	.390	.459	.297

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for the writing task.*

In order to analyze differences between program types in terms of language gains in written production while controlling for pre-test scores, the data were first collapsed across different LoS, and then regressions were performed. The residuals from these regressions were saved and *t*-tests were carried out in order to find differences between the residuals from the two groups. The results of these *t*-tests showed no significant differences in the gains experienced by the learners in any of the measures (W/TU: $t(44) = .895, p = .376$; C/TU: $t(44) = -.666, p = .572$; Guiraud's Index: $t(44) = .933, p = .356$; E/TU: $t(44) = 1.96, p = .057$).

We also performed the same tests to investigate differences in language gains in oral production. Before discussing the results of the parametric tests, we present the means and standard deviations in the following table.

	SA 2-MONTHS (N= 25)		SA 3-MONTHS (N= 21)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
	Pre-test			
Fluency (SPM)	123.44	29.90	123.60	27.21
Syntactic Complexity (C/TU)	1.70	.215	1.77	.315
Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's I.)	5.68	.809	5.71	.651
Accuracy (E/TU)	.728	.474	.750	.608
	Post-test			
Fluency (SPM)	148.27	34.83	144.20	27.37
Syntactic Complexity (C/TU)	1.87	.343	1.85	.299
Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's I.)	5.93	.720	5.92	.540
Accuracy (E/TU)	.701	.442	.612	.332

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics of the oral task.*

As in the written production task, no differences were found between the oral production gains of the two groups (SPM: $t(44) = .699, p = .488$; C/TU: $t(44) = .419, p = .677$; Guiraud's Index: $t(44) = .217, p = .829$; E/TU: $t(41.81) = 1.10, p = .276$).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study was designed to investigate whether a period of a month was sufficiently long to affect differences in the written and oral production of undergraduate students in an SA context. We did not find statistically significant differences for any of the measures between our two groups. This study, then, does not confirm the hypothesis that participants who stay longer in an SA context experience greater gains in different areas of FL acquisition (Ife *et al.* 2000; Dwyer 2004; Félix-Brasdefer 2004; Llanes and Muñoz 2009; Sasaki 2009). However, except for the Llanes and Muñoz study, the time difference between the groups analyzed ranged from a minimum of 1.5 months to a maximum of 28.5 months. Hence, one plausible explanation to our finding is that, as stated above, one month may be too short a period to enable participants to improve their language skills in a way that is significantly different from those staying a month less. Interestingly, Llanes and Muñoz (2009) found more L2 gains in the case of participants staying one extra week abroad. However, there are important differences between the two studies. First of all, the participants analyzed by Llanes and Muñoz (2009) were mainly adolescents with a lower level of proficiency, whereas in the present study the sample comprised adults with a relatively advanced knowledge of the language. Additionally, Llanes and Muñoz chose different measures to analyze learners' oral production, which may have been more sensitive to capturing language gains.

Another possible explanation is that the measures adopted in this study to account for written and oral gains are not sensitive enough to account for such short-term gains, since the progress that participants may have made was probably modest. Wolfe-Quintero *et al.* (1998) suggest that certain measures sometimes cannot capture differences between 'adjacent proficiency levels' and short-term change.

The participants' initial level of FL proficiency may also have played a role. Previous research has shown that the lower the proficiency of the participants, the greater the gains they record during an SA experience (Dyson 1988; Brecht *et al.* 1990; Ginsberg 1992; Brecht *et al.* 1993; Brecht and Robinson 1995; Freed 1995, 1998; Marriott 1995; Regan 1995; Lapkin *et al.* 1995; Siegal 1995; Díaz-Campos 2004; Llanes and Muñoz 2009). The majority of the participants in the present study were relatively advanced FL speakers, as witnessed by the level of English language classes they were taking or had taken in the past (B2/C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference). In less proficient participants, a month's difference might prove to be decisive.

The fact that no significant differences were found between the learners who stayed in the L2 country for two months and those who stayed a month longer does not mean that their performance was identical. It may be the case that differences exist in other areas, or that they would have been better captured using more qualitative analyses.

All in all, it can be said that this study provides useful evidence for an area of study in which little empirical research has been conducted to date. Our findings suggest that, even though a whole academic year has been demonstrated to be more beneficial than a semester in terms of learners' L2 gains (Ife *et al.* 2000; Dwyer 2004) 'longer' may not be necessarily be 'better' in terms of time in the L2 country in all contexts, especially as far as participants in an advanced level are concerned. It is important to examine how much additional time is needed to make a difference in the progress of learners studying abroad. As with some other issues related to SA, this 'time difference' may not be the same for learners of different ages or with different initial levels of proficiency. Future research into the effect of LoS in the SA should use more participants and also qualitative measures of written and oral production in order to establish whether more gains are captured than in the present study or whether, in fact, a month is not long enough for significant L2 writing or speaking gains to occur. Undoubtedly, more empirical evidence in this area of SA and in other issues related to this field of study will have positive practical and economic implications, since many institutions and participants are involved in this type of experience but have, until very recently, subscribed to the common belief that learning an L2 is more efficient in the SA context than AH, or that the longer the stay in the L2 country, the greater the language gains. It is time for empirical research to try to confirm or disprove these popular beliefs.

NOTES

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APPENDIX 1

Oral task (Heaton, 1966)

- *SAR: one day John and Mary were preparing their picnic to [/] because it was a [/] a really sunny Sunday. [T] [C] [C]
- *SAR: and they wanted to go to have a picnic in the countryside. [T] [C] [C] [C]
- *SAR: and they were preparing all the food. [T] [C]
- *SAR: and they had a [/] <a dog> [/] a little dog that really wanted to go with them. [T] [C] [C] [C]
- *SAR: but they [/] they didn't want to [/] to take the dog with them. [T] [C] [C]
- *SAR: and when they were preparing other things the dog oh@i slept <into the> [/] into the basket without being noticed. [T] [C] [C] [C]
- *SAR: and then the [/] the children went out. [T] [C]
- *SAR: and said bye [/] bye+bye to [/] to their mother. [T] [C]
- *SAR: and they arrived hmm@p on [err] the hill. [T] [C]
- *SAR: and they look [err] [err] <a place> [/] a perfect place for [err] having [err] picnic. [T] [C] [C]
- *SAR: and the [/] when they were getting [err] to take everything outside [err] the basket the dog was there with them. [T] [C] [C] [C]
- *SAR: and also a surprise was that the [/] the dog had eaten all the food. [T] [C] [C]
- *SAR: so the children don't have [err] anything to [/] to eat. [T] [C] [C]

APPENDIX 2

Coded samples from two students

- *PEP: when I arrived to [err] Ireland I was surprised because everybody was very kind. [T] [C] [C] [C]
- *PEP: and I expected that Irish people were [err] like English ones [err]. [T] [C] [C]
- *PEP: I was a little bit shy. [T] [C]
- *PEP: however now I am having a [err] great fun because I live [err] with four foreigner [err] people. [T] [C] [C]
- *PEP: and I speak English every day. [T] [C]
- *PEP: as regard [err] English the first time I heard some Irish speaking [err] was horrible because their accent is too thick. [T] [C] [C] [C] [C]
- *PEP: nevertheless I hope I will be [err] able to speak as they do. [T] [C] [C] [C]
- *PEP: the worst thing to which I am not used [err] is the food. [T] [C] [C]
- *PEP: there is no typical food. [T] [C]
- *PEP: and I miss a lot our Spanish food. [T] [C]
- *PEP: but it will be better from there [err] onwards because I improve [err] my cooking skills in Ireland. [T] [C] [C]
- *PEP: on balance [err] [err] Erasmus experience is amazing. [T] [C]
- *PEP: and I hope it carries on [err] like this way [err]. [T] [C] [C]