# "Studying Spanish Abroad: Does It Really Make a Difference?"

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## Introduction

It is widely believed that study abroad programs offer a setting that provides greater motivation and opportunity for language learning, and thus are more successful in developing language skills in students than traditional classroom instruction. Foreign language instructors tend to be the most vocal supporters of study abroad across campuses, and many students take the opportunity to study in a foreign country for varying time periods with the conviction that they will become better speakers of the language. Relatively limited research has been done, however, on the language gains among study abroad students, or on the linguistic effectiveness of participation in these programs. Among the different aspects of language learning abroad that have been considered are vocabulary development (Milton and Meara), listening comprehension (Kaplan), and reading and grammar (Diller and Markert). Not surprisingly, studies affirm that "...periods abroad have a positive effect on language skills" (Milton 18) (see also Carroll, Dyson, and Kalivoda), with some researchers asserting that the oral proficiency of students studying abroad is superior to those studying at home (Magnan) and that returning students are able to access upper-division courses easily (Graham).

The excellent collection of articles in *Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad Context* (1995), edited by Barbara Freed, makes a major contribution by providing more specific studies in this area. As Freed observes in the introduction: "The findings reported here add new empirical support to the long-held popular belief in the power of the study abroad experience to convert neophyte language learners into 'fluent' speakers of a second language" (26). Yet, as Freed herself recognizes in the conclusion, many facets of language learning during the study abroad experience either have received no more than minimal consideration or remain unexplored. Further investigation is necessary to determine more conclusively whether the study abroad experience automatically entails progress in students' communicative abilities and if so, to examine the nature of that progress.





Comparative studies can tell practitioners more about the connections between the communicative activities in the classroom, the quality of input that students abroad receive, and the linguistic progress of students in these two settings. Our study attempted to determine if there was an increase in students' ability to express themselves after studying abroad and compare their performance with students who were on the home campus. We have proceeded from the same pedagogical perspective of classes where communication in the target language is the principal objective of the activities engaged in; although grammatical and syntactical accuracy clearly contribute to communication, they may take on a complementary role. As M. Peter Hagiwara notes, the current emphasis on communicative competence in the classroom has resulted in "...contextualization of exercises, less grammar for grammar's sake, and a higher tolerance of learner errors" (30). The language gains that occur in study abroad programs can be observed not only in a student's progress in using correct grammatical constructions or more complex structures, but also (and we would argue, perhaps more so) in his or her ability to communicate more readily. Indeed, in a review of study abroad research, Thom Huebner discusses mixed results in improvement, observing that "[f]or intermediate and advanced students, the sojourn abroad may not greatly affect certain structural elements" (205), and citing Robert DeKeyser's 1986 study results, which found no difference in the ability of intermediate Spanish students to use the subjunctive correctly after study abroad when compared with others who remained on campus.

A number of studies have used the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) oral proficiency interview (OPI) to examine linguistic changes in study abroad participants, citing it as the best instrument for measuring a student's "oral skills" (Brecht et al., Freed, Gordon). Margo Milleret points to the following advantages of the OPI: "[it] measures global languages skills, as opposed to language achievement, and conforms more closely to commu-

nicative pedagogy" (39). However, precisely because the OPI measures global development in the language, including grammatical competence, it may not account for improvement in the ability to communicate at a very basic level. As Hagiwara indicates, "[r]esearchers...have also criticized the emphasis on grammatical accuracy placed by the PGs [proficiency guidelines] and OPI in the early developmental stages of communicative competence" (31). Indeed, Milleret recognizes that the OPI is less effective for evaluating gains after short-term study abroad. The interview is clearly better suited to measure changes in oral proficiency skills in periods of six months or longer, rather than in shorter periods, like those of summer or semester programs.

Furthermore, Milleret and others have remarked on the OPI's limitations in measuring the progress of advanced students. Some researchers have suggested that the nature of the OPI interview results in an apparently lower level of improvement in advanced study abroad students: "That is, students who know less can show gains more easily than can students who know more and must make more complex improvements in their skills" (Milleret 41). Milleret refers to questions that Barbara Freed raises about the OPI's effectiveness in this respect in Freed's comparison of the fluency of study abroad students with those at the same level on the home campus. In this study, it is only after removing students with a very high score in the preliminary fluency ratings that some improvement among the advanced study abroad students is evident.

Instead of using the OPI or a similar assessment tool, we chose to use a very specific measure: the amount of Spanish students could produce in two timed exercises. In Freed's study, the amount and rate of speech are among the features considered in judging fluency. Freed refers to Rosali Ejzenberg's earlier work on fluency, saying "...Ejzenberg showed that high-fluency speakers tend to speak both more and faster than low fluency speakers, with speech rate emerging as the more salient feature in distinguishing between the two groups" (qtd. in Freed, "What Makes Us Think": 127). In fact, of all the "factors of fluency" Freed studies, "[r]ate of speech is the only fluency feature which yields a significant difference between the At Home and Abroad groups....students who had spent a semester abroad spoke both more, and at a significantly faster rate than did those whose learning had been restricted to the language learning classroom at home" (137). Barbara A. Lafford also includes a word



count among the features that she considers in a comparison of communicative strategies of intermediate students abroad and those on campus. In a role-play exercise following a semester in either Mexico or Spain students scored 67% higher than their counterparts in the USA. The results of these two studies suggest that collecting samples of language production from larger numbers of students for comparison might well provide more conclusive data.

**Methodology**

We collected taped samples of language production from students in Spanish classes at the University of Kentucky (UK) during two semesters, and from participants in the Kentucky Institute for International Studies (KIIS) program in Segovia, Spain, during the spring semester and five-week summer session of 1999.[1] A total of fifty-five students with proficiency levels ranging from beginner to advanced participated in the study.

The KIIS Spain semester program enrolls approximately twenty students every spring who either take a variety of courses in Spanish or combine two humanities classes in English with intensive Spanish. The summer program usually has 34 participants who take one or two courses in Spanish. Students must have two years of college Spanish prior to participating. Both programs offer home stays and excursions, in addition to the coursework.

Based on the conversation class they were taking, we grouped students as either beginning, intermediate or advanced. These levels do not correspond with the ACTFL proficiency levels. As would be expected in any class on campus, there was a mixture of levels in the intermediate and advanced groups. Participation in the study was voluntary and not connected to the grades assigned in any way. In order to evaluate the students' fluency in terms of amount of Spanish produced in a fixed time period, we collected two types of samples from both groups of participants. In the first exercise, students used sets of cards with prompts in English about various topics or situations in order to produce as much Spanish as possible during five minutes, changing cards to move on to another topic when they desired. The same cue cards were given to the corresponding levels on the UK campus and in Segovia. Cards at the beginning level asked students to talk about such topics as their best friend or daily activities. Typical tasks at the intermediate level included describing the activities of the previous weekend and com-

paring oneself to a friend or sibling. Advanced students were asked to provide more complex descriptions, as in the following example: "Describe your first job interview or another important interview you have had. Explain what the interview was for, when it took place, and what the weather was like. Also describe what you wore, how you felt, and what the interviewer was like. Explain what you talked about and what the results of the interview were." The second task involved looking at a picture briefly and talking about it for two minutes.[2] As Terry L. Ballman notes in an explanation of her use of a picture description to compare the monologue discourse of different groups, "[d]escribing pictures is a common activity in participatory foreign language teaching" (222). Students were told they could include anything from description to creative speculation about what was happening in this exercise. At least one of the researchers was present during both activities to give instructions and tape them. Participants understood that the researcher would not take part in the exercises.

After graduate assistants transcribed the audio recordings, we removed English words, including fillers such as uhm, gee, etc. and performed word counts on the transcriptions.[3] These word counts, or the data from the two tasks, have served as our basis for comparison of an aspect of fluency, that is, the ability to express oneself spontaneously on a variety of topics, without much direction or prompting, within a limited time period. The photo activity is especially open-ended, as students could choose to describe what they saw in great detail or be extremely creative, imagining possible story lines to go along with the scenes. The first exercise offers a good deal of freedom as well because the participants were able to switch cards at any time. They could complete part of the task on a given card, draw it out at length, or reject a task and move on. Students with lower scores, or less fluency, tended to switch cards more frequently, losing time in reading the prompt, thinking, rejecting a topic or talking only briefly about it. Long pauses or hesitation in both exercises resulted in a smaller word production, or a lower score. Susan Bacon uses a similar exercise in her investigation of students' development of structured and nonstructured topics. It is interesting to note that her analysis of the content of participants' language production shows more advanced students communicating more extensively on an unstructured topic, or when they had greater freedom in expressing themselves.



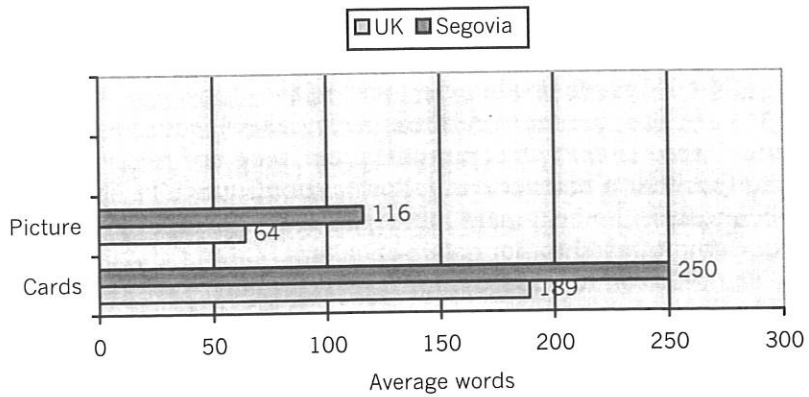
Since our interest was in the amount of Spanish produced, we have not analyzed grammatical structures or vocabulary in the samples. Although we did not consider the grammatical errors or content of the language produced as part of the study, it is important to emphasize that the tapes of these activities are completely intelligible and record acts of communication; they are descriptions and narratives that a listener can follow without difficulty. Not surprisingly, most of the beginners' tapes require a "sympathetic" listener, or one who is used to nonnative speakers.

During the summer program in Segovia, the free-speaking exercises were given to fourteen students at the beginning and at the end of the stay in order to measure progress in their ability to communicate. Likewise, the intermediate and advanced University of Kentucky participants were given the exercises at the beginning and end of the Fall 1999 semester. The intensive beginning UK class was tested only once, at the end of the semester. The entire semester study abroad group in Segovia (intensive beginners, intermediate, and advanced) also performed the exercise one time, two-thirds of the way through their stay.

**Findings**

Due to the limited number of beginners and intermediate students in the study abroad groups, we will focus here primarily on the advanced groups. The results for the other two groups, however, are worth noting. In the Segovia semester beginner group, 100% of the students produced from 200-299 words in the first exercise, while only two of the five on-campus students scored at this level.[4] The remaining three produced fewer words, with one of them producing fewer than 150. The picture activity had similar results. The Segovia beginners all had scores of more than 80 words, with two of them above the 100 word mark. All of the UK students scored below 80, and two of them had considerably lower scores of 47 and 48. The average for the study abroad students was nearly twice as many words as their counterparts (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Beginners**



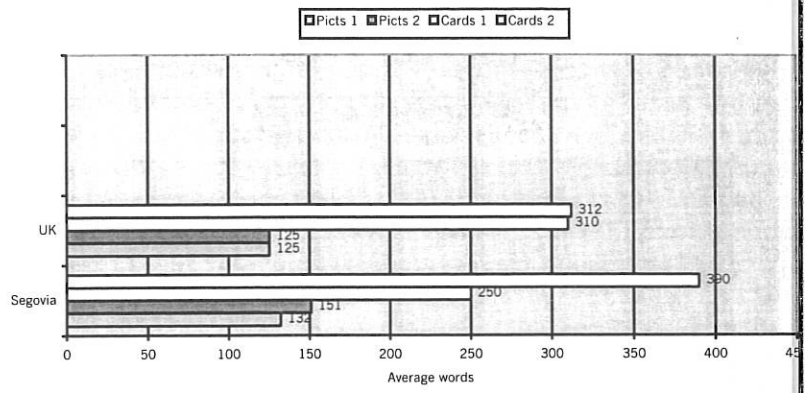

The results at the intermediate level also involve very small numbers, and provide limited data for comparison. There was only one intermediate student in the summer study abroad group, who was not enrolled in a conversation class. She improved her score by 53 more words during the second round with the cards. Of the five on campus students, three improved significantly, while one scored fewer words, and the fifth just one more word. Their average increase was 115 more words. This score is somewhat misleading, however, because one student who produced 147 more words (an increase that places him in the advanced group) is responsible for the dramatic increase in the group's average. If we remove his score, the average increase goes down to 27, or half of the study abroad student's increase. All of the participants showed an improvement in the picture activity; the study abroad student did somewhat better, with an improvement of 23 words, compared to the on-campus average gain of 18 words.

A comparison of the average for the advanced groups in both exercises is illuminating. There were ten students in both groups, although one of the study abroad students did not complete the picture activity. In the first round with the cards, the study abroad group scored 250 words, as compared to their counterparts' score of 310. Hence, the Segovia students on the average were starting well behind the on-campus students, in the early part of their study



abroad experience. Their improvement during the second round thus all the more significant, as they average a score of 390, or 14 more words, passing the UK students. The on-campus group, however, shows a very slight increase of only two words or an avera score of 312 words the second time. These results seem to demo strate that a dramatic increase in language production is possib even in a short-term study abroad program (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Advanced**



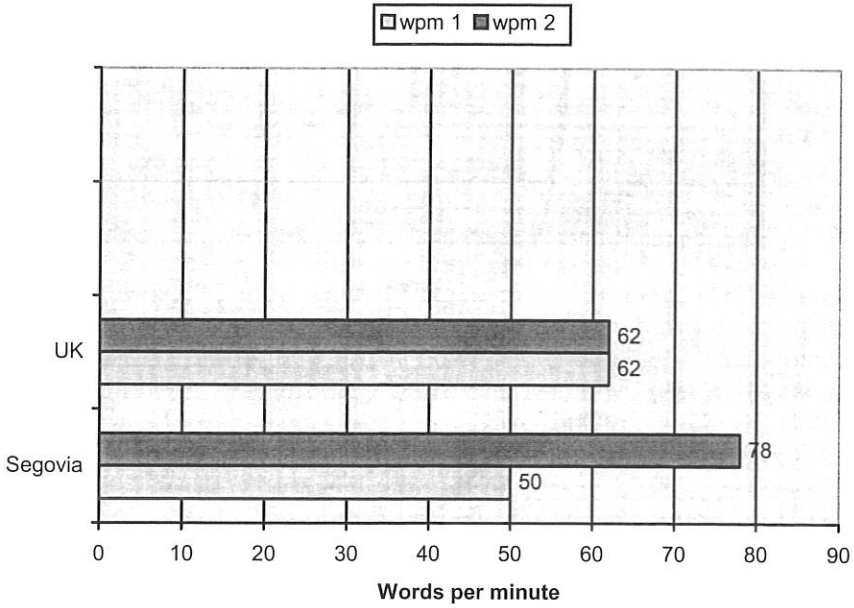

In looking at the performance of individuals, with the exception one student, all the advanced summer study abroad studen increased the number of words they produced in the exercise wi the cards. The average increase was 156 words in the seco round. Four on-campus students did more poorly on their seco round with the cards. They produced from 38 to 98 fewer word The average increase among the remaining students was only 4 Thus, the study abroad students as a group scored three times hig er on this exercise the second time.

The study abroad group's picture results show marked improv ment as well. Nobody scored under 91 words the second tim

whereas during the first round, two people did so. Six students produced more words and two students produced fewer words. The average improvement was 40 words. On campus, on the other hand, five students produced fewer words, from 2 to 42. Gains in this group were much less significant, with the average at only 21 words, or nearly half as many as their counterparts.

If we look at the average words per minute for the card exercise, the results are quite similar. Advanced summer program students scored an average of 50 words per minute during the first round and 78 the second—making a substantial gain—while the on-campus group remained constant at 62 words. Not only did the study abroad group produce more Spanish, they spoke at a faster rate, or with greater fluency (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Advanced wpm**




Since the fifteen students in the advanced semester study abroad group were only tested once, there is no comparative data to measure their improvement. Their average word production for the card activity, however, was 361—considerably better than the on-campus group's final score of 312. They fall behind the summer group's second score of 390, but had we been able to test them at the end of their stay (a month later), they would very likely have scored higher. In looking at the average words per minute, we find similar results. The semester group produces an average of 72 words, or ten more than the on-campus group, and 6 fewer than the summer study abroad students.



**Conclusions**

Our results indicate that significant improvement in an aspect of fluency at all levels, but especially at a more advanced level, does occur after study abroad and ought to be measured in ways other than with OPI interviews or similar assessment tools. Intuition and experience lead us to believe that these students make progress; indeed this is, as Milleret suggests, "...a commonly accepted tenet of foreign study: that better-prepared students—that is, those who have more time invested in learning the language—make more and better progress during a foreign-study experience" (41). Measuring the number of words produced in these exercises by advanced students in an on-campus course and those in a summer study abroad program, we have found that those who studied abroad not only showed improvement, but were able to communicate more than their counterparts in a fixed period of time.

A number of different elements might be considered in future studies or in replicating this study. Naturally a larger number of participants is desirable. We were limited to the study abroad groups to which we had access, especially to carry out the testing twice during the summer program. The number of cue cards a student uses in each round could be recorded in order to investigate if the use of fewer cards indicates an ability to develop ideas on one topic in greater depth, or greater fluency. Analysis of the transcriptions of the picture exercise might prove valuable in terms of a comparison of structures and vocabulary used by the two groups. Clearly, it is only through further research of the many elements of language production that we can build a solid case for the linguistic benefits of study abroad. Studies like ours suggest that evidence can be gathered supporting more realistic expectations of the gains that result from short-term study abroad. Surely such data would be helpful to language educators, administrators, and other academic units in their promotion of foreign study opportunities.

**•NOTES**

[1] The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance received from the Faculty Research Fellowship Program at the University of Kentucky to carry out this study.

[2] Initially we allowed students from thirty seconds to a minute to study the photo and collect their thoughts before beginning the task. As the majority indicated that they did not need the extra time, during the second round we started the exercise when the students said they were ready; they often started right after receiving the photo.

[3] Thanks to the two graduate students, Heather Campbell and Rebecca Whitehead, who transcribed the many audiotapes.

[4] There were no beginners in the summer study abroad group.

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