

How much L2 grammar development occurs while studying abroad?: A more realistic picture

Claudia Fernández
Knox College

Residence Abroad, Social Networks and Second Language
University of Southampton, UK April 12, 2013

Introduction

- The research that has been conducted on study abroad (SA) and grammar development is still very scarce and the little evidence we have has given contradictory results.
- Some researchers have observed that studying abroad does not result in the grammatical accuracy expected by instructors (e.g., Collentine, 2011, Isabelli-García, 2010)
- However, SA may, nevertheless produce some gains towards grammar proficiency. We may observe that students, after a period of SA, go from one level of grammar proficiency up to the next.
- How significant may this improvement be and what factors do we need to consider to better understand it?
- This presentation reports the preliminary results of a study that sought to investigate the effects of length of study, proficiency level, and amount of input exposure and interaction on L2 grammar development in a SA context.

Background

The studies with a focus on grammar development have mostly used OPI or picture descriptions although some of them have used grammar tests as measures of development. The length of stay (LoS) abroad is very variable within these studies, and cover anything from short-stays to more than one year stays.

Background

Ryan and Lafford (1992) found linguistic gains in Spanish morphology, and Regan (1995) observed gains as well in French negation. Regan (2005) observed that gains in French negation were maintained one year later. Howard (2001, 2005, 2006, 2009) found that SA participants were better than those at home (AH) in French morphology and past tense. The use of present tense to mark past was maintained after one year of SA although the accuracy decreased.

Background

DeKeyser (1991) however, found equal gains in Spanish grammar after 6 months for SA and AH participants. Collentine (2004) observed that the AH were better in Spanish grammar than the SA participants, although the SA participants were better at narrating abilities. Isabelli-García (2010) observed equal gains with Spanish gender agreement between SA and AH participants. Also, she found no correlation between grammar gains and Spanish use in SA context except for reading and writing and one type of gender agreement.

Background

However, there is evidence that shows that when data were taken orally and spontaneously, morphological and syntactical errors decreased even in short stays (Llañez & Muñoz, 2009; Llañez & Serrano 2001; Serrano, Tragant & Llañez 2012)

Background

Kinginger (2009) observes that holistic measures such as the OPI, cannot identify the nuances of language development in SA contexts.

Freed (1990) suggested that “in order to demonstrate change, future studies have to utilize more finely-tuned analyses, those who reveal with specificity development in lexical breath, syntactic complexity...” (p. 475)

Background

- Kinginger (2009: 210-211) also advises on having realistic expectations regarding SA and language gains:
 - > “For all the advantages it confers to language learners, study abroad is not a magic formula or a cure-all for language learning problems”
 - > “Students produce complex syntactic structures but have yet to fully master the subjunctive”
 - > The achievements of students abroad should be recognized as such, with encouragement and opportunities for further study”
 - > “In order to be useful, the evaluation of study abroad outcomes can and should be realistic”

Research questions

1. Does learning Spanish in a SA context result in grammar acquisition development as measured by a placement test?
2. If so, are there any differences in grammar development between the 10-week and the 24-week period?
3. Does proficiency level play a role in grammar development?
4. To what extent is the amount of Spanish use outside the classroom associated with the learners' grammar development?

Methodology

- Participants
 - > n = 13
 - > American, L1 English speaking, university-level students coming from a small liberal arts college in the Midwest of the USA
 - > Enrolled in the Study Abroad program in Barcelona, Spain offered by the college
 - > Female
 - > Average age: 21
 - > Two proficiency levels: n= 5 basic, n=8 intermediate

Methodology

- Instruments
 - > **Grammar-based placement test** adapted from the exams designed to obtain the DELE (Diploma de español como lengua extranjera) to assess grammatical development. It consisted of 77 tokens, multiple choice, sentence completion and cloze paragraphs.
 - > The post-test version of the **Language Contact Profile** (Freed et al. 2004), a self-report survey to assess the extent to which participants were exposed and used Spanish outside of the classroom. It consisted of 9 main questions with sub questions.

Methodology

- Procedure
 - > 4 to 5 days after arrival, participants took version A of the placement test (pre-test).
 - > 10 weeks later, participants took version B of the placement test (post-test) and answered the LCP survey online.
 - > During the 10 weeks, participants took one language class according to their levels, and two or three classes more of literature, art and history in Spanish only with peers from the program. The total number of classroom time per week was 9 to 12 hours.
 - > Participants lived with Spanish speaking families during their entire stay.

Methodology

- ◉ Analyses: Placement test
 - > 1 point per correct token
 - > Level assigned according to following table based on the CEFR:
 - Beginner A1- (0-15 points)
 - Elementary A2 – (16-30)
 - Intermediate B1- (31-47)
 - Upper intermediate B2- (48-60)
 - Advanced C1- (61-71)
 - Mastery C2 – (72-77)

Methodology

- ◉ Analyses: LCP
 - > Selected the questions that asked (1) using Spanish overall for speaking, reading, listening and writing, and (2) using Spanish to have extended conversations with the host family.
 - > Obtained the product of the number of hours per week and the number of days reported. Example:
 - 7. How much time did you spend doing each of the following activities outside of class?
 - 7. a. Overall, in reading Spanish outside of class
Typically, how many days per week? 0 1 2 **3** 4 5 6 7
 - On those days, how many hours per day?
0-1 1-2 **2-3** 3-4 4-5 more than 5
 - Score: $3 \times 2.5 = 7.5$
 - > Obtained the average of the number of hours per week for (1) and for (2).

Methodology

- Statistical Analyses
 - > For grammar tests:
 - Ratio of participants who changed levels or sub-levels across and between proficiencies
 - Pair samples T-tests to observe differences in scores.
 - > For associations between grammar development and Spanish use
 - Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients

Results: Grammar test

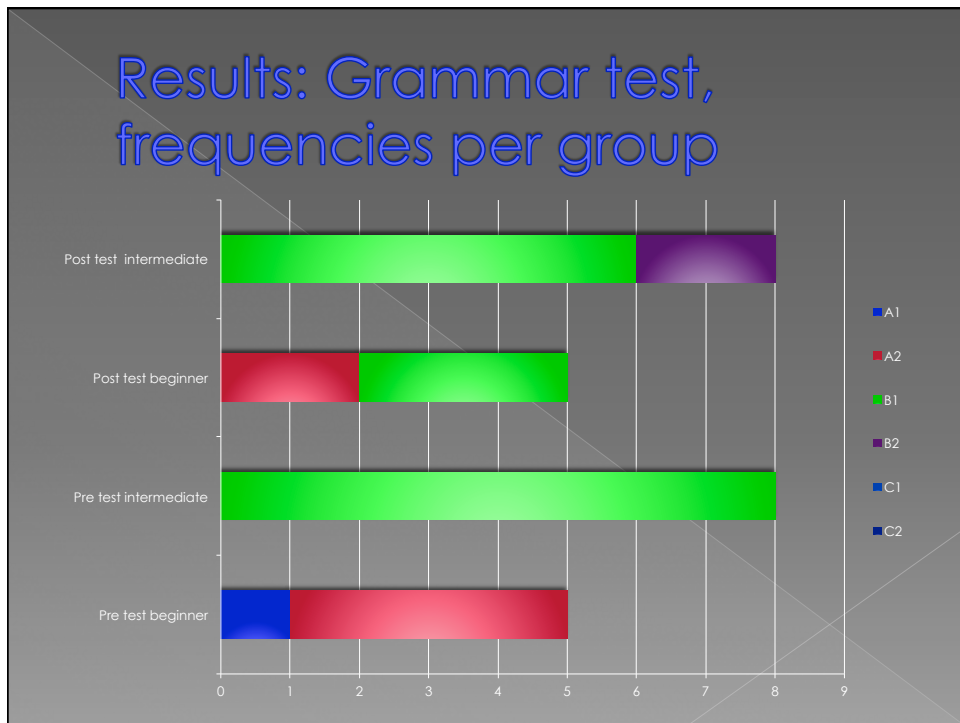
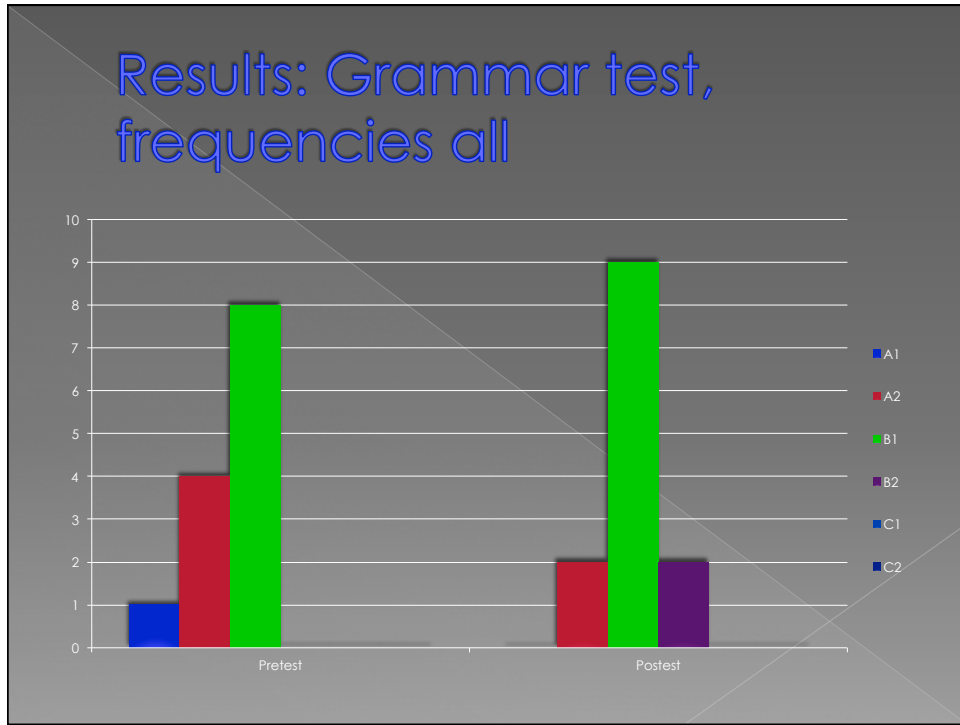
- 4 out of 5 beginners went up one sublevel, 1 of them stayed in the same sublevel.
- 2 out of 8 intermediate went up one sublevel, 6 stayed in the same sublevel.
- Of all, only 3 went from one level to the next (all of them beginners)

Results: Grammar test

- There was a significant difference in the scores for pretests $M=31.08$, $SD=11.29$ and post-test, $M=40.15$, $SD=7.59$; $t(12)=-5.08$, $p=.000$ across groups
- There was a significant difference in the scores of the pretests $M = 18.40$, $SD = 3.2$ and post-test, $M = 33.20$, $SD= 5.54$; $t(4)= -6.94$, $p = .002$ for the beginners
- There was a significant difference in the scores of the pretest $M = 39$, $SD= 5.12$ and post-tests, $M=44$, $SD = 44.50$; $t(7) = -3.47$, $p=.01$ for the intermediate group

Results: Grammar test

It seems that beginner-level participants experience greater grammar development than intermediate-level participants. The average difference between pre and post-test was 5.5 points for intermediate participants and 14.5 points for beginners.



Results: LCP

| Participants | Total hours per week using Spanish outside of class | | Total hours per week having extended conversations with the host family | |
|---------------|---|-------|---|-------|
| | M | SD | M | SD |
| Beginners | 61.7 | 36.31 | 19 | 12.15 |
| Intermediates | 48.88 | 22.26 | 13.62 | 8.86 |
| All | 53.81 | 27.76 | 15.69 | 10.71 |

Results: LCP

| Participants | Total hours per week overall Spanish use | | Total hours per week overall English use (exc. listening) | |
|---------------|--|-------|---|-------|
| | M | SD | M | SD |
| Beginners | 61.7 | 36.31 | 36 | 29.64 |
| Intermediates | 48.88 | 22.26 | 34.81 | 14.58 |
| All | 53.81 | 27.76 | 34.94 | 18.97 |

Results: Grammar development and L2 use

- There was no significant correlation between hours of Spanish use outside of class and gains in grammar development across groups (but it appears that with a greater sample, test scores would be significantly positively associated with both Spanish use, $r = .324$, $n = 13$, $p = .280$ and extended conversations with the host family, $r = .346$, $n = 13$, $p = .248$)
- There was a positively correlation between hours of extended conversation with host families and gains in grammar development for beginners, $r = .916$, $n = 5$, $p = .02$
- No other correlations were found.

Discussion

Does learning Spanish in a SA for 10 weeks result in grammar development as measured by placement test?

- Yes. In addition to the evidence given by the placement test, the difference in grammar gains was above chance.
 - > SA linguistic experience had a positive impact in grammar development.

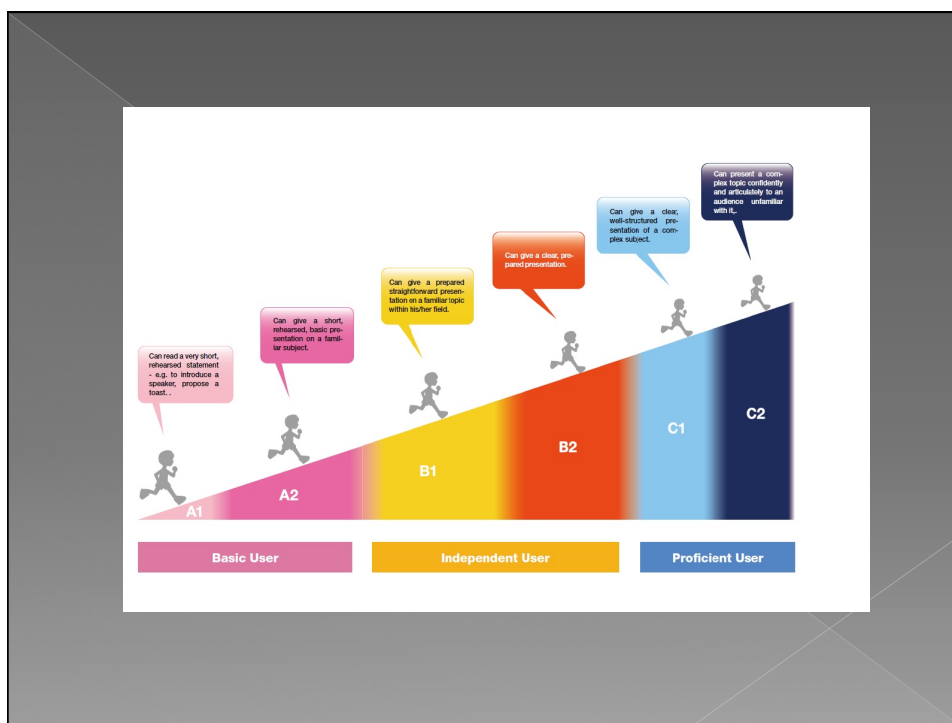
Discussion

Does proficiency level play a role in grammar development?

- Beginner-level participants experienced greater grammar development than intermediate-level participants.
 - > The number of guided teaching hours needed to fulfill the aims of each of the CEFR levels, according to the Language Testers of Europe.
 - > Intermediate-level participants need more time to progress in grammatical development.

| | |
|-----------|-----------------------------------|
| A1 | Approximately 90 - 100 hours |
| A2 | Approximately 180 - 200 hours |
| B1 | Approximately 350 - 400 hours |
| B2 | Approximately 500 - 600 hours |
| C1 | Approximately 700 - 800 hours |
| C2 | Approximately 1,000 - 1,200 hours |

Teacher's Guide to the Common European Framework (2001). Pearson Longman.



Discussion

To what extent is the amount of input and interaction associated with grammar development?

- No relationship was found except for beginner learners and extended conversations with families.
 - > Grammar development at intermediate levels may not be greatly impacted by input and interaction where the focus is on meaning and communication (see Isabelli-García, 2010).
 - > The grammar aspects generally found in conversations may be the ones that are processed and acquired by beginners because of its high communicative value, salience, frequency.
 - > Grammar development at higher levels may have a stronger association with the amount of instruction rather than with Spanish use.
 - > Beginner participants spent more time in conversations with families.
 - > Small sample size

Conclusions

- It seems that SA does positively impact grammar development.
- It seems that it has more impact on beginners than on intermediate level students, but we need to consider the type of grammar that is required to be acquired in order to advance from one intermediate level to the next.
- The acquisition of certain grammatical features –those that distinguish low intermediates from higher level students- may not be affected by input and interaction of the type found in SA encounters where one can have successful communication with little attention to form.

Conclusions

More research needs to be done in the area of grammar development in SA that help us better understand its nature and the factors that affect it. This will help instructors and program directors in the creation of an effective and realistic language curriculum in SA that really helps learners in the development of their L2 grammar.

Thank you!

Claudia Fernández
cfernand@knox.edu