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2012

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Original Publication Citation

Baker-Smemoe, W., Cundick, D. K., Evans, N., Henrichsen, L., & Dewey, D. P. (2012). Relationship between reported out-of-class English use and gains in English. *Applied Language Learning*, 22, 21-45.

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Baker-Smemoe, Wendy; Cundick, Denisa K.; Evans, Norman; Henrichsen, Lynn; and Dewey, Dan P., "Relationship between Reported Out-of-Class English Use and Proficiency Gains in English" (2012). *Faculty Publications*. 5904.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5904>

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Relationship between Reported Out-of-Class English Use and Proficiency Gains in English

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This study investigated the relationship between out-of-class L2 use and proficiency gains in learners of English as a second language (ESL) in an intensive English language program. In contrast to previous studies on this topic, which have found weak, non-existent or even inverse relationships between out-of-class language experience and L2 proficiency gains, this study took place over a longer period of time (31 weeks), involved a larger number of participants (61 ESL learners from 12 different language backgrounds at four proficiency levels), and found a statistically significant connection between out-of-class language use and proficiency gains. Participants took a proficiency pre-test and post-test and responded to a questionnaire designed to elicit information about out-of-class language use. In addition, six learners participated in semi-structured interviews. Data obtained from the questionnaire and interviews were compared to gains in proficiency between the pre-test and post-test. The results corroborate the “common sense” connection between L2 out-of-class use and proficiency development. They also identify the types of out-of-class language use that are most strongly connected with L2 proficiency gains.

Common sense suggests that students who devote themselves to using their second language (L2) outside of the classroom will become more proficient than those who refuse or avoid using the L2 in their daily lives. Surprisingly, however, the research-based link between out-of-class language experience and language gains is tenuous at best. Some studies have found a weak connection between the two factors (Freed, 1990; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Seliger, 1977; Yager, 1998), while others have found no connection—or even an inverse relationship in some cases, with increased out-of-class contact resulting in negative gains in proficiency (Day, 1985; Mendelson, 2004; O’Donnell, 2004; Spada, 1986). One explanation for this discrepancy and failure to find a strong connection could be the limited scope of most of the previous research, involving small participant samples (35 participants on average) and short timeframes (six to 15 weeks). We began the research reported in this article with the hope that a study examining a larger number

of participants over a lengthier period of time would provide more conclusive results. The purpose of this 31-week study involving 61 English as a Second Language (ESL) learners from various countries was thus to overcome some of the limitations of previous studies and determine more definitively the relationship between out-of-class English use and proficiency gain. If such a relationship were found, the study also aimed to discover which specific out-of-class language tasks were most beneficial to students' language proficiency gains.

Review of Literature

One of the most surprising aspects of previous studies conducted on the influence of out-of-class language use on language gain is that they continue to regularly appear, despite the fact that they almost universally have indicated no connection between out-of-class contact and proficiency (Day, 1985; Freed, 1990; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Seliger, 1977; Spada, 1986; Yager, 1998). This section will examine previous studies on this topic and their results in order to illustrate how the current study differs from previous studies in both methodology and scope (see Table 1 for a detailed chart comparing the various studies).

Table 1. *Chronological Research Design Comparison*

Researcher	Study Length	Subjects	Language Level(s)	Proficiency Test	LCP Used	LCP/Gain Relation Found
Seliger (1977)	Not Specified	6	Upper Intermediate	Cloze	Yes	Yes
Day (1985)	8 weeks	58	Intermediate to Advanced	Oral Interviews and Cloze	Yes	No
Spada (1986)	6 weeks	48	Intermediate	7 different measures	No	No
Freed (1990)	6 weeks	38	Beginner to Advanced	OPI and CEEB	Yes	Mixed
Yager (1998)	7 weeks	41	Beginner to Advanced	Oral Interviews	Yes	Mixed
Segalowitz & Freed (2004)	13 weeks	40	Not Specified	OPI and 7 other	Yes	Weak Connection
Mendelson A (2004)	4 weeks	31	Beginner to Advanced	OPI	Yes	No
Mendelson B (2004)	15 weeks	14	Beginner to Advanced	OPI	Yes	No
Hernández (2010)	15 weeks	20	Intermediate	SOPI	Yes	Yes

The first major study concerned with out-of-class language use and proficiency gain was conducted just over 30 years ago. Seliger (1977) performed a small-scale study with six upper-intermediate students of various language backgrounds who were enrolled in an intensive English language program (the length of the program was not specified in the study). One of the most important contributions of this study was that it was the first to use what has become a standard in this research field: the Language Contact Profile (LCP), a self-report survey designed to measure students' out-of-class L2 use. Due to the exploratory nature of this study (limited by both participant number and language level), Seliger's results were limited in scope. Nevertheless, based on the results of his study, Seliger suggested there are two kinds of learners: the ones who consciously work on their English and the ones who do not. Seliger concluded that there is an interaction continuum, with active learners who seek out opportunities to practice on one end and passive learners who avoid interaction in the language on the opposite end. In general, the former experienced greater proficiency gains than the latter. Thus, the first study in the field indicated a tentative positive relation between out-of-class contact and proficiency, although clearly further research was necessary.

Building on Seliger's study, Day (1985) conducted a similar study using the same survey—this time with 58 predominantly Asian adults who were enrolled in an intensive ESL program and whose proficiency ranged from intermediate to advanced. Based on the results of his study, Day disagreed with Seliger, concluding that “evidence purporting to support the claim that the level attained by ESL students is related to their use of English outside the classroom is mixed and questionable” (p. 265).

Spada (1986) conducted a study investigating the effects of type of contact and instruction on proficiency. Forty-eight intermediate adult ESL learners of various language and cultural backgrounds were included in her six-week study. Surprisingly, Spada (1986) found that “the more contact learners had with the second language, the *poorer* their scores were” on proficiency evaluations, yet “type (but not amount) of contact was positively correlated with speaking scores on both the pre- and post-tests” (p. 190). So rather than simply indicating there was no connection between out-of-class English use and proficiency, Spada's study seemed to show that the more students used English out-of-class, the worse their scores on proficiency tests became. However, other data in this study suggested that “neither amount, type, nor combined contact scores accounted for differences in learners' improvement” on proficiency (p. 191). In the end, Spada could find no link between out-of-class L2 use and proficiency gain.

Freed (1990) investigated the effect of out-of-class French use of a group of 38 students during a six-week study abroad program in France. Freed's findings corroborated the results of Day's 1985 study. As she stated, the “amount of out-of-class contact does not seem to influence measurable class progress,” although type of contact did have some effect on proficiency (Freed, 1990, pp. 472-473). According to Freed (1990), social interactions were beneficial to lower-level students who had not yet mastered this type of language. On the other hand, higher-level students profited more from interacting with language materials such as books, newspapers and movies.

Building upon these four major studies, Yager (1998) examined 30 native English students who participated in a seven-week study while learning Spanish in Mexico. Like Freed, Yager (1998) found that “greater interactive contact correlates with greater gain in beginners” whereas “greater noninteractive contact corresponds with less language gain in beginners” (p. 907). However, contrary to Freed's findings, Yager found that “greater

noninteractive contact corresponds with less language gain in advanced learners” (p. 907) as well.

Mendelson (2004) conducted a three-part study focused on two American study-abroad groups in Spain: one which lasted 15 weeks with 14 participants and one which lasted four weeks with 31 participants. Because some of her study participants ended up with her during the semester following the study, Mendelson took the opportunity to interview them further in a third, smaller study. Despite the fact that the longer study involved at least 14 of the participants, Mendelson failed to find a connection between out-of-class language use and proficiency gain.

Limitations of Earlier Studies

Why did these researchers not find a stronger, positive relationship between out-of-class language use and language proficiency gains? Several limitations to these earlier studies may explain why this is the case. First of all, most of them examined changes in language gain over a very short period of time—the longest of which was 15 weeks. Measurable proficiency gains may take longer than 15 weeks to develop. Second, the method of measuring language gain may have exacerbated this problem. Many of the studies used language measurements such as the OPI (Oral Proficiency Interview), which, though a viable method of measuring language proficiency, has only 10 levels of language proficiency. As a result, capturing subtle changes in language gain (like those most likely to occur over a short period of time) may be unlikely (e.g., Freed, 1990). Third, many of the studies had relatively few participants, most averaging around 35 students. Because of the myriad of factors affecting L2 acquisition, having few participants makes finding significant gains of one factor on language learning difficult. Any one of these issues might have had a marked impact on results.

One recent study addressed many of the limitations of earlier research. Segalowitz and Freed (2004) tried to remedy the biggest problem of all the previous studies—insufficient time between pre- and post-test. They lengthened the period between their pre-test and post-test to 13 weeks—almost double the length of most previous studies. Their participants consisted of 40 native English speakers learning Spanish in two different learning contexts—at home (AH) and in a study-abroad (SA) program. The results of this study were again mixed. On the one hand, when the participants from the AH context were compared to the participants in the SA context, the SA participants were found to have much higher oral performance gains as measured by the OPI and another oral proficiency measure. On the other hand, Segalowitz and Freed (2004) stated that the “amount of in-class and out-of-class contact appeared to have only a weak and indirect impact on oral gains” for learners in both AH and SA contexts (p. 192). They listed possible reasons for this discrepancy, including the observation that much of the contact participants had could have been formulaic (greetings or short chitchat) or that significant gains from out-of-class contact occurred only after a certain “threshold” of time was reached. They discussed the possibility that a 13-week time frame might have been too short for measurable gains in proficiency to develop from out-of-class language use.

Overall, the study by Segalowitz and Freed (2004) constituted a helpful step forward in overcoming the time-frame limitations of previous studies. It also reconfirmed good design choices, such as using the LCP to measure language use. Moreover, Segalowitz and Freed used a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures. Although the interviews they conducted with the participants were not explicitly discussed in the published version

of their study, these interviews were carried out in order to gain insights into the participants' out-of-class language use that the LCP as a self-reporting questionnaire could not provide. However, their results suggested that even a 13-week study may have provided "simply too little" time to confirm the hypothesis that out-of-class language use and proficiency gain are positively correlated (p. 193). Lengthening the time between pre-test and post-test even more and using a more sensitive instrument than the OPI to measure language gain would help in determining whether out-of-class language use does influence proficiency gains. The current study was designed to do these two things.

Current Study

The present study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a relationship between reported out-of-class English use and proficiency gain?
2. What specific language-learning activities promote language gain?

In order to arrive at more conclusive findings regarding the relationship between out-of-class L2 use and L2 proficiency gain, the study built on the strengths and weaknesses of previous research along these lines. Specifically, five areas were improved. First, the time between pre- and post-test was lengthened to allow for more distinct gains in proficiency. Second, the participant sample was non-homogenous both in terms of language level and linguistic background so that the results of this study could be applied to wider populations of L2 learners. Third, an Elicited Imitation (EI) proficiency test (discussed below) sensitive enough to measure subtle distinctions in proficiency was employed. Fourth, the Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, & Halter (2004) version of the Language Contact Profile was used (only slightly revised to fit our research setting) so that the results of the current study could be compared to previous research on this topic. Fifth, post-survey interviews were used in addition to the LCP to avoid relying on just one measure of out-of-class use and to better examine the factors behind language use patterns—an approach later researchers have consistently chosen.

The scope of this study was purposefully limited to ESL learners involved in intensive English programs. Other researchers have focused on out-of-class L2 use and proficiency gains by learners in other settings, such as study-abroad programs (Allen & Herron, 2003; Bacon, 2002; Ball, 2000; Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1993; Churchill & DuFon, 2006; DeKeyser, 1991; Freed, 1995; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Ife, 2000; Magnan & Back, 2007; Meara, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998) and heritage language learners using the target language in their homes and communities (Beaudrie & Ducar, 2005; Noels, 2005; Oh & Au, 2005; Siegel, 2004; Weger-Guntharp, 2006).

Methodology

Participants

Participants in this study were enrolled in an intensive English program (IEP) at Brigham Young University. Although all the IEP students (N = 240) were invited to participate and many did initially, because of the length of the study, only 61 students completed all the portions: the pre- and post-tests as well as the LCP survey. At the end of the study, participants were at one of

four proficiency levels (with approximate equivalents based on the ACTFL Speaking Proficiency Guidelines in parentheses): level 1, Novice-High (n = 8), level 2, Intermediate-Low (n = 19), level 3, Intermediate-High (n = 23), or level 4, Advanced-Low (n = 11). Most of the students were native Spanish (n = 25) or Korean (n = 15) speakers; other native languages of the participants were Japanese (4), Chinese (3), Taiwanese (3), Mongolian (3), Portuguese (3), Russian (1), Italian (1), Armenian (1), French (1), and Haitian Creole (1).

Instruments

An Elicited Imitation (EI) pre- and post-test was used to measure participants' oral proficiency in English. At the end of the academic year, the participants also responded to the questions on the Language Contact Profile (LCP) to self-assess their use of English outside of class. In addition, six semi-structured interviews were conducted to better understand and triangulate the results of the LCP. Each of these procedures is discussed in more detail below.

Elicited Imitation: One of the noted limitations of previous studies was the inability of an OPI to detect subtle differences in language gains. Hence, researchers have recommended the use of a more sensitive measure of language proficiency (B. F. Freed, 1990; Kinginger, 2009; Milleret, Stansfield, & Kenyon, 1991; Norman Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). Administering the OPI also involves considerable expense (the current individual test fee is \$134) and requires a substantial amount of time to coordinate and carry out, since tests are given on an individual basis and have to be conducted either face-to-face or by telephone by a certified tester. In response to these concerns, an elicited imitation test was chosen to measure participants' proficiency in the current study.

In EI tests, sentences are orally presented to participants, who are then asked to accurately repeat the sentences, which are "typically designed to manipulate certain grammatical structures" (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 46). EI is currently being used in research on second language acquisition (e.g., Ellis, 2005, 2006; Erlam, 2006; Jessop, Suzuki, & Tomita, 2007) for the purpose of determining which morphosyntactic features learners have acquired. Furthermore, EI is used in standardized measures of L2 proficiency (Suzuki, Ikari, & Yokokawa, 2010; van der Walt, de Wet, & Niesler, 2008) as one of multiple means of assessing proficiency. Several studies have shown EI to be a useful and highly reliable measure of L2 speaking proficiency (see Vinther, 2002 for a review). Several authors have found significant and high correlations between EI and measures of L2 speaking proficiency (Bley-Vroman & Chaudron, 1994; Chaudron, Prior, & Kozok, 2005; Graham, Lonsdale, Kennington, Johnson, & McGhee, 2008; Graham, Millard, Eckerson, & Christensen, 2009; Henning, 1983). Graham and his colleagues (Graham, et al., 2008; Graham, et al., 2009) have been successful in estimating a learner's OPI score based on EI to within one sub-level on the OPI scale (e.g., Intermediate-Mid estimate for an Intermediate-High student). Dewey and Matsushita (2010) found similarly high correlations between EI and OPI scores for learners of Japanese as a second language. In addition to correlating well with widely used measures of oral proficiency, EI is sensitive to fine changes in proficiency that might not be captured by a measures such as the OPI (Bley-Vroman & Chadron, 1994; Day, Boggs, Tharp, Gallimore, & Speidel, 1974; Erlam, 2006; Gallimore, Day, & Tharp, 1978; Graham, 2006; Henning, 1983; Chaudron, Prior, & Kozok, 2005; Vinther 2002).

Although many have noted the usefulness of EI as an indirect measure of L2 speaking proficiency (Day, et al., 1974; Diller, Diller, & Hamm, 2003; Graham, 2006; Graham et al., 2008; Radloff, 1992; Stadler &

Bagwell, 1993), the primary criticism of EI regarding its face validity (i.e., that it does not involve interactive speaking) still remains. In spite of this, we found EI to be a practical, highly reliable and useful measure of L2 speaking proficiency.

The EI test used for the present study was constructed independently of this study. We used the version developed by Graham and his colleagues (Graham, 2006; Graham et al., 2008) that was found to be highly correlated with various measures of oral proficiency, including the OPI. This test was validated using results from extensive testing of over 150 EI prompts in order to ensure that the 60 prompts used were as effective as possible. These were tested on more than 350 learners of varying L1 backgrounds and proficiency levels (Graham, 2006, Graham et al., 2008).

Participants heard a recorded semantically plausible sentence or a question (e.g., “If she listens, she will understand.”), which ranged between five and 25 syllables in length. These items were constructed to include “a range of syntactic and morphological features” (Graham, 2006). The sentences were unrelated to each other and required the participants to hear and understand each individual item without any picture prompts or context. Each item was followed by a five-second period during which the participants were instructed to repeat each sentence with accuracy. While the original test contained 60 items, one had to be eliminated due to a computer program malfunction that prevented the responses to this item from being recorded. Consequently, only 59 items were used.

Each sentence was scored on the basis of the student’s correct repetition of all syllables in the sentence. Using a five-point rating rubric (Chaudron et al., 2005; Graham, 2006), a score ranging from 0 to 4 was given for each sentence. Students started with a perfect score of 4 for each item. One point was then taken off for each syllable that was missing, unintelligible or added. Participant responses that were missing more than three syllables were given a score of 0. Points were not taken off for mispronounced words unless: (1) the participant used a completely different word than the word in the prompt; or (2) the response (or a part of it) was unintelligible.

To illustrate, if a speaker produced the sentence “He should have walked away before the fight started,” as “He should have walk before the fight started,” the score for this rendition of the sentence would be a 1; one point was taken off from the total points of 4 for each missing, unintelligible or added syllables (in this case, the missing ‘ed’ and the 2 syllable word ‘away’). As a second example, if a speaker produced the sentence “Joe writes poetry” as “Joe writes poetry,” with all of the syllables present and intelligible and nothing added, the score would be a 4. The responses were double scored by two trained raters who evaluated all of the items independently. When the two raters disagreed, a third rater was called in. Each response was scored individually, after which an average score for each student was computed based on the scores for all his/her responses. This resulted in a score for each participant that ranged from 0 to 4, broken down into tenths of a point (i.e. 0, 0.1, 0.2, etc.) resulting in 40 score intervals. This point spread created a much more sensitive measurement than the 10-level scale of the Oral Proficiency Interviews used in previous studies. This average score was then recorded as the pre-or post-test score.

The Language Contact Profile: The Language Contact Profile (LCP) has been used by many researchers in one form or another since Seliger’s 1977 study (e.g., Badstübner & Ecke, 2009; Dewey, 2008; Barbara F. Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Hernández, 2010; Isabelli-García, 2010; Magnan & Back, 2007; Martinsen, 2007; O’Donnell, 2004). Magnan and Back (2007) note that while the LCP may suffer from “its sensitivity to individuals’ ability

to recall behavior accurately, "... a comparison of students' responses on the LCP and their answers on the postprogram questionnaire suggested that the LCP had captured a reality of their experience" (p. 48). Freed (1990) found that the LCP had a high level of test-retest reliability. Building on the LCP, a number of researchers have made revisions to fit their needs (e.g., Badstübner & Ecke, 2009; Magnan & Back, 2007; Martinsen, 2007). We did the same. The version of the LCP used in our study was produced by Freed et al. (2004), but the following improvements were made to this version of the LCP in order to make it fit the IEP context better. First, the LCP by Freed et al. (2004) was made for native English speakers learning Spanish, so items had to be reworded to fit English-language learners. The second major change was that the LCP used in this study did not have separate pre- and post-test versions. The Freed et al. (2004) LCP pretest contained mostly demographic items and questions about participants' past language-learning experiences, and these demographic questions were simply incorporated into the LCP used in this study. Third, the present LCP was shorter than the Freed et al. (2004) LCP because some questions either did not apply to the IEP context or were unimportant for the purposes of the present study. Finally, items about homework were added to each section that did not already contain them (speaking, reading and listening). In addition, small changes in instructions had to be made because the present LCP was an online survey, not a pencil and paper survey.

For level 1 students, who were not proficient enough to understand all of the questions on the LCP in English, the whole survey was translated into Korean, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese and French—the native languages spoken by the majority of these students. The translations were provided by native or near-native speakers of each language. Additionally, each translation was back-translated into English and then compared with the English original. Any inconsistencies were corrected before the translations were made available to the students.

The LCP was administered during class near the end (during the 28th and 29th weeks) of the 31-week study, with the teacher for each class present. On average, it took the students 11 minutes to respond to the online version of the LCP. All writing class teachers in levels 1-4 were asked to help their students log into the survey. Once the students logged in, they were guided through the survey by simple instructions.

One limitation of the LCP noted by Mendelson (2004) and found in our study as well is that, due to the LCP's construction, the data it produces can grossly exaggerate the amount of contact—beyond what would be humanly possible in a 24-hour day. The reason for this problem is the way that the LCP forces participants to report the amount of their contact time in one-hour increments—making choices of less than one-hour impossible. In other words, even if a learner's out-of-class English contact lasted only one minute, it would be recorded in the "0-1 hour" category. When contact times were tallied later, that one-minute interaction would count as one hour, and multiple, short interactions could easily push the total beyond the limits of a normal 24-hour day. Furthermore, because some of the categories may overlap a bit, time may be double counted, further inflating time estimates. This face-validity problem has kept many researchers from reporting the total number of contact hours indicated on learners' LCPs (e.g., Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Magnan & Black, 2007).

It should be noted that our purpose for gathering information on amount of time spent in each LCP activity was not to achieve an accurate estimate of number of hours total in the language (separate individual questions asked students to estimate totals in speaking, reading, writing, and listening). Rather, our goal was to approximate the proportion or degree of time spent in

each activity (i.e., if more hours are reported in one activity than another, the assumption is that it is a more frequently occurring activity, regardless of the difference in total hours in all activities). For this reason, for our analysis of these items, we chose to focus on relative amounts of time spent rather than trying to obtain totals by adding items. Furthermore, we took an approach similar to Freed (1990), using standardized scores rather than total number of hours.

Interviews: As in previous studies (Day, 1985; Dewey, 2002; Freed, 1990; Hernández, 2010; Seliger, 1977), post-survey interviews were conducted to obtain qualitative data to triangulate the quantitative LCP data. Since these interviews could be conducted only after all other data were collected and analyzed (so that we could ensure we were interviewing both high and low English users), interview participant selection was limited to students still studying at the ELC. Of the 18 participants still studying at the ELC beyond the academic year of testing, six participants were selected based on their overall out-of-class English use values. Two participants from each level (2, 3, 4) were selected—the student with the highest out-of-class English use value and the one with the lowest. The interviews were semi-structured and ranged between 20 and 37 minutes in length.

Interview data were analyzed inductively in order to reveal unanticipated outcomes. In other words, the researchers drew generalizations and developed understanding from the students' perspectives (Borg & Gall, 1996). There were two primary objectives when making sense of the data gathered in the interviews: (1) interpreting what students think about their out-of-class use of English; and (2) verifying those perceptions against the students' responses to LCP questions. The desired outcome was to better explain how students use English during their out-of-class time. Each interview recording was transcribed. The transcription and investigator's post-interview notes were compared to the answers each interview participant reported on the LCP in order to find trends of typical out-of-class English use.

Data Analysis

The first step in our analyses was to calculate the gain scores for each of the participants. The gains for each participant were obtained by subtracting the average pre-test score on the Elicited Imitation test from the average post-test score.

We performed two analyses on the data. The first was to run correlations between the gain scores and the scores for the total out-of-class daily English use (the sum of learner estimates of total speaking, reading, writing, and listening in English). We also ran correlations on four other questions on the LCP. These four questions asked how often per week and per day each participant spent speaking, reading, listening, or writing English out of class, respectively. Thus, five measures of out-of-class English use were compared with language gain. This was done to analyze whether use of one particular language skill was more highly correlated with language gains than another.

Our second analysis examined whether participants who used English out of class more often were likely to have greater language gains than participants who used English less frequently. We did this by dividing the students into two groups: those who used English out of class frequently ("high users") and those who used it less ("low users"). Thus, we ordered the data from the participant who used English the most to the participant who used it the least. Because these scores were scalar and the data followed a normal distribution, it was impossible to determine where "high users" ended

and “low users” began. For this reason, and to ensure that the two groups were distinctly different, we instead compared those users in the top quartile (i.e., the 25% (n = 15) with the highest out-of-class language use) with the bottom quartile (i.e., the 25% (n =15) with the lowest out-of-class language use). An independent sample t-test was used to statistically compare the gains in proficiency as measured by the EI for the high-user versus the low-user group.

To answer the second research question (What specific language-learning activities promote language gain?), a linear step-wise multiple regression analysis was applied. In the analysis, the gain scores for each participant were used as the dependent variable. The participants’ answers to how often they used English in various activities outside of class were used as predictor variables in order to determine which of the activities on the LCP were associated with larger gains on the proficiency measures.

In addition, to analyze the interview data, each interview recording was transcribed. The transcription and investigator’s post-interview notes were compared to the answers each interview participant reported on the LCP so that trends of typical out-of-class English use could be found.

Results

Research Question 1

The first research question examined the relationship between reported out-of-class English use and proficiency gains. Analyses revealed that all of these measures were correlated to a significant degree with language gains (total per day, .394**; overall speaking, .276*; overall listening, .369**; overall reading .272*, where * = $p < .05$ and ** = $p < .01$) with the exception of out-of-class writing (overall writing, .194). While these findings suggest that out-of-class English use does play a significant role in language gain, we must also point out that the correlations between out-of-class English use and language gains, although significant, were still low. For this reason, we also performed a t-test comparing participants who reported high out- of-class English use with those who reported low out-of-class English use (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics for groups). This analysis revealed a significant difference between the gain scores of high users versus low users ($t(29) = 4.318, p < .0001$). These findings provide further evidence that out-of-class English use is associated with language gain.

Table 2. *Out-of-class English Use: Top versus Bottom Quartile Groups*

Study Participants	N	Average Hours a day speaking English	Average Gain Score
Top Quartile Group	15	9.20 (2.35)	.80 (.69)
Bottom Quartile Group	15	1.67 (.35)	.34 (.31)
Total Participants	30	4.81 (3.03)	.55 (.51)

* $p = 0.0001$

To further corroborate the findings of the correlation analyses, we also examined the differences between the two groups' hours-per-day averages for the individual English contact types based on skill (speaking, reading, listening, writing and overall). To do so, we ran a two-way ANOVA on the hours-per-day out-of-class English use for each of the skill areas for the high and low English users. This analysis revealed a significant effect of group ($F(1,29) = 197.149, p < .0001$), skill ($F(1,3) = 19.24, p < .0001$) and a skill x group interaction ($F(3,29) = 12.62, p < .0001$). In other words, the high-user group reported greater out-of-class language use than the low-user group for each of the four skill areas. However, the skill x group interaction suggested that the difference for the two groups was greater for some skills than others. Post-hoc Tukey tests revealed a greater difference between the two groups' use for listening and speaking than for reading and writing (see Figure 1). These findings suggest that the main difference between the high users and the low users was that the high users participated in more speaking and listening activities than the low users.

Next, we re-calculated the correlations between language gain and the five measures of language use (overall total hours per day and the four measures examining overall speaking, listening, reading and writing) for the participants in the top and bottom quartiles. This analysis revealed a similar finding to those described for the entire group above, although the correlations were stronger (total per day .433*; overall speaking .400*; overall listening .426*; overall reading .323; overall writing .398 where * = $p < .05$). One notable difference between the two correlations (overall and the high/low-user group) was that, when only the bottom and top quartile participants' scores were examined, amount of out-of-class English writing correlated significantly with language gains whereas reading did not. The opposite occurred in the correlations run on all the participants' scores—that is, reading was significantly correlated with language gain while writing was not.

Research Question 2

The second research question sought to determine which specific out-of-class English use activities listed on the LCP were the most effective predictors of language gain. This question was especially important for

pedagogical reasons because its results might suggest that specific language-learning activities may be more helpful than others for improving L2 proficiency. To examine this question, all of the 26 activities listed on the LCP (see Appendix) were included as predictor variables in a linear step-wise multiple regression analysis. We also included as a predictor variable the average of the scores of all activities on the LCP. This was done so that we could see the influence of each of these skills on the language gain scores. This analysis revealed four factors that influenced language gain the most. LCP item 5a – “Deliberately trying to use what was taught in the classroom (grammar, vocabulary, expressions) with native or fluent English speakers outside the classroom” – accounted for 20 percent of the variance in the scores. LCP item number 2a – “How much time did you spend speaking in English outside of the classroom?” – accounted for 14 percent of the variance. The average score for all tasks combined accounted for another 12 percent of the variance. Finally, LCP item number 4b – “Obtaining directions/information” – accounted for nine percent of the variance in the scores (see Table 3). These four factors accounted for approximately 54 percent of the variance. The other 24 LCP items and the other combined skill scores were not significant predictors of gain.

Table 3. *Multiple Regression Analysis—Activities that Predict Language Gain*

Gain predictors	R ² value	F value	Significance	Percentages
Deliberately using what was learned in speaking class	.202	8.600	.006	20%
Time spent speaking English	.330	8.144	.001	14%
Average of speaking, reading, writing, listening in English	.433	8.130	.0001	12%
Asking for directions or information in English	.546	9.307	.0001	9%

Once these gain predictors were identified, we examined how high and low users differed in their use of these four factors. We tested whether the two groups were indeed different in the amount they used these factors by running

a two-way (user group by task) ANOVA. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 3. The analysis revealed a significant effect for group ($F(1,29) = 301.262, p < .0001$), task ($F(1,3) = 85.65, p < .0001$), and task by group interaction ($F(3,29) = 39.73, p < .0001$). These results demonstrate that the high-user group reported greater out-of-class language use than the low-user group for each of the four tasks found to relate to language gain. However, the task by group interaction suggested that the difference for the two groups was greater for some skills than others. Post-hoc Tukey tests revealed a greater difference between the two groups' total use of speaking and deliberately using skills taught in class than for the other tasks (i.e., overall use of English and asking for directions and information). In other words, these two factors seemed to play the greatest role in distinguishing between the two groups.

Discussion

This study examined the connection between out-of-class L2 use and learners' L2 proficiency gains. Moreover, it sought to examine which types of out-of-class activities had the strongest relationship with language gain. The study's findings in these two categories will be discussed below. In addition to the results of the quantitative data analysis, we present further support for these findings by using interview data gathered from six participants.

Out-of-class Language Use and Proficiency Gains

The main finding of this study was that learners who used their L2 outside of class more frequently typically had larger proficiency gains than those who used their L2 outside of class less frequently. While this seems to be a validation of the obvious and is in line with a few studies showing connections between out-of-class language use and language gains (Dewey, 2008; Freed, 1990; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009; Shively & Cohen, 2007; Taguchi, 2008), this finding contrasts with the results of other studies (i.e., Day, 1985; Mendelson, 2004; O'Donnell, 2004; Spada, 1986), which found a weak or non-existent relationship between out-of-class language contact and proficiency development. Reasons for the difference between our results and studies finding no relationship between language gains and proficiency development are that our study was significantly longer, had more participants, and used a proficiency test allowing for more fine-grained measurements of language gain.

By examining correlations between the four skill areas and language gain, we found that the greatest correlations occurred with overall speaking and listening use, although overall reading use and language gain were also significantly correlated. This may not be surprising since the method of examining language gain required speaking and listening more than reading and writing. However, interview data seemed to indicate that speaking and using the language verbally were the types of activities most high users (i.e., those who used English out of class often) consciously used to help improve their language skill. Five of the six interviewees mentioned the fact that being able (or unable) to initiate a conversation was directly related to their improvement. For example, in one interview, Richard¹ (a level 1 high user whose native language is Portuguese) said, "In my job, . . . all the time I speak English. All the time . . . only English, because I'm not crazy. I have to practice. So when a person from Brazil tries to speak Portuguese, I tell them stop." Time after time, participants stressed this fact during their interviews. They all believed speaking more English would help them improve their language skills, and

most of them expressed the desire to speak even more English than they were managing at the time.

Interestingly, when correlations were run using only the low and high users' language gains and amount of English use, amount of writing was also significantly correlated with language gain. Earlier research examining factors affecting language gain in domestic immersion and study-abroad contexts revealed that writing was the primary predictor of language gain, even for tasks unrelated to writing (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004). Freed and her colleagues attributed this to the development of automaticity (in particular of chunks of language) that occurs as a result of the deep processing involved in writing the L2. It may be that writing plays a more prominent role in L2 speaking development than expected. Additional research testing participants' writing skills and use of English outside of class would further illuminate this relationship.

Types of Activities Affecting Proficiency Gains

The second purpose of this study was to determine which specific out-of-class activities were related to proficiency-gain differences in English. The results showed that four activities on the LCP had a statistically significant relationship with proficiency gains: "deliberately trying to use what was taught in the classroom;" "overall use of English;" "overall amount of speaking English;" and "asking for information." Each of these four factors is discussed separately below.

The greatest predictor of language gain—deliberately trying to use what was taught in the classroom—seems to support previous research which has shown that increasing students' participation in class leads to significant gains in proficiency (Lim, 1992; Zhou, 1991) and that the more students become personally engaged in a class, the better the odds that their proficiency will increase (Krupa-Kwiatkowski, 1998; Tsou, 2005). Thus, the current study's finding confirm previous research, since deliberately using what was taught in class implies a certain level of personal engagement with the material. This conclusion also corroborates the findings of Seliger (1977), who concluded there were two types of learners: active (those who sought out opportunities to practice) and passive (those who avoided interaction in the target language). In general, then, it seems reasonable to conclude that language learners who actively use their target language by finding opportunities outside of the classroom to practice what was taught in class experience higher proficiency gains. In other words, the current research supports Seliger's earlier conclusion, while providing a more detailed view of the relationship.

Once again, interviews with the participants corroborated this conclusion. One discussion stood out in particular. Aaron, a native speaker of Japanese, who was classified as a low user, talked about his perceptions of learning English before he came to America. "[I thought] just staying here I can improve. Like I learn Japanese just [by] staying in Japan, I could learn English by staying here. I was wrong. I need to do something to improve." His comments contrast starkly with those of Lucy, a high user and native-speaker of Spanish who talked about how much she used English outside of class and how confident it made her feel.

In sum, as this gain predictor (deliberately trying to use what was taught in class) indicates, it is not enough to simply reside in a foreign-speaking country. To make significant gains in proficiency, learners need to deliberately apply what they are taught in class when they use their target language out of class.

The next two factors—overall use of English outside of the classroom and overall use of spoken English—similarly are supported in previous research and seem to indicate that the more the language is used interactively with other people, the greater the language gains. These findings are significant since earlier studies examining students on study abroad indicated learners actually make fewer language gains the more they speak the language (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Magnan & Black, 2007). One reason for the difference between our participants and those in study-abroad programs may be the type of language use. Segalowitz & Freed (2004), for example, suggest that negative language gains are related to more language use with the host family because students may only be using formulaic language when speaking to the host family or they may be passively listening in on such conversations rather than producing language.

One interviewee's response serves to illustrate this point. Lucy, whose proficiency gain was almost double the average (1.06 versus 0.55), said she spent seven days a week, four to five hours a day talking with her native English-speaking boyfriend. During the interview, she indicated she spent every weekend at the home of her boyfriend's sister, where none of the other people spoke Spanish (her native language). It appears that, in an intensive English language situation, the caliber of language contact may play a greater role than merely the amount of language use. Certainly, future research should investigate whether, and to what degree, specific types of speaking improve language gain.

The final factor—using English to obtain directions/information—may be related to how willing and how comfortable learners feel using English outside of class (MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998). Willingness to communicate (WTC)—defined as the “intention to initiate conversation” and related to anxiety, motivation and apprehension in speaking—may significantly affect not only language use but also language gain (Matsuda & Goebel, 2004; Kang, 2005). Indeed, all of the above factors may be related to WTC since those learners who are actively engaged in attempting to use the language may feel more comfortable speaking the language (Yashima, 2002). To illustrate this point, in our study, those participants claiming to frequently speak English felt more confident about their English skills. Lucy, a level 2 high user whose native language is Spanish and the participant with the highest gain of any of the interviewees (and also the highest reported out-of-class English use), repeatedly talked about how good she felt about her English, since she was able to speak it often. In fact, in each interview, high users consistently reported being more confident about their English and optimistic about their prospects for improving. In contrast, Aaron, the level 2 low user mentioned earlier whose native language is Japanese, indicated having difficulty feeling comfortable interacting with English speakers and consequently rarely using English out of the classroom. As the gain predictor indicates, it is not enough to simply reside in a foreign-speaking country as Aaron believed. Rather, to make significant gains in proficiency, learners need to become actively engaged in learning, which may either cause or be caused by a willingness to communicate. Segalowitz, Gatbonton, and Trofimovich (2009) posit similar complex relationships between L2 identity, language use and language acquisition. They suggest that a L2 learner's ethnolinguistic affiliation (language identity) can influence “the selection of communicative experiences the individual allows him or herself to engage in,” which in turn influences and is influenced by L2 use, thus molding L2 acquisition (p. 188). In short, the relationship between L2 use and language acquisition is a complex one, but the current study suggests that they are connected.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between out-of-class L2 use and L2 proficiency gains. The main finding was that those ESL learners who engaged in out-of-class English use were more likely to demonstrate proficiency gains. This finding is not necessarily surprising; it accords with “common sense.” Nevertheless, it contrasts with the results of several shorter studies (i.e., Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Day, 1985). This study also found that speaking tasks in general—as well as the activities of asking for directions/information and deliberately trying to use what was taught in the classroom with native or fluent English speakers outside of the classroom – were the strongest predictors of proficiency gain. A closer examination of these factors in future studies may help researchers and teachers alike improve our understanding of how languages are best taught and learned.

While it is unclear whether the relationship between L2 use and L2 proficiency development is a simple causal one, it is clear that there is some connection between the two. Additional research, focusing not only on L2 use and proficiency development but also on Willingness to Communicate, L2 identity, and other similar factors, would help illuminate the nature of the relationship between use and proficiency.

Notes

¹ All interviewee names listed are pseudonyms.

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Appendix A

Language Contact Profile

The responses that you give in this questionnaire will be kept confidential. The information that you provide will help us to better understand learning experiences of ELC students. Your honest and detailed responses will be greatly appreciated. Thank you.

Part 1. Background Information

1. What is your 9 digit BYU ID?
2. What is your email address?
3. What is your gender?
4. How old are you?
5. What level at the ELC are you this semester?
6. What country are you from?
7. What is your native language?
8. How many other languages do you speak (for the purposes of this study it doesn't matter how well you speak them)? Do not include your native language and English.

I don't speak any other languages besides my native language and English.

I speak one other language besides my native language and English.

I speak two other languages besides my native language and English.

I speak three other languages besides my native language and English.

9. How long have you been in United States?
less than 4 months 5-8 months 9-12 months 1-2 years more than 2 years

10. If you have ever lived in another English-speaking country, how long have you lived there?
less than 4 months 5-8 months 9-12 months 1-2 years more than 2 years

- 11a. This semester, how often have you participated in the ELC Choir?
always often sometime rarely never

- 11b. This semester, how often have you participated in ELC activities (dances, cultural and sport events, etc.)?
always often sometime rarely never

12. Which situation best describes your living situation while studying at the ELC?

I live with only native English-speaking roommates.

I live with some native English-speaking roommates.

I live with no native English-speaking roommates.

I live with my own family and we mostly speak in my native language.

I live with a native English-speaking family (host family).

I live alone.

13. Have you studied English in school in the past at each of the levels listed below? Click NO if you have not studied English at the specific level or if you have studied at that level, specify for how long?

	No	Yes, less than 1 year	Yes, 1–2 years	Yes, more than 2 years
Elementary school				
Junior high (middle) school				
Senior high school				
University/college				

Part 2. Language Contact Profile

1. For the following items, please specify

(i) how many **days per week** you typically used English in the situation indicated, and

(ii) on average how many **hours per day** you did so.

Click on the appropriate numbers.

2a. On average, how much time did you spend speaking, **in English**, outside of class with native or fluent English speakers during this semester?

2b. doing speaking homework assignments in English **outside of class**

3. This semester, outside of class, I tried to speak **English to:**

3a. my teacher(s)

3b. friends (acquaintances, study buddy, etc.) who are native or fluent English speakers

- 3c. classmate(s)
- 3d. a host family, English-speaking roommate or other English speakers in my apartment complex
- 3e. Who else do you speak English with? Specify:
- 4. How often did you use **English** outside the classroom for each of the following purposes?
 - 4a. to clarify classroom related work (homework)
 - 4b. to obtain directions/information (e.g., "where is the post office"; "what time is it"; "how much are stamps")
 - 4c. for superficial or brief exchanges (e.g., greetings, "please pass the salt"; "I'm leaving", ordering in a restaurant, etc.) with my host family, English-speaking roommate, or friends in my apartment complex
 - 4d. for extended conversations with my host family, English-speaking roommate, friends, or acquaintances in my apartment complex, native speakers of my native language with whom I speak English
- 5a. How often did you try deliberately to use things you were taught in the classroom (grammar, vocabulary, expressions) with native or fluent English speakers outside the classroom?
- 5b. How often did you take things you learned outside of the classroom (grammar, vocabulary, expressions) back to class for question or discussion?
- 6. How much time did you spend doing each of the following activities **outside of class**?
 - 6a. Overall, in reading in English **outside of class**
 - 6b. reading English newspapers **outside of class**
 - 6c. reading novels in English **outside of class**
 - 6d. reading magazines in English **outside of class**
 - 6e. reading e-mail and/or internet web pages in English **outside of class**

- 6f. reading homework assignments in English **outside of class**
- 6g. Overall, in listening to English **outside of class**
- 6h. listening TV/radio, movies (at theatre and at home) in English **outside of class**
- 6i. listening to songs in English **outside of class**
- 6j. trying to catch other people's conversations in English **outside of class**
- 6k. doing listening homework assignments in English **outside of class**
- 6l. Overall, in writing in English **outside of class**
- 6m. writing personal notes, letters, email or chat in English **outside of class**
- 6n. writing homework assignments in English **outside of class**

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