

"Studying Abroad: Do You Really Learn To Speak The Language Better?"

David Allen Foltz

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

This project was undertaken in an effort to evaluate and tailor our study abroad programs in the Spanish Department of Indiana University of Pennsylvania in order to maximize the potential gain the student participants might expect from living and studying abroad.¹

Many of us believe that living and studying a foreign language abroad is the most effective way of acquiring competency in a second language. Although the focus on skill development in recent years has altered the way foreign language classes are being taught, most of us still hold to the perception that a summer or semester of language study in a host country will produce an astounding degree of progress in comparison to what can be accomplished in our classrooms, a perception that harks back to 1967 when John Carroll published the results of his study of college seniors who studied language abroad (Carroll, 1967). Stephen Krashen has written about the futility of traditional classroom learning which is characterized by non-contextual input and confrontational encounters; whereas the overseas experience provides constant, non-confrontational learning environments with correspondingly high contextual input for the learner (Krashen, 1985). We assume that immersion in the linguistic culture of the target language provides the learner with round-the-clock contextual inputs which the learner may internalize more naturally.

Over the last several years, professional interest on this question has heightened. In 1991, two articles appeared in the MLA publication, *ADFL Bulletin* (Association of Departments of Foreign Languages) reporting on research concerning studies overseas (ADFL 22, 2 and 3). Margo Milleret reports on the "Gain in Oral Proficiency from Summer Foreign Study in Brazil" (39-43). And Robert Dekeyser reports on 12 case studies of two groups of students in Spanish, one studying in Spain, the other studying at the home university (43).

I have undertaken to report on the progress in second language acquisition of two groups of students—one living and studying in Spain for five months, the other, students who studied Spanish on campus for about the same period of time. Although the findings are not surprising (the

progress made by the Spain group was significantly higher than that of the on-campus group), we find some correlations among several of the variables that may prove helpful in assessing the quality of both our on- and off-campus language programs.

METHOD

To determine the effectiveness of a study abroad program on second language oral acquisition, I designed a comparative study of two groups. All of the students who participated in this study had already met the two-year distribution requirement in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. One group, the experimental group, consisted of two sets of Spanish students who studied in Valladolid, Spain, under the auspices of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) Spanish and Classical Language Department. One set of 20 students (we will call them Experimental (E) Group, although their experience was in no way shaped by any experimental controls) lived in Valladolid from January through May, 1990 (approximately 17 weeks, with a total of 3 weeks vacation from class). The other set of 24 students lived there during the same period in 1991. For the purposes of this study both sets (1990 and 1991) are considered as one group, although there were some significant and interesting differences between the two sets. They lived in groups of 2 with Spanish families in Valladolid and carried out their academic and social lives entirely in Spain for the duration of the program. The second group of 20 (for our purposes we call it the Control (C) Group) stayed on campus and studied Spanish during the same period from January to May, 1991 (the semester at home is 14 weeks long). We tried to match the two groups as closely as possible in terms of GPA, apparent interest in studying Spanish, and level of entry into the program. At the outset, my colleague, Dr. Eileen Glisan from IUPUI and I, both ACTFL certified raters of oral proficiency in Spanish, evaluated the pre-program oral proficiency of each student. A standardized achievement test in Spanish grammar was also administered to each subject as a pre-program assessment of knowledge of grammar. The instrument for testing was the ETS-MLA Cooperative Spanish Writing Test (the MA form). Then in May, at the end of the semester, we administered a post-program oral proficiency test and a post-program grammar test (the MB form) to all on-campus participants. Immediately thereafter, I traveled to Spain to give the same post tests to the Valladolid group. In the analysis of the data collected, I quantified the results in the following manner. Using the ACTFL scale for oral proficiency, we arbitrarily assigned numbers to the proficiency levels:

Novice Low:	0
Novice Mid:	0.5
Novice High:	1
Intermediate Low:	2
Intermediate Mid:	2.5
Intermediate High:	3
Advanced:	4
Advanced Plus:	5
Superior:	6

Although arbitrary, the numbers reflect the realities of oral proficiency as defined by the ACTFL Guidelines. Within the Novice and Intermediate ranges, the incremental advancement from Low to High is represented by an increase of one unit with the Mid-level representing a half-unit. Crossing a threshold represented by an increase of one unit, as is the move from Advanced to Advanced Plus, denoting the relative difficulty of moving across a threshold and similarly the move toward a Superior level of proficiency. We assigned a 2-unit increment from Advanced to Superior although there were no Superior Level speakers in our sample. We used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program to tabulate the data. After matching the mean GPA for each group, we tabulated the mean scores on the pre-OPI and the pre-grammar test and compared them with the mean scores of the post-OPI and the post-grammar tests. We also tabulated the differences between the pre-and post-scores; that is, we measured the progress each group made in oral proficiency and in their knowledge of grammar during their period of study. Using the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) system, we measured the outcome of each group while controlling for GPA, the Pre-Grammar score, and the Post-Grammar score. We gave the class of '91 in Valladolid a questionnaire with which we attempted to determine to what extent students actually used Spanish outside of the classroom and under what circumstances.

FINDINGS

The following facts are gleaned from the analysis of the data collected:

Experimental Group (Valladolid)	Control Group (On-campus)
Participants: (Admissible)	
Females: 28	14
Males: 7	3

STUDYING ABROAD

Admissible participants are only those who submitted to both the pre and post-tests of either or both oral and grammar. For a variety of reasons, a few students did not meet their appointments for the OPI or did not take one of the grammar achievement tests and therefore are not included in the group sample.

Mean GPA	(E Group) 3.06	(C Group) 2.98
----------	----------------	----------------

A difference of .08 or one point on GPA with a 5% margin of probability. The average GPA for all students at the university (IUP) is 2.92². All participants are Spanish majors or minors (up to 48 sh required for a major, 12 for a minor).

All the students in E Group were enrolled in an Advanced Spanish Grammar class (5 sh) and in a conversation class (5 sh). They also attended mini-lectures given in Spanish on Spanish history, art, and literature one hour each day (8 sh). All participants in the C Group were currently enrolled in Advanced Spanish grammar (3 semester hours). Some students in the C Group were also enrolled in Spanish conversation or Spanish literature (3 sh) or literature and culture course (3 sh).

At the time they entered their respective programs of study, the two groups were nearly matched on both their knowledge of grammar and their oral proficiency. "E" group on the grammar achievement test had a mean score of 168.9 (s.d.= 7.5) while "C" Group had a mean score of 166 (s.d.= 5.6) ($t= 1.31(46)$; n.s.). On the Pre-OPI scores, E Group achieved a mean score of 2.6 (s.d.= .599) (Intermediate Mid). C Group had a mean score of 2.3 (s.d.= .694) (slightly lower than Intermediate Mid). The difference between these scores is not statistically significant ($t=1.79(53)$; n.s.).

At the end of the period of study, E Group achieved a median score on the Grammar test of 175.12 (s.d.=4.65), moving up an average of 6.2 points. This means the overseas group made significant progress in the knowledge of grammar, moving up on ETS-MLA scale of Converted Score almost 7 points, putting them into the 80th percentile. The C Group achieved a median score on the post-Grammar test of 168.6 (s.d.= 5.2) moving up slightly less than 2 points (1.8). On the same ETS-MLA scale, progression of only 2 points is insignificant and does not represent a change in the percentile ranking.

On Oral Proficiency similar evidence of progress occurred. The E Group achieved a median score on the OP Interview of 3.5 (between Intermediate High and Advanced), moving up nearly one whole step, while the C Group achieved a median score on the OP Interview of 2.8 (slightly higher than Intermediate Mid), moving up only slightly. That is, the E Group made sta

tistically significant progress in terms of their oral communicative skills while the C Group only made slight progress in these same skills.

We also tabulated the progress in oral proficiency skills within each range for both groups. The following chart shows the exit-level (post-test) scores as a function of the entry-level (pre-test) scores.

E-Group (Valladolid)

POST-OP SCORES	Novice High	Inter- Low	Inter- Mid	Inter- High	Advance	Row Totl
Inter-M Number %Column %TotalGroup		3 42.9% 8.3%	1 6.3% 2.8%			4 11.1%
Inter-H Number % Column %Total Group	1 100.0	2 28.6% 5.6%	7 43.8% 19.4%	2 22.2% 5.6%		12 33.3%
Advanced Number % Column % Total Group		2 28.6% 5.6%	8 42.1% 50%	7 77.8% 19.4%	2 66.7% 5.6%	19 52.8%
Advanced Plus Number % Column % Total Group					1 33.3% 2.8%	1 2.8%
Total: % of Total Group	1 2.8%	7 19.4%	16 44.4%	9 25.0%	3 8.3%	36 100%

C-Group (On Campus)

POST-OP SCORES	Novice High	Inter- Low	Inter- Mid	Inter- High	Advance	Row Totl
Inter-L Number % Column % Total Group		2 100% 12.5%	1 20% 6.3%			3 18.8%
Inter-M Number % Column %Total Group		3 60% 18.8%	3 60% 18.8%			6 37.6%
Inter-H Number % Column % Total Group			1 20% 6.3%	3 100% 18.8%		4 25%
Advanced Number % Column % Total Group		1 20% 6.3%	1 20% 6.3%		1 100% 6.3%	3 18.8%
Advanced Plus Number % Column %Total Group						0
Total: % of Total Group	2 12.5%	5 31.3%	5 31.3%	3 18.8%	1 6.3%	16 100%

The sample size being different for the two groups, the percentage differences do not relate. Nevertheless, the charts show clearly that the two groups were about matched when they went into their respective study programs. The majority of the participants in both groups were Intermediate Level speakers at the outset. At the end of the program, the majority of

the E Group had achieved Advanced ranking (53%) on Oral Proficiency while the majority of the C Group were still in the Intermediate Level, although there is a clear indication of improvement. While 62% of the C Group were at Intermediate Low or Mid at the beginning, 62% of the same Group were either Intermediate Mid or High at the end.

The *ACTFL Proficiency Testing Manual for Oral Proficiency* carefully defines the border between levels (Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior) (ETS 33). The border represents a major breakthrough in oral competency, at every level, a threshold through which advancement signals significant improvement in communicative skills over the lower level. We examined how many people crossed over into a higher level during the 4 months of their language study. It is interesting to note that of the 41 students who studied in Valladolid in either '90 or '91, 17 of them (41.5%) crossed a threshold, most from Intermediate to Advanced. Of the 16 students who stayed on campus, only 3 of them (18%) crossed a threshold.

On the chart we can see that in the E-Group, 1 Novice High moved to Intermediate-Mid, 2 Intermediate-Low people moved into Advanced; 8 Intermediate-Mid speakers crossed into Advanced; 7 Intermediate-High speakers moved to Advanced, and no Advanced speaker moved to Superior, although 1 did progress to Advanced Plus. These people represent 50% of the entire E-Group.

In the C-Group, the results are far less impressive; there were only 3 students out of the 16 in the Control Group who moved across a border: 2 from Novice to Intermediate Low, and 1 from Intermediate Mid to Advanced. This latter student may have had an off-day in the pre-interview. She is generally a very conscientious junior-year Spanish major who has done well in all of her Spanish classes.

Are there any predictors for significant progress in oral proficiency? If we hold all the other variables constant, is it possible to isolate any one variable that might be an indicator of probable success? For example, in our sample, we can say that GPA is not a predictor of success for either the E or the C Group. We performed a MANOVA procedure (Multiple Analysis of Variables) for each group and for the groups collectively, using all of the variables as possible co-determinants of outcome. A correlation ($0.5 <$) is insignificant while correlations of ($0.5 >$) indicate a moderate significance. ($0.75 >$) indicates a strong significance. The variables we can test for significance are 1) the PreWriting Score, 2) the PostWriting Score, 3) the PreOPI Score, 4) the Difference between PreWriting and PostWriting Scores (progress in grammar), 5) the Difference between the Pre-OPI and the Post-OPI Scores (progress in oral proficiency). The table for this test may be found in the endnotes.³ The correlation between the PreWrite (Grammar) score and the PostWrite (Grammar) score is moderately signifi-

cant. This means that the pre-test score in grammar is a moderately accurate predictor of the post-test score in grammar. It does not tell us whether a low score in grammar on the pre-test predicts a high score on the post-test; it just says that a given score on the pre-test will most likely produce a given score on the post-test. If we look at the Pre-Write test score in relation to the Difference in Writing (progress), we find again that the Pre-Write Grammar Score is a moderately strong indicator of Progress. We can see that the Pre-Write, the Post-Write, and the Pre-OPI scores are all significant co-variables with the Post-OPI scores, although only the Post-writing score is the best predictor of success in oral proficiency. This correlation is most significant at the Advanced level, a fact that validates the ACTFL OPI rating standard at the Advanced level as stated in the *ETS Oral Proficiency Testing Manual*: "The examinee has enough control of the language to be able to join sentences in limited discourse. Good control of the morphology of the language (in inflected languages), and of the most frequently used syntactical structures" (35). As one would expect, people starting at the lower levels in Oral Proficiency tend to make the most progress, whereas people starting at the Advanced Level or higher make less progress. (My test samples of Advanced level participants are small, too small to generate significant data.)

DISCUSSION

As we expected, the students studying overseas made significantly more progress in their oral competency and in grammar knowledge than their counterparts who stayed home. The groups were matched as closely as possible in terms of their GPA, the entry level into the project, the courses they studied, their major, and their year in college, leaving the most significant variable the fact that the E-Group studied Spanish in Spain. While it is true that the E-Group studied Spanish for approximately 3 hours a day, 3 days a week, for 14 weeks, and the C-Group students were in class 1 or 2 hours a day for 14 weeks, this is a variable over which we had no control. On average, the students studying in Spanish moved ahead in their oral skills by one whole step; that is, either from Intermediate Low to Intermediate High, or across a threshold from Intermediate to Advanced. The On-campus group on average progressed less than a half-step, that is, from Intermediate Low to less than Intermediate Mid. Since the number of students entering the study at the 2 (Advanced Level) was insignificant, we cannot report on data that might have been generated at the upper levels of oral proficiency. However, it is reasonable to assume that among the overseas group we would have run up against the "Terminal Advanced-Plus" phenomenon reported by Judith Liskin-Gasparro⁴ in the survey of Middlebury College language students who studied overseas

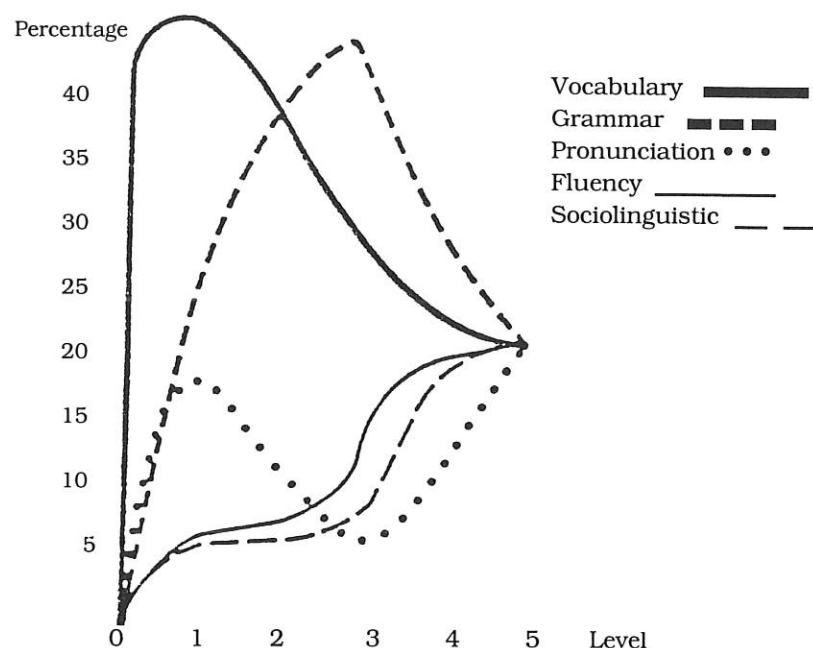
for a year, many of whom were unable to breakthrough the Advanced/Superior threshold.

This study suggests that the most reliable predictors of oral proficiency at the end of a course of study are 1) the entry level in oral proficiency and in grammar and 2) knowledge of grammar at the end of the period of study. The relatively high correspondence between oral proficiency and knowledge of grammar at the higher proficiency levels is predictable.

The *ETS Oral Proficiency Testing Manual* (Liskin-Gasparro 31), reproduces the "Model of Relative Contribution of Language Factors," (Clifford and Higgs). This study indicates five linguistic aspects that contribute to speech: vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and the sociolinguistic factor. Vocabulary ascends astronomically in contribution at the Novice Level, but flattens out at the Intermediate Level where grammar begins to ascend rapidly. At the border between Intermediate and Advanced, these two factors cross over, vocabulary being on the decline as grammar increases. At the Superior Level, grammar peaks in its relative contribution and as speech proficiency progresses toward the 5 level (native quality), all five aspects contribute 20%, or an equal amount to the overall speech performance.

These relationships are depicted in the figure below:

Relative Contribution Model



Note: This hypothesized model is most applicable to Indo-European languages.

There are many questions that our study generates. We beg the question, why don't students studying second language at home, on our campus, make larger gains? I suppose every language teacher constantly tries to answer that question by modifying teaching technique and improving teaching skill. Certainly, one of the contributing factors to low performance in our classroom is attitudinal. Even for people majoring or minoring in the language, the study of grammar or conversational skills seems like just another course, one more to get through on the road to earning that all important degree.

Why does study abroad make such a big difference in developing communicative skills? Robert DeKeyser reports on a number of the contributing factors such as: the linguistic environment in which the student is immersed, the constant need to communicate in the target language, the interaction with multiple native speakers, abundant opportunities to put language theory into practice, frequent occasions to focus on form, vocabulary learning in a natural context—none of which are consistently present in the typical American classroom (47).

There are other reasons, too, psycholinguistic reasons, having to do with individual differences in motivation and proclivity for talking with people. To get at some of these factors, I asked all of the participants in the 1991 Valladolid group to fill out a questionnaire in which I attempted to quantify their language learning experience outside of the classroom. I asked them to estimate the time spent in several activities that serious students of a language might be involved in: 1) percentage of waking hours spent outside of class speaking Spanish; 2) time spent talking with members of their family; 3) time spent talking with other Spaniards; 4) the time spent per week reading newspapers and magazines; 5) the number of hours per day watching TV. Matching the responses in the questionnaire to the progress made in oral proficiency over the semester abroad, one might expect to see some kind of relationship between the individual's willingness to contribute time and effort in the foreign country and the linguistic outcome.

The questionnaire yielded the following information. Out of 21 students who responded completely to the questionnaire, 16 (72%) said they spoke in Spanish more than 50% of the time. 5 of them (23%) said they spoke in Spanish 75% or more of their waking hours. Only 6 students estimated speaking Spanish 25% or less of their waking hours. Regarding their estimate of time spent talking with family members, 64% estimated speaking "often" or at "every opportunity." 36% said they engaged their families in conversation occasionally or almost never. Similarly, 76% said they spoke with other Spaniards more than an hour a day, on average, while 24% admitted they spoke less than one hour per day with other Spaniards. The

implication here is that while they were not speaking Spanish they were probably speaking English among their friends. To the question, "How often did you read Spanish newspapers or magazines?" 22% said 3 times a week or more, 64% said once a week, and 13% (3 people) said never. The relatively few number of participants who read newspapers at least 3 times a week may be owing to the tendency of young people today not to read and not to interest themselves in the news of the day.

Finally, regarding TV watching, I supposed that the majority of the students would have watched a fair amount of TV. In fact, about half of the group (46%) watched TV more than one hour a day, and 55% watched less than half an hour a day. This may be owing to the general perception among students that Spanish TV is not worth watching, with only three national channels at that time.

If you sum up all these responses to calculate the total estimated time people spent speaking and/or listening to Spanish outside of the classroom, one can define a range of response—from many hours a day to few hours a day. Five students (5) estimated speaking about half of their waking hours. Four students estimated speaking most of the time. The others said they spoke less than half of the time. When we correlate these responses with the progress in oral proficiency made among the group members over the course of the 5 months, the best we can say about this possible causal relationship is that there is a tendency toward progress in speech and the amount of time spent speaking Spanish outside of class. The correlation is not statistically significant (.6663 Significance). Yet of the 14 students who improved by at least a whole step on the ACTFL scale, 68% stated they spoke Spanish with others at least 50% of their waking hours, which is a significant variable.

CONCLUSIONS

This study tries to measure the factors that contribute to second-language acquisition in an overseas context. It is clear that compared to studying the same material at home on campus, studying abroad produces far greater gains in speaking skill. Although these findings are not surprising, we are able to say with some degree of certainty what factors contribute to the gain. The most significant factors are the entry level—the lower levels produce more gain than high entry levels. Another factor is achievement in grammar. One would not expect acquisition of an Advanced Level of oral proficiency without a substantial control of structural components. It should be noted that the testing procedure used in the study may not be reliable. Testing for control in grammar on a written test (such as the MLA-ETS test) does not necessarily test for grammar control in oral performance. But there is a significant cross-over from the written

to the oral performance as indicated by this study. Finally, the student's proclivity (or lack of same) to take advantage of the opportunities to use the target language during the day's activities tends to contribute to the gain achieved.

We need now to consider modifications to our overseas programs, if not to our on-campus programs, that will lead to even greater gains to be expected from our students. This study shows the need in our IUP program to strengthen the advanced grammar course to enable Intermediate-High students to develop better control of verb morphology and usage necessary at the Advanced Level. We need to enhance the opportunities for students to speak outside of the classroom in a semi-structured setting. While the advantages of living and studying abroad exceed the gain in language skills, we as teachers and administrators of overseas programs are accountable to our schools, to the parents of our students, and to our students themselves. As the cost of travel/study abroad continues to mount, we must continue to evaluate our overseas programs in terms of the value received. As more studies of this sort become available, we will know increasingly well how to tailor our programs so as to realize the maximum outcome for the resources expended in the process.

• NOTES

1. I am deeply indebted to the IUP University Senate Research Grant program for funding the project, and to my colleagues, Dr. Eileen Glisan and Dr. Edward Gondolf. Eileen generously gave many hours of her valuable time in interviewing students participating in the project, making and giving pre-and post-Oral Proficiency Interviews to some 60 students. Dr. Edward Gondolf, Professor of Sociology at IUPUI, similarly gave generously of his expertise and assistance in doing the statistical analysis of the data collected.
2. The median grade average at IUP of 2.92 was calculated by the Associate Provost for the year 1990-1991 for Main Campus undergraduate students, about 12,000, who were matriculated as full and part-time students.

3. MANOVA TESTING FOR SIGNIFICANT CO-VARIABLES

Correlations:	PREW	POSTW	PREOPI	POSTOPI	GPA	DIFW	DIFOPI
PREW	1.0000	.5858	.4492	.5187	.2386	-.6511	.1286
PSTW	.5858	1.000	.3557	.6760	.3547	.2327	.4010
PREOPI	.4492	.3557	1.000	.5689	.3405	-.2058	-.3542
POSTOPI	.5187	.6760	.5689	1.0000	.3325	.0108	.5498
GPA	.2386	.3547	.3405	.3325	1.000	.0459	.0291
DIFW(progress)	.6511	.2337	-.2058	.0108	.0459	1.000	.2212
DIFOPI							
(progress)	.1286	.4010	-.3742	.5498	.0291	.2212	1.000

Eliminating all the insignificant co-variables, we are left with the following positive correlations:

MANOVA TESTING FOR SIGNIFICANT CO-VARIABLES
(SIGNIFICANT CO-VARIABLES)

Correlations:	PREW	POSTW	PREOPI	POSTOPI	GPA	DIFW	DIFOPI
PREW		.5858		.5187			
POST W	.5858			.6760			
PREOPI				.5689			
POST OPI	.5187	.6760	.5689				
GPA							
DIFW(progress)	.6511						
DIFOPI							
(progress)				.5498			

4. Judith Liskin-Gasparro reported this information to me by phone in February, 1991 shortly after completing the assessment of oral proficiency among the students participating in the Study in Madrid program.

• WORKS CITED

- Carroll, John. "Foreign Language Proficiency Levels Attained by Language Majors near Graduation from College," *Foreign Language Annuals* 1.1 (1967): 131-151.
- DeKeyser, Robert. "The Semester Overseas: What Difference Does It Make?" *ADFL Bulletin* 22.2 (Winter 1991): 42-48.
- Higgs, Theodore V. and Ray Clifford, "The Push Toward Communication." *Curricu-*

- lum, Competence, and the Foreign Language Teacher*, v. 13, ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series. Ed. Theodore V. Higgs. Skokie, IL: National Textbook Co. 1982: 57-79.
- Krashen, Stephen D. *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. London: Longman, 1985.
- Liskin-Gasparro, Judith E. ed. *ETS Oral Proficiency Testing Manual*. Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1982.
- _____. Telephone interview, March 1, 1991.
- Milleret, Margo. "Assessing the Gain in Oral Proficiency From Summer Foreign Study." *ADFL Bulletin* 22.3 (Spring 1991): 39-43.