

The Effects of Study Abroad on L2 Learners' Interactional Competence

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Abstract: This paper explores how L2 learners' interaction competence is influenced by the exposition of study abroad context and discusses the factors account for different interaction competence effects. Based on the review of SA (study abroad) and AH (at home) context research and study, it can be seen that SA shows its advantage according to students' progress in interactional competence in spite of some pragmatic misuse. However, the effects of SA context vary due to certain internal and external factors.

1. Introduction

In second language learning, the language context plays an essential role in students' learning outcomes; the knowledge that students gain and the opportunities for output vary due to the different input (Dekeyser, 2007). Compared to the AH normal instruction context, learners in SA context are more likely to be exposed to intensive and authentic L2 input and motivated to conduct output in real situations, therefore automatizing the L2 knowledge they have learnt (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004). Freed and his associates also point out a majority of people assume that students can contact with the host community substantially and then develop their oral proficiency to a higher level. Based on the SA context, learners are expected to improve not only oral proficiency but interactional competence, which means how to use language in the meaningful context. This essay aims to study how SA context affects on L2 learners' interactional competence and why individuals have different improvements.

2. The concept of interactional competence

When assessing language levels, linguistic competence which refers to the capacity to produce phonology, lexical items, morphology and syntax with proper grammatical rules (Chomsky, 1965, 1966) is normally considered as a basic and most essential component. However, a certain linguistic form may denote different specific meanings in particular contexts. As Hymes (1964, as cited in Hall and Dochler, 2011, p3) argues that linguistic competence is inadequate to give explicit and appropriate meaning if it is not context-embedded. Hymes therefore coined the concept of Communicative Competence which is defined as the capability to produce and acquire language appropriately in the specific context.

Canale and Swain (1980) further differentiated four components of communicative competence in applied linguistics: grammatical competence, including the accuracy in grammatical rule and structure realms, which is closely related to linguistic competence (mentioned before); sociolinguistic competence, concerning the consideration of given circumstances, such as the participant's status, the interaction's topic and purpose; discourse competence, referring the ability to form and govern spoken or written texts clearly and coherently; strategic competence, meaning the language learners' techniques to use verbal or nonverbal languages to overcome the problems or misunderstanding in communications.

Communicative competence states the importance of context in language production and acquisition. Canales and Swain's four types of communicative competence imply what people should know and could do to facilitate their interaction. However, communicative competence emphasizes the individual language user in a context, while it neglects the interaction among interlocutors (Young, 2000). Kramsch (1986) was the first one who put forward interactional

competence, as a response to the limitation of communicative competence. To compensate the deficiency of communicative competence, Kramsch (1986) states that interactional competence is a further elaboration of communicative competence in which co-construction of discursive practices by all interlocutors involved is emphasized to bring about successful interaction. As Young (2011, p 430) claims, “IC is not what a person knows, it is what a person does together with others.”

Interactional competence is bottom-up (Masuda, 2011), and comprises all kinds of language proficiencies. The effectiveness of those moment-to-moment interactions rely on speakers’ oral proficiency and fluency, and their abilities to employ interactional resources to create interaction jointly with other participants.

3. Study context affecting oral proficiency and fluency

SA context is normally considered as an ideal context to improve oral proficiency for second language learners. It seems that the extensive L2 input in class accompanied by substantial opportunities to receive input in the native community will build the best language learning environment (Freed, 1995). Krashen (1981) who holds a strong position on the input also claims that language proficiency is related to the length of living in the language speaking country since language exposure is an essential predictor for language acquisition.

3.1 The effects of SA context

The gains in oral proficiency and fluency are typically measured by Oral Proficiency Interview by which learners speeches are examined in terms of the rate and length of fluent runs, and the number of pauses and struggles (DuFon and Churchill, 2006). Simões’ (1996) research explores the change of five American adults’ oral proficiency after a five-week language study program in Spain. Based on OPI analysis, it can be seen that four of them improved their oral proficiency and the broaden vocabulary and more ease in the interaction account for the improvement. Isabelli-Garcia’s (2003) study on American adolescents studying in Spain for five-months also shows that students are likely to improve their fluency in spoken language when they are exposed to the country speaking their second language.

3.2 The comparison between SA and AH context

However, study abroad may not necessarily be the best context for oral proficiency and fluency enhancement. Serrano *et al.* (2011) compared Spanish students’ gains in oral and written proficiency in domestic intensive course (5 hours session each weekday), domestic semi-intensive course (2.5 hours session from Monday to Thursday) and study abroad in UK (8-10 hours English class each week), with 106 participants. After two months, those who study abroad outperformed than those who took domestic semi-intensive language course in terms of oral language fluency and lexical complexity. But there is no distinct superiority in study abroad learners with respect to their peers taking intensive course at home. Freed *et al.* (2004) has conducted a similar study in these three learning context and he argues that AH intensive program even made more gains in students’ oral proficiency. As a consequence, it is not the context itself but the intensity of contact within the context determines students’ improvements.

According to Serrano and Freed research, it seems that SA students obtain more gains than their semi intensive AH peers although they take nearly the same course hours. It is because students studying abroad have more opportunities to speak in the daily interaction. However, it should be noticed that studying abroad does not guarantee the interactions in the language of the host country, since it appears that learners speaking the same L1 tend to spend time together and many homogeneous students in the same class also restrict the time for speaking L2 opportunities (DuFon and Churchill, 2006). Therefore, L2 production but not location (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004), is the most important factor for oral proficiency and fluency improvements.

4. SA context impacting on interactional practice

4.1 Increasing formulaic pragmatic expressions

Due to the immersion in the abroad context, L2 learners are believed to gain more pragmatic improvements compared to their AH peers (Churchill and DuFon, 2006). He demonstrates that by the exposure to the language, learners tend to gradually acknowledge the use of some formulaic pragmatic expressions and adopt these expressions to make their language native-like. For example, for numerous English learners, not until they live in UK, they realize that “cheers” has the meaning for “thank you” and it is extensively used in oral language. Unlike the L2 production which can be promoted by the intensity of the course, this nature environment is difficult to create. Some L2 teachers may recommend movies or stories for students to gap the bridge; however, the limited created exposure may probably result in misinterpretation of some expressions or they may not be noticeable for learners.

4.2 Learning how to co-construct interaction in L2

Maduda's (2011) research studies the change of interactional competence in English-speaking JFL (Japanese as a foreign language) learners after they take study in Japan for five weeks. The focus of Maduda's study is L2 learners' use of “ne”, the most frequently used particles within many social contexts. According to the pre-test, the formal formulaic expression *soo desu ne* (‘that's right’) is where “ne” appears most although “ne” can be used in many other situations; one more important thing is that the use of “*soo desu ne*” is often anomalous. After five weeks, the biggest change can be detected is that learners extend the use of “ne” in various context. They played a more active role in the interaction with natives since they learnt how to use “ne” to initiate a conversation, soften the response, create the further express space, change the topic and etc. Therefore, it is assumed that SA has positive influence on people's ability to co-construct interaction in L2. Hardison (2014) also reveals that study abroad for a certain time provides learners opportunities and activates their enthusiasm in the interaction with native or fluent speakers, and therefore they become more proficient in initiating a conversation, handling a complication and being spontaneously involved in discussion. However, it is worth mentioning that both of Maduda and Hardison's study are based on the language learning and culture immersion program. It implies that considerable contact with the abroad context is necessary to make progress in co-constructing interaction.

4.3 Over-generalizing some language use.

Although significant progress appears in L2 learners' interactional practice, their proficiency is still non-native as they are still likely to behave not appropriately in some context (Churchill and DuFon, 2015). AS non-native speakers, some learners may require a long period of time to gain full understanding of certain norms after they use them wrongly and realize the mistakes. In addition, some norms do not follow the accepted conception or identity. In Maduda's (2011) study, another finding is that one person who used “ne” only twice in the first recording started to overuse it in the second time and another one overusing it in the first record reduced his misuse in the second time. It appears that a cognitive U-shape also exists in the understanding of some pragmatic use of language. L2 language learners are likely to overgeneralize some norms at the first stage of learning.

5. Factors account for different interactional competence effects

L2 learners are generally expected to gain improvements after studying in the second language host countries (Freed, 1995). The research on SA has revealed that SA L2 learners tend to have different improvements levels appearing in various aspects, and some of them even could not get improvements, which both happens to participants in different programs and individuals of the same program (Isabelli-García, 2003; Musuda, 2011) The internal factors and external factors, and the interactions between these factors tend to result in different learning outcomes.

5.1 The effects of internal factors

SA students' willingness to interact in L2 is an essential factor which may generate more opportunities for interactional practice and thereby facilitating interactional competence (Yashima *et al*, 2004). Based on a study on German SA program, Fraser (2002) reports that those who take initiative to involve themselves in interaction required activities are more likely to improve language proficiency. Allen (2002) reported that some students with strong motivation before their SA experience end up with dissatisfaction in their improvements. He also hypothesizes that those students with higher levels of language proficiency tend to better adapt to the L2 context and benefit from the interaction with natives. That is to say, proficiency disadvantaged students may find it hard to construct interaction in L2 even though they are eager to.

5.2 The effects of external factors

The length of the program may affect learners' acquisition considerably. Although SA research tells that even short SA program could generate positive effects on students' motivation (Hardison, 2014), oral proficiency and fluency (Simões, 1996), and pragmatic ability (Musuda, 2011), Fraser (2002) found that students gained more improvements from a year-long program than a semester-long program. Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2002, as cited in Magnan & Back, 2007, P45) argues that, the recommendation time for study abroad is "the longer the better".

Classroom and residential arrangement are also the focus of SA research when seeking more interactional opportunities for learners (DuFon and Churchill, 2006). When class is grouped by students' nationality, there is a strong possibility that students talk with their peers in L1 and even the motivated learners may find it hard to avoid that (Allen, 2002). If students have peers sharing the same L1, they are also likely to interact with them in L1 in class. Since normally students from the same countries like spending out-of-class time together, it is important to reduce the use of L1 in class.

In terms of residence, usually there are two choices: host family with NSs or dormitory living with either NSs or NNSs. A Host family with a patient and talkative host mother may be the best choice for advancing interactional competence. Law's (2003) study demonstrates that L2 learners gain fruitful "input, practice and feedback" from their host mothers. Students in Hardison's (2014) study also highly appreciated their hosts who were helpful to promote more interactions in L2, integrate them to the culture and correct their language mistakes. But some host mothers merely play roles as landladies and they may not have patience to interact with influent language learners (Wilkinson, 1998).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, SA has shown its advantages over AH normal class due to its authentic context. It offers students more input and facilitate output so that students gain more improvements in oral proficiency and fluency. Exposed to the language environment, L2 learners are also more likely to acquire the use of some formulaic pragmatic expressions and improve their pragmatic competence in interactions, although they may over-generalize some use. The quantity and quality of interactions in L2 do matter the learning outcomes. There are some factors seemingly resulting in different effects on individuals, including internal and external factors. L2 learners' initiatives can stimulate themselves and compensate the deficiencies of external factors to make full use of the available resources in SA context.

In the SA research I related, the researchers put forwards their assumptions based on their elaborated research methods and analysis. But it can be noticed that the subjects involved in the research are all adolescents or adults (normally university students). The question is that if the conclusion would be the same when L2 learners are children, or middle aged people even the elderly.

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