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Wendy Baker

Brigham Young University, wendy_baker@byu.edu

Rob A. Martinsen

Brigham Young University, rob.martinsen@byu.edu

Dan P. Dewey

Brigham Young University

Jennifer Brown

Brigham Young University, jennifer_brown@byu.edu

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Cary Johnson

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Brigham Young University, cary_johnson@byu.edu

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Exploring Diverse Settings for Language Acquisition and Use: Comparing Study Abroad, Service Learning Abroad, and Foreign Language Housing

Rob A. Martinsen, Wendy Baker, Dan P. Dewey, Jennifer Bown, Cary Johnson

Brigham Young University

This study compared the amount of the second language (L2) use and linguistic gains made by students in three short-term language immersion programs: (1) traditional study abroad, (2) service-oriented study abroad, and (3) foreign language (FL) housing. These were chosen because they represent three distinct program types, providing students with different ways of interacting in the target language and different types and amounts of contact with native speakers. This allowed us to evaluate relationships between study setting, language use, and language gains. Learners completed language logs detailing their use of the L2 as well as pre- and post-immersion oral tests to assess gains in fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Although the traditional study abroad group used the L2 the most, findings demonstrate much of this use was due to coursework. When comparing use outside of the classroom, the service learning group used the target language significantly more than students in the FL house and traditional study abroad. Also two of the groups, those in the FL house and service-oriented study abroad demonstrated significant linguistic gains. Results also suggest a positive relationship between time speaking the L2 with non-native speakers and linguistic gains.

The setting in which L2 learning takes place is considered an important variable in L2 acquisition research. As Hymes (1972, quoted in Collentine & Freed, 2004) suggested, in order to understand language in context we must “systematically relate the two [language and context].” Firth and Wagner (1997) also contend that social and contextual factors are vital to understanding second language acquisition.

One setting that has received a great deal of attention is that of study abroad. Numerous studies have compared language learning in study abroad to at-home contexts such as formal classroom study or intensive immersion programs (Freed, 1995; Lafford & Ryan, 1995; Lapkin, Hart, & Swain, 1995). However, study abroad programs vary greatly in their structure, emphasis, and length. For example, a majority of students who participate in study abroad go for less than a semester and short-term programs account for most of the growth in study abroad participation (Institute of International Education, 2009). Yet most of the research on study abroad has focused on semester or year long programs. Additionally, few studies have examined language learning in study abroad programs in which students dedicate a large portion of their time abroad to activities other than coursework that require extensive interaction with native speakers in the target language. For example, in some programs, students engage in humanitarian service (Lewis, 2005; Porter, 2003; Wessel, 2007).

Another important setting for L2 learning is foreign language housing, in which students reside and speak the target language with other L2 learners and sometimes native speakers. Unlike students in intensive immersion programs like Middlebury College's Summer Language Schools, students do not devote all their time to studying the L2. Often their only exposure to the target language occurs in their residence, mostly with non-native speakers of the target language. Research (Martinsen, Baker, Bown, & Johnson, in press) comparing residents of foreign language houses to comparable students studying language on the same campus in the U.S. but not residing in language housing suggests that students in FL housing use the L2 more frequently and make greater gains in oral proficiency. However, more research is needed to determine what role FL housing can play in post-secondary FL education.

The purpose of this study is to compare language use and learning in three different short-term settings: (1) a traditional study-abroad program in which students attend classes, live with a host family, and make frequent excursions to visit historical and cultural sites; (2) a study abroad program where students, in addition to their course work, provide community service to native speakers and also live with host families, and (3) a program in which students live in an on-campus FL house over the same time period. The programs were examined in terms of changes in students' linguistic skills and time spent using the TL in various tasks.

Literature Review

Study Abroad

Research on study abroad has demonstrated that students who go abroad experience tremendous learning and growth in a variety of areas. Students' language skills often improve significantly. Moreover, students who go abroad frequently gain a deeper appreciation for and understanding of other cultures as well as their own (Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004). Study abroad also offers other benefits such as personal growth and development, increased confidence and willingness to communicate, and expanded career opportunities (see for example, Archangeli, 1999; Kauffmann, 1984).

Though most of this research has focused on semester or year-long programs, some evidence does suggest that short-term programs do have a significant impact on students' growth, at least in terms of cultural awareness and motivation. For instance, Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) found that students who spent five weeks abroad reported higher levels of intercultural awareness, personal growth and development, awareness of global interdependence and functional knowledge of world geography and language than students who took similar courses at home. Medina-Lopez-Portillo (2004) found that students in a seven-week study abroad program in Mexico significantly improved their sensitivity to other cultures. Also, Dwyer (2004) noted that students who participated in short summer programs reported that their commitment to learn a FL was strengthened as much (or more) from their brief sojourn as that of students who went for a semester.

However, empirical studies of language learning in short-term study abroad programs are very scarce. This may be due to the widespread use of the OPI (Oral Proficiency Interview) in study abroad research. Since it measures overall skill in the target language it may be too blunt an instrument to capture the incremental changes that take place over a short period (Freed, 1995). In fact, many studies find that a percentage of students show no evidence of gain according to the OPI, even after a semester abroad

(Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1993, 1995). These findings suggest that incremental changes may be better captured by other means, such as self-assessment or native speaker ratings.

Martinsen's (2007) study employed native speaker ratings to examine the linguistic gains made by students in a short-term study abroad program. Student participants completed two contextualized linguistic tasks similar to those used in oral proficiency interviews both before and after their time abroad. Native speakers then rated those recorded speech samples. Results indicated a small but statistically significant increase in students' oral skills. However, these results only reflect the learning of students in one program and more research is needed to determine if such learning is typical of students in other language learning contexts as well.

Target Language Use

Teachers, students or administrators involved in study abroad often assume that while students are abroad they will undoubtedly engage in many interactions with native speakers in the target language and that these interactions will propel them to new heights of fluency in the target language (see Mendelson (2004) for a discussion of these common assumptions). This idea is related to work by Hatch (1978), who argues for the importance of conversation in developing grammar, and Swain (1993, 1998) who holds that both input and output are vital to L2 acquisition (Mackey, 1999).

Interaction with native speakers is one of the most widely studied variables relating to improvement in oral language skills in study abroad (Brecht, et al., 1993, Freed, Segalowitz & Dewey, 2004; Keating, 1994; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004), though there is little consensus as to its benefits. Many studies have found that interaction with native speakers in the target language does predict improvements in the target language (see, for example, Brecht et al., 1993; Isabelli, 2001). On the other hand, some studies have found no significant relationship between improvements in oral fluency and the amount of time spent using the target language interactively outside of class. Still others (Rivers, 1998; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Wilkinson, 1996, 1998) shed doubt on the widely-held assumption that homestay experiences during residence abroad automatically lead to extensive interaction with native speakers. Also, very little research has considered how various language learning settings may encourage or discourage students from interacting with native speakers, suggesting the need for further study.

Service Learning

Service learning is a form of experiential learning that combines a few key elements: rigorous academic study of a particular discipline and provision for some form of service related to the same discipline that benefits members of a local community. The knowledge and experience gained by students from academic study and their service experience are thought to create deeper, more practical understanding than either service or classroom study alone (Lewis, 2005; Wessel, 2007). Buchen (1995) argues that students who engage in academic work related to community service become involved in 'a circular process that moves from feeling to fact, from experience to inquiry' which can cause the students to '[turn] to the academic with the kind of urgency that can set learning ablaze' (69). Morris (2001) found that students who participated in a service learning course

experienced an increase in their motivation to learn Spanish and improved attitudes towards Spanish speakers. This was true regardless of the learner's initial motivation to learn the target language.

Research has also found that service learning in study abroad is an excellent way for students to pursue culture learning. For example, Jackson (2007) found that students who participated in a study abroad program with a service learning component gained important cultural insights and felt significantly more confident in their ability to interact with native speakers of Spanish. Research suggests that service learning abroad has very positive effects on students' attitudes and motivation and promotes cultural understanding. However, these studies do not document how participation in service learning affects time spent interacting with native speakers in the target language or linguistic gains.

Foreign Language Housing

Foreign language housing (FLH) is a language learning context in which students (1) live together in an area designated as foreign language housing, (2) commit to speaking exclusively in the target language while in the foreign language housing, and (3) are often encouraged or required to participate in certain activities designed to increase use of the target language or understanding of the target culture such as preparing and eating dinner together and/or participating in cultural or social activities.

FLH programs advertise that learners will gain increased fluency in the target language, yet there are those, like Wolf (2002) who claim that learners do not interact in the target language in FLH. Pearson's (2006) study of Spanish learners in a language community suggests that learners report interacting primarily in English. Bown's (2006) study, however, offered contradictory evidence; learners reported speaking the target language 90% of their time in the language residence. The contradictory evidence is probably a result of differences in the structure and emphasis of particular FLH programs. Overall, the literature on FLH is sparse, and little is known about the amount of language used in FLH. Also, there is little empirical data regarding the potential linguistic benefits of FLH.

Research Questions

To address the need for greater understanding of the benefits of traditional study abroad, service learning abroad, and domestic foreign language housing, and to evaluate relationships between study setting, language use, and language gains, this paper will focus on the following research questions:

1. Do students in the three groups, Foreign Language Housing, Traditional Study Abroad, or Service Learning Study Abroad spend significantly different amounts of time using the target language (Spanish)?
2. Do students' oral language abilities (measures of fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar drawn from speech samples) improve more in one of the programs than the others?
3. Does amount of target language use translate to greater gains in oral language abilities in each of the three groups?
4. Does time spent using the target language in specific tasks predict language gain?

Method

Participants

Participants included 48 students total. Of the participants, 19 (5 males, 14 females) were students in a traditional, spring term program conducted in Madrid, Spain and whose focus was Spanish language and culture (hereafter TSA). These students lived with local Spanish families and took approximately 9 credit hours of upper division courses including a 300-level grammar course and other courses such as the culture and civilization of Spain. Thirteen (1 male, 12 females) participants took part in a spring term program whose focus was Spanish language and service learning (hereafter SLA). These students also stayed with local families. They took 200-level courses and were assigned in pairs to give service 5-15 hours per week at various sites such as schools, orphanages, or homes for the elderly. Finally, sixteen (3 males, 13 females) participants lived in the foreign language housing (specifically the Spanish House) located near the campus of Brigham Young University. Residents of FLH at the research site live in an apartment complex designated specifically as foreign language residences and are required to communicate only in the target language within the complex. Additionally, students prepare and eat dinner together each weekday evening in the residence. However, students continue to take courses on campus and work and participate in extracurricular activities. Each apartment within the language house has a resident facilitator who is a native Spanish speaker and helps students to use the target language, coordinates meal preparation, and serves as a linguistic and cultural resource for the other residents.

Materials and Procedures

For the purposes of this study, language assessment focused on students' speaking skills since it seemed likely that the informal learning that occurs in study abroad through interaction with native speakers would affect oral skills more than reading or writing. Before and after studying abroad, students were asked to respond orally in Spanish to two contextualized tasks taken from the OPI and the Texas Oral Proficiency Test (TOPT), a test based on the OPI used in Texas to certify bilingual teachers.

These two tasks provided a sample of approximately three minutes of each student's Spanish from before and after their time abroad. Similarly brief samples of learner speech have been used in other studies (Yager, 1998; Koren-1995; Okamura, 1995) to successfully measure improvements in oral skills, particularly when measuring gains in pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency. Later, a panel of three native speakers and one of the researchers rated each sample on pronunciation, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary (see Appendix A—TOLS (Test of Oral Language Skills Rubric). To score the samples, the native speaker raters used a rubric, which was created for this purpose by the researcher and contained descriptors of the kind of speech that would qualify for a given rating.

In order to create this rubric, the researchers referenced rubrics used by the Inter-agency Language Roundtable and other sources (Higgs, 1984, Koren, 1995, Okamura, 1995). Then one of the researchers discussed the rubric with experts in pedagogy and oral testing. The rubric was piloted informally with a panel of native speakers. After a discussion of the rubric with the native speakers, the raters calibrated it on a group of sample recordings (not from the current study) in order to establish inter-rater reliability.

For purposes of this study, inter-rater reliability meant that raters consistently scored samples within one point of each other in each of the categories. For example, a rater could assign a score of 3 in pronunciation and another rater could give the same sample a 4 in pronunciation, but if one of the raters assigned a 2 and another a 4, that would be considered inconsistent. During the ratings of the samples in the actual study no such inconsistencies occurred. The raters' ability to rate the students consistently and distinguish between a variety of skills levels indicated that the rubric was useful for the purposes of the study. The native speakers were also able to distinguish between students with experience abroad from those who had not been abroad as well as distinguish between university students in first- or second-year Spanish. Also, the raters in this pilot stage recommended that grammar be included as a factor on which students could be rated. Thus grammar was added as a category in the rubric used later in the actual study. Additionally, the raters in the pilot stage felt that a scale of 1 to 5 was too broad for comprehensibility and recommended a scale of only 1 to 3, which change was included. However, for future studies, we may consider re-wording the original rubric in the following manner: (1) could understand almost nothing, (2) could understand a little, (3) could follow the train of thought, (4) could understand almost everything, (5) could understand everything.

After piloting the instrument, one of the researchers and a new set of native speaker raters followed the procedures outlined above in order to reliably rate participants' speech samples. Samples were presented to the raters in random order so that the raters did not know whether a sample was taken before or after the student went abroad. Analysis of the ratings for the TOLS revealed high inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater reliability was calculated for each of the five components of speech rated. Cronbach's Alpha for each was Pronunciation = .83, Grammar = .91, Fluency = .95, Vocabulary = .90, and Comprehensibility = .14. Since the Cronbach's Alpha was low for Comprehensibility, the researchers considered those scores unreliable and therefore they were not included in the analysis. Face validity was deemed to be high because students were carrying out a communicative task with native speakers.

Approximately three weeks into their study experience, participants were also asked to keep a language log detailing how frequently they used the L2 over one week. The log was sent out with instructions by e-mail and students recorded the amount of time spent in a variety of tasks during the week (See Figure 1 for a complete list of activities provided on the language log.) Previous to the study, the language log was piloted on several FLH residents not involved in the actual study. This allowed the researchers to determine if there were any tasks that should have been on the log but were not. This log has been used in other research regarding language context and language use (Martinsen, Baker, Bown, & Johnson, in press).

Of the 48 participants, 43 completed the language logs, 26 completed the pre-test and post-test of oral language skills and 21 completed all three measures.

Results

In this section we will present the results of the study as related to each individual research question. Our first research question was to determine whether students in the three groups, FLH, TSA, or SLSA spent significantly different amounts of time using Spanish. (See Table 1.) To answer the first research question, we tallied the total number of hours spent using Spanish per week as recorded in the language log for each participant

in each group. We submitted these scores to a one-way ANOVA with the total number of hours spent using Spanish per week as the dependent variable and group (TSA, SLSA and FLH) as the independent variable. This analysis found a significant effect for group, $F(2,42) = 6.043$, $p = .005$. Tukey post-hoc analyses determined that the FLH group (3.64 hours per day on average) used Spanish significantly less than the TSA (6.84 hours per day on average) and SLSA (6.7 hours a day on average) groups.

Table 1. Reported Amount of Spanish Use by the FLH, SLSA, and TSA Groups (Standard Deviations in Parentheses)

	FLH (n= 12)	SLSA (n= 16)	TSA (n= 15)	F statistic	p value	Post-hoc Tests
Average total hours using Spanish per day	3.64 (1.89)	6.71 (3.66)	6.84 (2.90)	6.04	.005	TSA, SLSA> FLH
Average total hours per day using language productively	2.16 (1.34)	3.71 (2.09)	3.43 (2.40)	2.47	.09	TSA= SLSA =FLH
Average total hours per day using language receptively	1.71 (1.63)	2.54 (1.44)	3.25 (0.82)	5.10	.01	TSA> SLSA , FLH
Average total hours per day in class	1.51 (1.50)	2.19 (0.95)	3.96 (2.81)	5.64	.007	TSA> SLSA , FLH
Average total hours per day outside of class	2.12 (1.45)	4.71 (2.62)	2.87 (0.52)	4.65	.01	

We next examined how the three groups differed in their use of Spanish in specific types of tasks. We first examined whether the three groups differed in the total amount of time spent using Spanish productively (i.e., speaking and writing—for example, talking to roommates, talking during dinner, etc.) and found no significant effect for group, $F(2,42)=2.47$, $p=.09$, suggesting that the three groups, unlike for the total time

spent using Spanish, did not differ significantly in how often they used the language productively (FLH, 3.16 hours on average; TSA, 3.43 hours per day on average; SLSA, 3.71 hours per day on average, when averaging over a seven-day week). By contrast, in an analysis examining how much time the three groups spent in receptive activities such as listening to music, reading, and watching TV, the TSA group spent the most time (3.25 hours per day on average) in this manner, with the other two groups spending significantly less (FLH, 1.71 hours per day on average; SLSA, 2.54 hours per day on average), $F(2,42) = 5.098$, $p = .01$. A similar analysis performed on the total amount of time spent in the classroom revealed that the TSA group reported significantly more time (3.96 hours a day on average) using Spanish in the classroom than did the FLH (1.51 hours per day on average) or the SLSA groups (2.8 hours on average per day), $F(2,42) = 5.64$, $p = .007$. By contrast, a one-way ANOVA run on the total amount of time spent using the language outside of class noted a significant effect of group, $F(2,42) = 4.65$, $p < .01$. Post-hoc Tukey tests revealed that the SLSA group used Spanish significantly more outside of class (4.7 hours on average) than the other two groups. This analysis also found that the FLH group (2.12 hours on average) did not differ significantly from the TSA group (2.82 hours on average).

The results of the analysis on the amount of language used by each of the three groups revealed that the two study abroad groups used Spanish more than the FLH students. However, when time using Spanish productively was compared, the three groups spent a similar amount of time speaking Spanish. In addition, the TSA group spent more time using the language receptively (i.e., reading and listening) than the other two groups. In fact, the biggest difference between the two groups was in the amount of time spent in class, with the FLH group spending the least amount of time in class and the TSA group spending the most.

Our second research question sought to determine whether the three groups differed in their language gain during the 7 weeks spent in the program. To answer this question, we averaged the native speakers' ratings of the participants' pre- and post-test language tasks into four scores for each participant: pronunciation, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary. (See Table 2.) We submitted these scores to a series of one-between, one-within repeated measures ANOVAs with time (pre- vs. post-test scores) as within and group as between group variables. Our analyses found that for vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency, there was no significant main effect for time (all F 's(2,25) < 3.49 , all p 's $> .07$), nor group (all F 's(2,1) < 3.44 , all p 's $> .07$), nor a significant group \times time interaction (all F 's(2,1) < 3.09 , all p 's $> .08$). A similar analysis performed on the participants' pre- and post-test grammar scores, however, did reveal a significant effect for time ($F(2,25) = 12.74$, $p < .002$), but no significant effect for group ($F(2,25) = 1.70$, $p = .205$), nor a significant group \times time interaction ($F(1,2) = 2.22$, $p = .131$). In other words, according to this initial analysis, all three groups demonstrated significant gains only in their grammar abilities from pre-test to post-test and did not demonstrate significant gains from pre-to post-test on vocabulary, pronunciation, or fluency. In addition, although all three groups did improve in grammar abilities from pre- to post-test, none of the three groups improved more than any other on any of the language skills measures.

Table 2. Pre- and Post-Test Scores for FLH, Sevice-Learning, and Traditional Study Abroad Students for the Skill Areas of Pronunciation, Grammar, Fluency, and Vocabulary (Standard Deviations in Parentheses)

	FLH (n=8)		SLSA (n=9)		TSA (n=9)		F statistic	p value
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test		
Pronunciation	3.33 (0.55)	3.44 (0.69)	3.25 (0.39)	3.13 (0.31)	3.85 (0.60)	3.59 (0.76)	Time: F(2,25) =1.07 Group: F(2,25) =2.18 Group x time: F(1,2)= 1.58	.311 .135 .228
Grammar	2.67 (0.91)	3.07 (0.81)	2.37 (0.33)	3.08 (0.49)	3.30 (0.99)	3.41 (0.91)	Time: F(2,25) =12.74 Group: F(2,25) =1.70 Group x time: F(1,2)= 2.22	.002 .127 .131
Fluency	2.82 (0.80)	3.00 (0.69)	2.92 (0.75)	3.46 (0.50)	3.57 (0.78)	3.48 (0.87)	Time: F(2,25) =3.49 Group: F(2,25) =2.26 Group x time: F(1,2)= 1.81	.070 .205 .187
Vocabulary	3.15 (0.72)	3.15 (0.44)	2.75 (0.49)	3.25 (0.23)	3.70 (0.65)	3.48 (0.60)	Time: F(2,25) = .793 Group: F(2,25) =3.44 Group x time: F(1,2)= 3.09	.382 .060 .080

One concern about the above analysis is that the TSA group had significantly more experience with Spanish than the other two groups. Many of them had had a previous 2-year immersion experience and were enrolled in third- and fourth-year language classes, unlike the FLH and SLSA students who were generally enrolled in second-year courses and had not had previous immersion experience. To assess whether the three groups differed in their language abilities prior to the 7-week study abroad or foreign language housing experience, we submitted their pre-test scores on pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and grammar to a two-way (group by language score) ANOVA and did find a significant effect for group ($F(1,25) = 4.24, p < .01$). Post-hoc Tukey tests revealed that the FLH and SLSA groups did not differ significantly from each other on any of the language-task scores, but the TSA group did score significantly higher than the other two groups. Running the above analysis with pre test scores (high, mid, low) as a covariate may have addressed this concern; however, because the high pretest group would have included so few individuals ($n = 4$), we felt that such an analysis would not be possible.

Because of this, we ran a separate analysis looking only at the difference between the FLH students and the SLSA students. We submitted their pre-and post-test scores on pronunciation, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary to a series of one-between, one-within repeated measures ANOVAs with time (pre-vs. post-test scores) as within and group as between group variables. (See summary of statistical analyses in Table 3.) These analyses revealed that for vocabulary, grammar, and fluency, there was a significant effect for time (all F 's(1,17) > 4.48, all p 's < .05), but no significant effect for group (all F 's (1,17) > .834, all p 's > .376), nor a group x time interaction (all F 's(1,1) < 1.28, all p 's < .276). In contrast, for pronunciation scores, there was no significant effect for time ($F(1,17) = 0.004, p = .949$), nor was there a significant effect for group ($F(1,17) = .794, p = .387$), nor a group x time interaction ($F(1,1) = 1.23, p = .285$). In other words, both the FLH and SLSA groups improved in vocabulary, grammar and fluency, but not in pronunciation. In addition the two groups did not differ from each other in terms of how much they improved on any language measure.

Table 3. Reanalysis of Statistics Comparing the Two Groups, FLH and SLSA Students on the Four Skill Areas

	F statistic	p value
Pronunciation	Time: $F(1,17) = .0004$	.949
	Group: $F(1,17) = .794$	.387
	Group x Time: $F(1,21) = 1.23$	.285
Grammar	Time: $F(1,17) = 17.61$	.001
	Group: $F(1,17) = .208$	.655
	Group x Time: $F(1,21) = 1.28$	.276
Fluency	Time: $F(1,17) = 6.28$	.024
	Group: $F(1,17) = .834$	.376
	Group x Time: $F(1,21) = 1.51$	.238
Vocabulary	Time: $F(1,17) = 4.48$	.050
	Group: $F(1,17) = .453$	.511
	Group x Time: $F(1,21) = .411$	.186

Our third and fourth questions involved connections between language use and language gains. To answer the third research question, we ran a series of correlations between language gains (fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar) and total time spent using Spanish, total time using the language productively, total time using the language receptively, and total classroom time. These Pearson correlations revealed only weak connections between the measures of language use and language gain (correlations from $-.174$ to $.115$; p values ranged from $.422$ to $.948$). However, one reason for these weak correlations may have been that the number of participants (21) who completed all three tasks (pre-test, post-test, and language log) was too low for reliable correlations. To further investigate the relationship between language use and language gain, we determined which two students in each of the three groups had the highest (i.e., in the top quartile) and which two had the lowest language gains (i.e., in the bottom quartile), as averaged across all four language skills. As mentioned previously, we did not include comprehensibility in this or any of the other analyses since the level of reliability was too low. We compared total time using Spanish for these high and low gainers, receptive and productive time, and amount of class time using Spanish. As seen in Table 4, relatively few noticeable differences were found between the two groups. While the group with the highest gain scores had a slightly higher amount of time spent producing Spanish, the group with the lowest gain scores spent a slightly higher amount of time listening to Spanish. In other words, there appears to be no obvious relationship between how much total time a learner spent using Spanish and whether or not s/he had noticeable language gains from pretest to post-test.

Table 4. Average Number of Hours Spent Using Spanish by High and Low Gainers Per Week (Data Was Collected for All Participants in All Three Programs for One Week)

	Top Gainers	Bottom Gainers
Total time using Spanish	6.8	6.84
Productive	4.12	3.95
Receptive	2.34	2.75
Class Time	2.01	2.12

To further investigate language use in specific tasks and the relationship of the tasks to language gains (question four), we examined the top and bottom quartile gainers' use of Spanish in all the language situations presented in the language log (see Appendix B). For several of these language situations, an interesting pattern emerged (see Table 5). The participants with the highest gains in each of the groups spent considerably more time (74 minutes a day on average) speaking to non-native Spanish speakers (their roommates and other non-native speakers) than did the participants with the lowest gains in each group (37 minutes a day on average). In contrast, the participants with the lowest gains spoke more often to native Spanish speakers, i.e., their host family, shop clerks, teachers, and other native speakers, (83 minutes on average) than did the group with the highest gains (35 minutes a day on average). In other words, from these results, it appears that the participants with the highest gains in all three of the groups (TSA, SLISA, and FLH) spoke more often to non-native and less often to native Spanish speakers, and that this difference between the two groups may have led to higher language gains.

Table 5. The Number of Minutes Per Day High and Low Gainers Spent Using Spanish in Specific Situations

	Top Gainers	Bottom Gainers
Commuting	25	7
Talking to Roommates	42	15
Talking with Non-Natives	32	22
Listening to Music	16	37
Talking with Host Family	19	46
Talking with Native Speakers other than the Host Family	22	41

Discussion

Results and implications will be presented for each of the research questions, as well as suggestions for future research.

1. Do students in the three groups, FLH, TSA, or SLSA spend significantly different amounts of time using the target language (Spanish)?

This study found that the TSA group, and the SLSA, on average, spent significantly more time using the target language during their time abroad than students in the foreign language housing, but the TSA and SLSA groups did not differ significantly from one another. However, when time spent in class is accounted for, students in the on-campus foreign language housing did not differ significantly in the amount of time spent using the target language interactively from that of students in the study abroad programs. This finding is particularly surprising given that the students living in foreign language housing generally only used the target language while in their apartment. As soon as they left the apartment they were in an English-dominated university setting.

This finding seems to corroborate other studies of domestic immersion programs. For example, Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey (2004) found that students in an intensive domestic immersion program spent more time in the target language than students in study abroad programs. Furthermore, Dewey (2002) found that learners in domestic immersion programs at home spent more time in a variety of communicative tasks than learners abroad. However, in the immersion programs in question, students were often isolated from the English-speaking world. They took at least four hours of classes per day and participated in target language activities during almost all waking hours. The students in the present study had much less contact with the target language, as they were required only to eat dinner in the foreign language house with the other participants Sunday through Thursday and speak exclusively in the target language while in the housing. The rest of the time they were free to go about their lives in the English-speaking world, working, attending class, and socializing with English-speaking friends. Yet students in the FLH reported interacting in the target language roughly the same amount of time as students in both study abroad programs who had traveled to a Spanish-speaking country, lived with a host family, and were in proximity of native speakers.

Several possible explanations can be given for the patterns in language use in the FLH, TSA, and SLSA settings. These reasons largely relate to the need for and nature of social interaction, program-design issues, and student motivation.

The first social issue is the apparent need students have to interact with peers. Social capital theory suggests that people will form the strongest relationships with others with whom they have much in common (Borgatti and Jones, 1998; Coleman, 1988). Study abroad participants are often placed in homestay settings where the host parents are much older and have very different perspectives on life. Even if there are children in the home, often the ages of these children differ vastly from that of the guest student. Cross-cultural differences can also create differences that make communicating and bonding challenging. Study abroad participants may manage to have some contact with people their age, but again cultural and linguistic barriers can prevent strong bonding. It is only natural for learners to bond with the people with whom they have the most in common—fellow study abroad participants.

The issue of culture shock comes into play as study abroad participants are suddenly thrust into exciting but often frightening new surroundings far from home and anything familiar. These cultural differences will tend to push students towards the safety of the cultural similarity of their fellow students and their native language (Rifkin, 2005). Generally, this is seen as a negative pattern, but Wilkinson (1998) notes that spending time with other students allows an individual to process the overwhelming newness of their surroundings. One student stated, “If I hadn’t formed the friends (other study abroad students) that I did, I don’t know what I would have done—curled up in my room or something.” Another stated that she “didn’t see how it could be any other way” and felt that the time she was spending occasionally speaking English was “a pretty good balance.” Wilkinson claims that these statements contrast with the perception that students lack motivation; instead, they are reacting to their environment in predictable ways, which may have actually benefited their learning over time.

Social bonding also came into play with the FLH residents, who had much in common with their fellow residents. They were attending the same university, were the same age, had a strong interest in learning Spanish, and had taken some of the same language classes. For this reason, it was natural for them to be able to connect well with each other. In fact, as with many college students, their social lives often revolved around roommates and other FLH residents. In order for them to share their lives they needed to speak and were required to do so in the target language. They also had signed a language pledge and had a native Spanish-speaking resident facilitator living with them who was responsible for encouraging target language use. These facilitators were also students, similar in age and background to the residents of the FLH, and thus could easily be part of the students’ social and peer groups. This was generally not the case with the host family or the native speaker teachers in the study abroad settings. Also, students in the FLH knew that these native speakers had been hired to help them to use the target language and that their role was not to criticize or evaluate, but to encourage language use. In short, FLH promoted peer social circles where Spanish was used, whereas study abroad often involved social circles comprised of fellow participants speaking mostly English.

Another factor in understanding the results of this study is the way that the context affected contact with native speakers. In the traditional study abroad and the service learning study abroad programs, students interact with many native speakers.

Much of this interaction takes place with a native-speaker teacher, the host family, or service providers such as bus drivers, waiters, or store clerks. Some research on study abroad has found that these types of contacts are superficial and do not result in extensive or meaningful conversations with native speakers.

It is clear that program design (providing a native Resident Facilitator, requiring a language pledge, etc.) played a major role in language use in the FLH. Similarly, the service learning study abroad program also facilitated language use outside of class through requiring out-of-class contact with native speakers. The program tended to foster the same types of contact with native speakers as traditional study abroad, but also added the volunteer service component. The service component provided an opportunity to interact with native speakers for an authentic, non-language-related purpose. This finding may explain why the SLSA group spent more total time speaking Spanish outside of class than either the foreign language housing group or traditional study abroad. This finding corroborates other research on study abroad. For example, Martinsen (2007) suggests that students in study abroad need more natural ways of connecting with native speakers, as most interactions are superficial and require little speaking on the part of the native speaker (usually the host family). Isabelli-Garcia (2006) also asserts that helping students abroad to form social networks with native speakers through formalized activities such as volunteer service or internships could provide students with the kind of language contact that will foster gains. Others have also suggested the importance of social involvement (Dewey, 2008; Fraser, 2002; Levin, 2001; Whitworth, 2006).

2. Did students' oral language skills improve more in one of the programs than the others?

The results of this study showed that the TSA group as a whole showed significant gains from pre- to post-test only for grammar proficiency, though their lack of gain in other measures may be due to the fact that they started out at a significantly higher level than students in the FLH and SLSA groups. However, the similarities in gains between the FLH and the SLSA groups are striking. Specifically, the FLH and the SLSA made significant gains in grammar, pronunciation, and fluency, and the size of the gains in these three areas was not significantly different between the two groups.

The similarities in the gains in the two groups may suggest that the two contexts provide very similar opportunities for interaction in the target language. Students are often with other learners of the target language who share the same native language and also have some opportunities to interact with native speakers. The similarities in gains may also be due to the short-term nature of the program. It may be that students who participate in a study abroad or immersion program over seven weeks will show similar gains even if programs vary from one another in some aspects. It is possible then that differences in gains between programs could become more pronounced if the programs were extended to a semester or a year.

3. Does the amount of target language use translate to greater gains in oral proficiency in each of the three groups?

This study found that in all three groups the amount of time spent using Spanish did not correlate with greater gains. This may simply be due to the short-term nature of the program, so that the effect of spending more time using Spanish on students' gains

does not become visible. It may be that over a longer period of time the effect of using Spanish more regularly would be apparent.

4. Does time spent using the target language in specific tasks predict language gain?

The analysis performed using descriptive statistics indicated that the students with the greatest language gains spent far more time speaking with roommates on a daily basis than those who had the smallest language gains, while those with few or no language gains spent much more time speaking with native speakers. At first glance this seems counterintuitive. Generally, we would assume that interaction with native speakers would provide more rich and varied input than interaction with other non-native speakers.

There are two possible explanations for these results. One, the gains measured in this study were gains in oral skills only. It is possible that students speaking with native speakers spent more time listening than speaking since students are much less fluent than native speakers and are less familiar with conversational patterns in the target culture such as turn-taking or maintaining the floor. On the other hand, students who interacted with their non-native roommates may have had more equal exchanges because they were more similar in their fluency levels and their conversational patterns. Another explanation for this phenomenon could be that interaction in Spanish with roommates was of higher quality in terms of the linguistic tasks students engaged in. As mentioned previously, students' interactions with native speakers while abroad frequently consist of superficial interactions such as purchasing a bus ticket, ordering meals, or greeting members of the host family. In FLH, students' conversations with their roommates may cover a wider range of topics in greater depth due to their similarity in age, culture, and the amount of time they spend with one another, all of which could lead to greater gains in their speaking skills.

Limitations

In this particular study, only one of each type of program was investigated, limiting the generalizability of these results to other similar programs. The small sample size also represents another limitation. Additionally, this program focused on only a few variables that are of interest in study abroad and a more complete picture would be provided if this or future studies included other variables. In spite of these limitations, these findings provide useful case studies, suggestive of what may occur in other similar programs.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

One of the interesting findings of this study is that students in the SLSA program spent significantly more time using the language outside of class when receptive and interactive activities were combined. This suggests that the inclusion of the service-learning component provides more opportunities for contact with Spanish since the service component was one of the few unique characteristics among the three programs. This implies that program directors and planners can encourage use of the target language for students who go abroad by providing them with a non-linguistic purpose for communicating in the target language, in this case rendering service in the community. Future research could examine the advantages and disadvantages of different means of

connecting students with native speakers. Future research might also employ observation to corroborate the self-report measures used in this study.

This study also reported that students who interacted with English-speaking roommates in the target language were more likely to demonstrate gains in their oral skills than students who reported interacting more in the target language with native speakers. We suggested that this may indicate that interactions with native speakers are more superficial and that students rarely become full conversational partners in their interactions with native speakers. This highlights a need for further research to document the nature of the interactions that students have during study abroad and implies again the need for programs to help students to develop relationships and interactions with native speakers. Researchers should also consider the structure of particular programs, as the findings may differ across learning contexts.

Future studies might also consider additional variables that reflect specific programmatic objectives or outcomes that are normally attributed to study abroad. Among the possible variables to address are not only language-specific skills such as listening comprehension, but also pragmatic knowledge, including nonverbal communication, cultural knowledge, intercultural sensitivity, and motivation to continue studying the target language. In addition, future research should investigate larger populations of students in a greater variety of contexts. The findings of this study, however, represent an important first step in understanding the benefits of various learning settings. Moreover, this study raises important questions about the benefits of interacting in the L2 with native as opposed to non-native speakers.

Conclusion

Participation in study abroad will likely increase in the future, and it is likely that students and program directors will continue to opt for short-term programs for convenience and practicality. Even though the programs may be short-term in nature, program designers have many options for structuring their programs to create the most valuable learning context for their students. The current study suggests that even in short-term programs lasting two months or less, the context of learning does indeed impact the type of interactions that students have in the target language and influences their contact with native speakers. For example, we have found that students in the service learning study abroad program spent significantly more time outside of class using the target language than did students in the other two programs. This fits with the suggestion of previous researchers that built-in connections with native speakers can lead to more time using the target language outside of class. At the same time, more research is needed to determine what types of programs help to maximize interaction in the target language and how programs can create opportunities for interaction with students in the target language with native speakers outside of class. This aspect of programs may be particularly important in short-term immersion or study abroad programs where students might not have the time to develop such relationships on their own.

Additionally, we have seen that domestic immersion programs such as foreign language housing can provide valuable language learning opportunities even when students are not entirely cloistered from the English speaking milieu of a large U.S. university. This further highlights the idea that language-learning programs can vary greatly in their structure and purpose yet still provide students with a means of improving their language skills.

Appendix A

Test of Oral Language Skills Rubric

	1	2	3	4	5
Pronunciation	heavily accented speech with obvious interference from speaker's first language	less heavily accented speech, still much interference from first language	consistent use of sound system of target language even with errors	expert level of pronunciation with little interference from 1st language	highest level of pronunciation, very little interference from 1st language
Grammar	Typically misuses basic structural elements	correctly uses basic structures, but still irregular, may also lack knowledge of structures necessary to complete task easily	Correctly uses high frequency structures, some facility with complex structures	Consistent, correct use of basic and complex structures, small errors still present	nearly perfect agreement of gender, number, aspect, Proper use of complex structures
Fluency	Completely halting, hesitant, speaks with great difficulty	very halting, hesitant & fragmentary, far from smooth	Fairly halting, sometimes smooth & fluid	very smooth and fluid	Completely smooth/fluid
Comprehensibility	incomprehensible, only occasional words understood	reasonably comprehensible, can understand most sentences	completely comprehensible		
Vocabulary	Nearly unable to complete task due to lack of vocabulary knowledge	Task difficult to complete b/c of lack of vocab. Some simple vocab present	adequate, may still lack some words for the topic or unnecessary repetition	Very adequate, though range limited or slightly odd word choice	rich and varied, excellent word choice

Appendix B

Language Log A: TSA and SLSA Programs

Each day, record the number of minutes that you spend speaking, reading, listening to, or writing in Spanish while engaged in the activities listed below

Language Log

	Tues 5/ 27	Wed 5/28	Thurs 5/29	Fri 5/30	Sat 5/31	Sun 6/1	Mon 6/2
Getting ready for school							
Commuting, Public Transportation/Walking							
Eating breakfast							
In classes							
Eating meals							
Talking to friends/roomate							
Watching TV							
Listening to music							
Preparing meals							
Cleaning							
Studying/Doing Homework							
Email							
Reading							
Talking on the phone							
Sunday School							
Family Home Evening							
Talking to Host Family							
Talking to other native speakers							
Talking to other Americans in Spanish							
Other: specify							
Total	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Language Log B: Foreign Language Housing Program

Each day, record the number of minutes that you spend speaking, reading, listening to, or writing in Spanish while engaged in the activities listed below

Language Log

	Tues 5/ 27	Wed 5/28	Thurs 5/29	Fri 5/30	Sat 5/31	Sun 6/1	Mon 6/2
Getting ready for school							
Commuting, Public Transportation/Walking							
Eating breakfast							
In classes							
Eating meals							
Talking to friends/roomate							
Watching TV							
Listening to music							
Preparing meals							
Cleaning							
Studying/Doing Homework							
Email							
Reading							
Talking on the phone							
Sunday School							
Family Home Evening							
Talking to Host Family							
Talking to other native speakers							
Talking to other Americans in Spanish							
Other: specify							
Total	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

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Authors

- ROB A. MARTINSEN, Assistant Professor, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, *Brigham Young University*, 3143 JFSB, Provo, UT 84602. Specializations: second/foreign language pedagogy, Language and culture learning in study abroad and other immersion settings
- WENDY BAKER, Assistant Professor, Department of Linguistics and English Language, *Brigham Young University*, 4057 JFSB, Provo, UT 84602. Specializations: second language speech perception and production.
- DAN P. DEWEY, Assistant Professor, Department of Linguistics and English Language, *Brigham Young University*, 4067 JFSB, Provo, UT 84602. Specializations: informal out-of-class second language acquisition.
- JENNIFER BOWN, Assistant Professor, Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages, *Brigham Young University*, 3095 JFSB, Provo, UT, 84602. Specializations: foreign language acquisition, curriculum studies.
- CARY JOHNSON, Doctoral Student, Instructional Psychology and Technology, *Brigham Young University*, 150 MKB, Provo, UT 84602. Specializations: ESL pedagogy, research design, and evaluation.