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Study Abroad and Intensive Linguistic Immersion in Spain: Undergraduate Oral Proficiency for Short-Term Study Abroad

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Abstract

Study abroad is an important piece of the internationalization of curriculum and is particularly advantageous for second language learners. Many students study abroad to learn a language and the majority of students studying abroad enroll in shorter-term programs. Given their strong representation in the field of study abroad, the following article addresses second language students and oral proficiency in shorter-term study abroad programs. This study focuses on participants ($n = 8$) who spent three weeks in Spain. These students completed six credit hours of online spring semester coursework and signed an immersion contract for their three weeks abroad over the summer. Before departure and upon returning they took the Versant for Spanish test. Findings indicated that the three-week program abroad led to gains in overall Spanish oral proficiency as well as in vocabulary acquisition, fluency, and pronunciation skills.

Keywords

Immersion, oral proficiency, second-language acquisition, short-term, study abroad

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Introduction

For many postsecondary students study abroad (SA) is a component of the U.S. college experience (Open Doors, 2020). The 2020 Open Doors report indicates that 341,751 U.S. students studied abroad for academic credit in 2017-2018. That is an increase of 2.7% over the 2016-2017 data. The majority (86%) of these students were undergraduate students. Since the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic the number of students studying abroad decreased by 91%; these numbers have not yet rebounded, but the most recent 2022 Open Doors report shows that some gains have been made. Much of the merit of studying abroad rests in its classification as a “high impact practice” and increasingly emphasized global learning outcomes across college campuses.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities identified key factors to increase retention and attainment of undergraduate learning outcomes, these practices were categorized as high-impact practices (HIPs). Specifically, HIPs emphasize learning outside of the classroom and include interaction between faculty, students, and diverse others. These types of educational experiences have been found to increase learning, retention, and overall student success (Kuh, 2008). HIPs results are sustained even for higher-risk student groups (Huber, 2010). Study abroad experiences in general promote student success and have been found to contribute to global learning and citizenship, both areas of ever-increasing focus in higher education in general (O’Donovan, 2002).

While advantageous for all students, within the field of foreign language specifically, global mindedness is considered particularly relevant and can be demonstrated in various ways. The American Council for Teachers of Foreign Language (ACTFL) has established the World-Readiness Standards for Language Learners. Three of the five standards directly complement study abroad experiences. First, students must communicate effectively in another language. Students should also demonstrate cultural competence and understanding when interacting with others. Finally, students should participate in multilingual communities both domestically and internationally.

The emphasis placed on SA as an essential part of foreign language study is apparent in its prevalence in the field. Foreign language and international studies majors are the fourth most prevalent group of U.S. college students who study abroad (Open Doors, 2019). Considering that the National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reports that foreign language majors make up less than 1% of college majors, the fact that they make up for 7.1% of all students who study abroad is significant. This statistic

does not consider those who are indeed studying abroad to gain second language (L2) proficiency but who may not be formally declared language majors.

Language Testing International in coordination with ACTFL has developed timelines for language learning based on language difficulty. Group 1 languages are defined as being easier for native English speakers to learn. These languages are Afrikaans, Danish, Dutch, French, Haitian Creole, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish, Swahili, Swedish, and others. The following table explains the range of acquisition based on length of training and aptitude. Aptitude can include many factors such as motivation, engagement, and overall intelligence.

Length of Training	Minimal Aptitude	Average Aptitude	Superior Aptitude
240 hours	Intermediate Low	Intermediate Mid	Intermediate Mid
480 hours	Intermediate High	Advanced Low	Advanced Mid
720 hours	Advanced Mid	Advanced High	Superior

TABLE (1): GROUP 1 LANGUAGES AND TIME TO ACQUISITION

A three or four-credit hour U.S. college course over the span of a 15-week semester is 45 to 60 hours of instruction. Based on this chart, it would take new language learners approximately four semesters of a traditional college course to reach the Intermediate Low to Intermediate Mid level of language proficiency. Beginning language learners also learn and progress through proficiency levels more quickly than intermediate or advanced learners.

As ACTFL emphasizes, SA programs in general are a beneficial means of experiential language learning. When in France, for example, a student will presumably be presented with many more opportunities to engage in the language than in most areas of the U.S. A long-standing and respected plethora of research studies support that studying a L2 in a target language country can have a significant positive impact on L2 acquisition (Magnan & Lafford, 2013; Martinsen, 2010; Pinar, 2016; Wessel, 2007). Many L2 students live with local families abroad while they take formal courses at an institute or university. Staying in these homes and using the target language is particularly beneficial for students learning language abroad, especially when students form positive relationships with the host family (Di Silvio et al., 2014). This is presumably because students and local host families with stronger relationships demonstrate more positive cultural understandings and exchange a greater quantity of L2, which increases the time of immersion for the student.

While the benefits of time abroad immersed in a second language are well-documented, the larger body of research has been focused on the traditional academic semester or yearlong programs (Hernández, 2010). This limited research focus has been sustained despite the increase in students opting for shorter-term programs (Martinsen, 2010). Cubillos and Ilvento (2018) note that research on proficiency for short-term programs is still “limited and inconclusive” (p. 250), perhaps, at least in part, because of the variety of short-term programs available.

Part of what makes this body of research insufficient is that many categorize 8-week programs as “short-term,” when there may be other viable even shorter options that are also valuable teaching and learning experiences (Crabtree & Sapp, 2018). Open Doors (2019) considers summer or eight weeks or less as short-term and reports that nearly 65% of students are enrolling in programs fitting within that category. Given that most students enroll in “8 weeks or less,” the largest body of data groups students who took a one-week tour with those who lived eight weeks with a local family and took courses for five hours per day. Mid-length programs (approximately one semester) enroll 33% of study abroad students while long-term (academic/calendar year) only enroll just above 2% of students (Open Doors, 2019). So, only 35% of student experiences are well-defined and mostly uniform in terms of length. This leaves a staggering majority of SA cases where much less is known. A cultural tour has very different outcomes than an immersion experience, as Reynolds-Case (2013) documents, there is a pressing need for more extensive research on shorter-term programs, particularly as they relate to linguistic gains.

While still inadequate, there is a growing body of research on shorter-term L2 programs of various lengths. Arnette (2013) compared learning German abroad to studying German on campus and found that students who studied abroad for 10 weeks experienced linguistic gains comparable to one whole year of study (approximately 30 weeks) on campus. These results indicate that students who studied abroad acquired the L2 much more quickly than the students who stayed on campus. Other comparative studies found that time abroad allowed quicker acquisition of L2 as well. A study by Grey et al. (2015) demonstrated that five weeks in Spain were equivalent to an entire semester of on-campus for learning Spanish. SA students needed one-third of the time that the campus students needed to learn Spanish. Even in programs of only four weeks abroad, research has shown significant impact in L2 learning compared to students who study language on their home campus (Schenker, 2018).

However, the purpose of this study is not to argue the benefit of SA for L2 learning as compared to on-campus courses, but to show how study abroad, even

short-term, positively impacts language development. Even in intensive programs as short as two weeks, Spanish students have shown substantive improvements as well (Miano et al., 2016).

Some analyses related specifically to oral proficiency acquisition in short-term study abroad programs utilized the Versant exam. Quan (2019) demonstrated increased Versant scores for three students who studied abroad for 10-16 weeks, but many factors like personality, motivation, and sense of belonging had impacts on the degree of learning. The influence of affective factors in language development in general is well known and these findings are in line with prior research on second language acquisition in the SA environment (Anderson et al., 2015; Frey & Tropp, 2006). For example, in Quan's (2019) study, Versant scores rose after 10-16 weeks abroad; two students maintained ACTFL Advanced Low and Novice High while one shifted from Intermediate High to Advanced Low. Cubillos (2013) assessed oral proficiency for students who spent five weeks in Panama and found statistically significant gains for students with regard to pre- and post-overall oral proficiency and all the components therein: sentence mastery, vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation. Cubillos (2013) noted that students who exhibited lower levels of oral proficiency pre-departure had larger gains than those who were already at Intermediate High or Advanced Low.

With attention to the need for analysis of short-term intensive L2 SA programs regarding linguistic gains (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2018; Martinsen, 2010; Reynolds-Case, 2013), the following study assessed the oral proficiency of students of Spanish before and after a three-week study abroad experience in Spain. The research questions were:

- RQ1) What effects on **overall oral proficiency** are observed from a three-week undergraduate immersion class in Spain as measured by a pre- and post-Versant for Spanish test?
- RQ2) What effects on **sentence formation** are observed from a three-week undergraduate immersion class in Spain as measured by a pre- and post-Versant for Spanish test?
- RQ3) What effects on **vocabulary** are observed from a three-week undergraduate immersion class in Spain as measured by a pre- and post-Versant for Spanish test?
- RQ4) What effects on **fluency** are observed from a three-week undergraduate immersion class in Spain as measured by a pre- and post-Versant for Spanish test?
- RQ5) What effects on **pronunciation** are observed from a three-week undergraduate immersion class in Spain as measured by a pre- and post-Versant for Spanish test?

Methods

Participants ($n = 8$) for this study were undergraduate college students at a regional university in the Midwest. These students enrolled in two, three-credit hour classes that required a three-week Spanish immersion experience in Spain after the semester. Seven students identified as female and one student identified as male. The majority identified as White ($n = 5$). One identified as African American and two identified as Hispanic. Both of those who identified as Hispanic considered themselves heritage speakers of the language. All participants were college students of traditional age (under 25).

Before enrolling in the SA courses, students completed a minimum of four semesters of Spanish (a minimum of 210 hours of study as first year courses are four credits, and second year are three credits at this institution) and were briefed on the structure and content of the time abroad. The course began at the onset of the traditional spring semester. Students completed content-based pre-trip course materials online during the 15-week semester (approximately 90 hours of language study) followed by a three-week intensive study abroad experience in May.

During the semester, each course had a different topic. One addressed contemporary representations of Spain's medieval past and the other focused on diversity in Spain from the early modern period (e.g., Christians, Muslims, Jews) to today. Students read historical literature and studied art and culture as part of these courses. The time abroad emphasized the content of these courses in a real-world context via museums, architecture, and linguistic and cultural immersion.

In addition to learning about these topics, students also had course content to prepare them for the experience of studying abroad. Immersion was emphasized throughout the class and was a portion of the course grade, particularly regarding the time abroad. An excerpt from the syllabus emphasizes:

Participation and Professionalism: 20% of the final grade. Attitude matters in learning—ESPECIALLY IN A SECOND LANGUAGE. Your grade will be based on completing homework in a timely manner, using proper etiquette and professionalism in the classroom space, in emails, and while abroad, maintaining a positive attitude, NOT SPEAKING ENGLISH, speaking Spanish, and working in a collaborative manner to complete tasks. This applies to time spent in the course in the U.S. and abroad. International travel, though a worthwhile and life-changing experience, is not necessarily an easy experience. Patience, a positive attitude, and hard work will be an asset.

Thus, students knew from the beginning of the course that refraining from using English and producing Spanish would be key components of their grades.

Before travel, students were also required to read research-backed documents on language learning abroad. These were *Eight Principles of Good Practice for All Experiential Learning Activities* by the National Society for Experiential Learning (2013) and the *Guidelines for Language Learning Abroad* by The Forum on Education Abroad (2018). The 2018 Forum document emphasizes immersion and using L2 abroad as pivotal to language development. Then, students were given the following assignment:

You have had the chance to review research-backed best practices on study abroad and language immersion. In the language of your choice (English or Spanish), please discuss five ways this course will employ best practices to ensure the greatest impact on learning. A list with a few sentences each is fine. THEN, in a few sentences, reflect on what YOU can do to make this the most impactful experience possible for you.

Following this, students then signed the required immersion contract that they would not use English for the duration of the trip (Appendix A). The three weeks consisted of one week of travel throughout Spain with the professors. Students shared hotel rooms for this portion of the trip. The group traveled to Madrid, Granada, Sevilla, and Toledo. This week was complete immersion via museums, restaurants, Flamenco demonstrations, tours, group meals, and more. Professors were readily on hand to answer questions, redirect any use of English, and encourage the use of the L2 by initiating conversations (both one-on-one and in small and larger groups), asking questions, and rephrasing or scaffolding what the local guides presented in the L2.

After the week of acclimatization to Spain and immersion, the group traveled to Barcelona. Barcelona is an international city with two languages in use: Catalan and Castilian, which is referred to as “Spanish” in the U.S. and throughout this article. Here students spent two weeks living with Spanish-speaking host families and took five hours of Spanish language courses each weekday (50 hours total of formal study over the two weeks) at a local language school. For enrichment and cultural learning, students took lessons on Catalan and how it differs from Castilian, but Castilian Spanish as the target language was clear.

Students were given exams by the school and divided by level into the first four hours of coursework every morning and the study participant students were mixed with language learners from other countries. Then there was one hour of intensive conversation exclusively with the group of U.S. students. Three to four evenings per week, including weekends, were also utilized for cultural activities and tours with the

professors and local guides. These were all conducted in Spanish. Therefore, the trip combined formalized language instruction, informal language immersion via conversations, immersive cultural experiences, and interactions with target language host families. During the immersive cultural experiences, such as group tours, the professors redirected English use, if needed, and encouraged L2 use through conversations, questions, and adapting/clarifying native L2 to student levels.

Students completed oral proficiency exams using the third-party Pearson's Versant for Spanish Test, which is based on psycholinguistic theories of language acquisition of facility (Levelt, 1989) and automaticity (Cutler, 2003), defined as the ability to respond to an aural prompt automatically, without a noticeable pause for thought or processing. This test was selected because of its prevalence in the existing literature measuring oral proficiency and because it is less expensive and more convenient than other methods such as the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview. It also is assessed by a third party, which eliminates potential bias in the assessment of one's own students.

The Versant exam measures listening, processing, and responding times to assess automaticity. A parser and speech recognition software then evaluates the results and produces an oral proficiency score. Students voluntarily granted consent to participate in an IRB study regarding the impact of study abroad, of which the Versant exam was a component.

The Versant oral evaluation produces an overall oral proficiency score that consists of fluency, sentence formation, vocabulary, and pronunciation. The assessment uses audio prompts at a conversational pace by native speakers from different Spanish-speaking countries and regions. To take the test, students must read sentences from a provided paper. Students then repeat words that are spoken to them. Then they must produce opposites of a verbal word prompt (up/down). For the next portion, students listen to a short story and then must retell the story remembering as many details as they can. The fifth section presents students with a list of words that can be reassembled into sentences. Finally, students must end the exam by responding to a few short answer questions that should have obvious answers, such as, "¿Cuál es más grande, una hormiga o un elefante?" (Which is larger, an ant or an elephant?). This tests their vocabulary for they must understand the adjective and the nouns to answer correctly.

While a computer-based assessment, the Versant test correlates at 0.86 with the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). Versant scores compare to ACTFL benchmarks in the following ways:

Versant Test Score	ACTFL
80 or more	Advanced High or Above
73-79	Advanced Mid
63-72	Advanced Low
53-62	Intermediate High
43-52	Intermediate Mid
33-42	Intermediate Low
23-32	Novice High
20-22	Novice Mid

TABLE (2): VERSANT SCORE COMPARISON TO ACTFL

As the scale indicates, Versant does not distinguish very low levels of oral proficiency, such as ACTFL Novice Low, or very high levels of oral proficiency, such as at ACTFL Superior or any of its sublevels. As these were undergraduate college students of Spanish who had completed a minimum of four semesters of language study (approximately 210 hours), no student should have tested at Novice Low for any portion of the test. Likewise, a score of Superior is quite difficult in general and is not to be expected of undergraduate L2 students. Thus, the limitations of the Versant test should not pose a problem for the analysis in this study.

One week before departure but after the 15-week semester, students were given individual test ID's and test instructions via email to complete the Versant for Spanish Test. Students took the exam at their own convenience via phone. After the exams were scored, students were able to see their overall oral proficiency and the scores for each sub-skill (fluency, sentence formation, vocabulary, and pronunciation). The scores also contained ACTFL language describing each oral proficiency level and how they could improve their language skills.

Within one week of returning to the U.S. after the three weeks abroad, students again received test IDs and instructions again and took the Versant for Spanish Test one more time. Students scheduled their phone call exam at their convenience and were able to see their scores. They could compare these post-study abroad scores to their pre-study abroad scores if they chose.

The researchers then matched pre-study abroad scores to post-study abroad scores for each student. Overall oral proficiency and fluency, sentence formation, vocabulary, and pronunciation were compared. The data were analyzed using SPSS.

Results

Pre- and post-oral proficiency results were calculated and matched and are presented in Table (3) on the following page, with denotations for the overall score along with sub-scores. This table shows that by and large, there was improvement in

overall oral proficiency and its sub-skills for students when comparing the pre- and post-Versant scores after spending three weeks abroad.

Student	Pre-Test Scores					Post-Test Scores				
	Overall	Sentence Formation	Vocabulary	Fluency	Pronunciation	Overall	Sentence Formation	Vocabulary	Fluency	Pronunciation
1	51 IM	33 IL	33 IL	71 AL	67 AL	57 IH	42 IL	47 IM	73 AM	68 AL
2	75 AM	80 AH	67 AL	33 IL	71 AL	78 AM	80 AH	64 SL	77 AM	75 AM
3	41 IL	31 NH	46 IM	42 IL	50 IM	47 IM	30 NH	58 IH	51 IM	54 IH
4	34 IL	20 NM	27 NH	45 IM	56 IH	43 IM	31 NH	42 IL	46 IM	57 IH
5	58 IH	68 AL	72 AL	40 IL	54 IH	59 IH	62 IH	68 AL	51 IM	56 IH
6	24 NH	20 NM	20 N M	26 NH	28 NH	31 NH	30 NH	22 NM	32 NH	40 IL
7	51 IM	60 IH	53 IH	42 IL	50 IM	62 IH	67 AL	62 IH	59 IH	57 IH
8	36 IL	33 IL	27 NH	37 IL	46 IM	33 IL	36 IL	23 NH	32 NH	41 IL

TABLE (3): OVERVIEW OF PRE- AND POST-STUDY ABROAD VERSANT OVERALL ORAL PROFICIENCY AND SUB SKILL SCORES AND CORRESPONDING ACTFL ORAL PROFICIENCY LEVELS

Student scores show that SA has a positive effect on their overall L2 oral proficiency. Nearly every single participant saw improvement in this area. A paired sample t-test was used to examine the difference between the two variable points (pre- and post-oral proficiency) for the same subject. The results showed that before-departure scores ($M = 46.25$, $SD = 16$) were statistically different from ($p = 0.016$) post-return scores ($M = 51.25$, $SD = 18.8$). Means scores increased across the sample from 46.25 to 51.25 from the pre- to post-oral proficiency test while standard deviations remained somewhat similar. Cohen's (1988) d , a benchmark used to interpret effect size, i.e., small = 0.2, medium = 0.5, large = 0.8, was calculated to assess the impact of this educational tool, $d = .314$. In this case, study abroad was a substantively important educational practice per the standards of the U.S. Department of Education (2014). As

Figure (1) demonstrates, though the degree of improvement varied, students experienced increased Spanish oral proficiency after three weeks of immersion abroad.

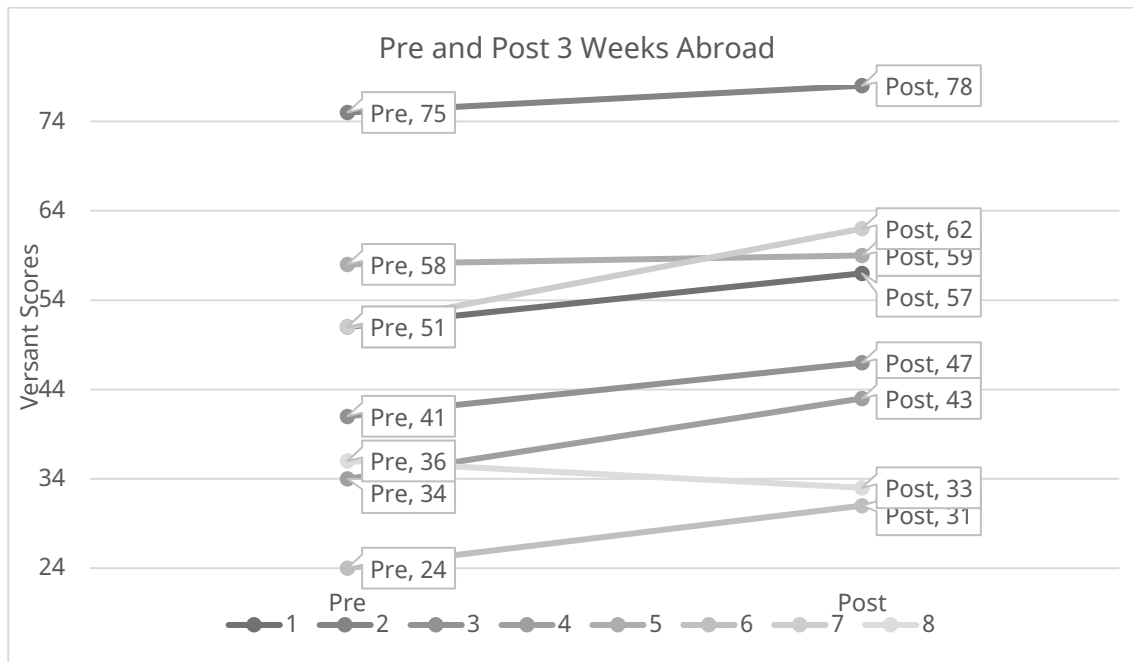


FIGURE (1): OVERALL VERSANT PROFICIENCY SCORES PRE AND POST THREE WEEKS ABROAD

The mean Versant scores placed the group in the Intermediate Mid ACTL score range pre-departure. As a group, they nearly reached (within 0.75 points) Intermediate High or a Versant score of 53. On an individual basis, one scored Advanced Low. Two students scored Intermediate High. Only one student was Intermediate Mid. Three students received an Intermediate Low score. Finally, the student with the lowest oral proficiency pre-trip scored Novice High post-trip. The post-trip distribution shifted upward. One was still Advanced Low. Three scored Intermediate High, an increase of one student. Two scored Intermediate Mid, an increase of one student at that level. Only one student remained at Intermediate Low, a decrease of two students. And one student stayed at Novice High. As the results indicated, students experienced statistically significant gains in overall oral proficiency.

Sentence Formation

The Versant test also measured sentence formation skills. Six students showed improvement in this area; one maintained the same score; and one decreased by one point post-study abroad. Overall students had a mean score of $M = 43.13$ before departure on this skill. After returning from three weeks abroad, the mean score rose to $M = 46.25$, an increase of over 3 points in sentence formation. The difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.098$).

Before departure, the mean ACTFL level for sentence formation was Intermediate Mid. The students did not surpass the Intermediate Mid level after SA, though the mean score did rise. On an individual basis, two scored Novice Mid; one scored Novice High. At the intermediate level, two scored Intermediate Low and one scored Intermediate High. Two tested within the advanced range, one at Advanced Low and one at Advanced Mid in sentence formation. ACTFL ranges did improve post-SA. Three still scored at the novice level, but all were at the top at Novice High. Three were still in the intermediate range, two were still Intermediate Low, and one still Intermediate High. Finally, the two students in the advanced level stayed at their respective sub-levels, one at Advanced Low and one at Advanced Mid.

Vocabulary

Student vocabulary knowledge was assessed pre- and post-trip. Six out of the eight students saw growth in this area. The mean score also improved from $M = 43.123$, $SD = 19.52$. to $M = 48.25$, $SD = 6.4$. A paired samples test showed that the difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.124$) when comparing pre-trip to post-trip vocabulary scores. Three students shifted up to higher ACTFL benchmark levels. One from Intermediate Low to Intermediate Mid; one from Intermediate Mid to Intermediate High; and Novice High to Intermediate Low. The two advanced students maintained their levels. One maintained Intermediate High in vocabulary. And two stayed in the novice category at Novice Mid and Novice High.

Fluency

Responses were also assessed for fluency and seven out of the eight students improved their spoken L2 fluency. Pre-travel test scores ($M = 42$, $SD = 13.2$) were lower than post-travel test scores ($M = 46.7$, $SD = 5.9$). A paired samples t-test indicated that the difference between pre- and post-Versant scores was not significant ($p = 0.086$), but it was approaching significance. Six of the eight students progressed an ACTFL oral proficiency level, even at the advanced level, in contrast to the pattern of only the lower-level students improving in the other skills. One student progressed Advanced Low to Advanced Mid in the area of fluency. At the intermediate level, an Intermediate Low student score moved up a surprising three levels to Advanced Mid. Two who scored Intermediate Low moved to Intermediate Mid and another who scored Intermediate Low moved up two levels to Intermediate High in fluency. An outlier moved down from Intermediate Low down to Novice High.

Pronunciation

The last skill that was measured pre-departure and post-return was pronunciation. Again, seven out of eight students saw improvement in this score. The

group mean score for pronunciation before study abroad ($M = 52.75$, $SD = 13.2$) increased post-study abroad ($M = 56.00$, $SD = 11.9$). Although the improvement is evident, this difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.106$). In contrast to the results of most of the subskills, of the two students who tested advanced at pronunciation, one did move up a subcategory, Advanced Low to Advanced Mid. Pre-departure most students tested at the intermediate level (Intermediate Mid = 3, Intermediate High = 2) in pronunciation. Three of these moved up one level from Intermediate Mid to Intermediate High. One maintained Intermediate Mid and, again, one dropped to Intermediate Low.

Discussion

RQ1) What effects on **overall oral proficiency** are observed from a three-week undergraduate immersion class in Spain as measured by a pre- and post-Versant for Spanish test?

The effect on overall oral proficiency from three weeks of immersion abroad was a positive one. Impressively, four students improved their overall ACTFL oral proficiency benchmark. This overall positive effect of the three weeks of immersion abroad echoes previous findings on other short-term programs of differing durations (Arnett, 2013; Cubillos, 2013; Martinson, 2010; Miano et al., 2016). Four of the participants in this study maintained their pre-trip overall ACTFL oral proficiency levels, though nearly all had gains in the Versant score, and many scored at the top range of the level post trip. While it would be rewarding to see all students progress an entire ACTFL level after their time abroad, Quan (2019) also noted that some students maintained their pre-departure ACTFL levels after 10-13 weeks abroad. So, the fact that in three weeks half of these participants experienced an ACTFL overall oral proficiency level shift is impressive.

Arnette (2013), Grey et al. (2015), and Schenker (2018) indicate that students can acquire language during a target language study abroad more quickly than they could on campus. As mentioned in the literature review, while this study did not have a control group studying the L2 on campus to compare to the students who studied abroad, some observations about the language gains can be made using the well-established data on timelines to language acquisition developed by ACTFL. It should be noted that in this study before the trip most students ($n=5$) were scoring in Intermediate Low to Intermediate Mid ranges comparable to 240 hours (approximately four semesters) of instruction as indicated by Language Testing International and ACTFL.

Employing the length of training proscribed by LTI to make progress in language learning shows interesting results. In only three weeks abroad two students moved

from Intermediate Mid to Intermediate High. Per LTI, this shift should take 240 additional hours, or approximately four semesters, of language instruction. Other students experienced smaller shifts, a student with minimal aptitude should score Intermediate Low after 240 hours. Two students were Intermediate Low pre-departure but progressed to Intermediate Mid post travel. These students nearly reached the threshold traditionally reached by an additional four semesters of study. Perhaps more time abroad would have helped the shift to Intermediate High. However, achieving the equivalent to three semesters of study in three weeks is certainly still commendable.

As mentioned, the four remaining students increased Versant oral proficiency scores but did not progress an entire ACTFL oral proficiency level. Two of these students already scored in upper oral proficiency levels and studies show higher level shifts take more time (Cubillos, 2013). Per LTI, an Advanced Mid student can still score Advanced mid after 240 hours of study. One student's results showed this. Another stayed Intermediate High, again in line with the longer time needed to progress to higher levels of proficiency. Finally, one student remained Intermediate Low, as discussed.

RQ2) What effects on **sentence formation** are observed from a three-week undergraduate immersion class in Spain as measured by a pre- and post-Versant for Spanish test?

As shown, the impact on sentence formation was not statistically significant and had only a small effect size. However, five students saw an increase in Versant score, and a few saw a sublevel shift up in their ACTFL score. Perhaps sentence formation was somehow less practiced in the SA abroad environment. Certainly, in everyday conversation scenarios, speakers are less apt to answer every question in complete sentences. Regardless, the results do indicate that students at the novice level saw the most improvement in sentence formation. This is in line with the findings of Cubillos (2013) for a five-week SA experience. In that study, novice learners, who arguably have the most ground to gain, saw the most improvement. Perhaps in this study, too, those testing at the lower levels exhibited some foundational gains in this skill post-immersion SA.

RQ3) What effects on **vocabulary** are observed from a three-week undergraduate immersion class in Spain as measured by a pre- and post-Versant for Spanish test?

The students saw improvement in vocabulary knowledge pre and post SA and the analysis showed the experience abroad was a substantively important educational intervention. Two of the three students who saw upward movement in ACTFL oral proficiency were at the intermediate level and at the Novice level, only one student moved up post SA. It is interesting that the other two novice learners did not move up after three weeks abroad given that Cubillos (2013) found that novice learners

experienced the most gains. Furthermore, after SA, Cubillos (2013) found that vocabulary had the largest gains of all skills; from the five-week experience, he observed a mean 14.8 Versant point gain compared to the mean five-point gain revealed in this study on three weeks abroad. Even without comparable gains, the three weeks abroad did have a substantively important effect as mentioned. Perhaps more time abroad would have encouraged greater gains in this area for those at novice level.

RQ4) What effects on **fluency** are observed from a three-week undergraduate immersion class in Spain as measured by a pre- and post-Versant for Spanish test?

The three weeks abroad had the biggest impact on the students' language fluency. Six of the eight students, or 75%, shifted up an ACTFL oral proficiency level. Only one student tested at novice level in fluency pre-departure and that student did not progress out of that level. Furthermore, one who tested at Intermediate Low before SA tested Novice High afterward, seemingly decreasing in oral proficiency. Intermediate-level students at large showed a nice upward movement post SA. Three moved up sublevels from their pretest scores. Astonishingly, one Intermediate Low student moved into ACTFL Advanced Mid oral proficiency by advancing four sublevels. Finally, one who was already advanced pre-departure moved up a sub-level within the advanced range. Thus, within the area of fluency, we saw upward movement at all levels of the oral proficiency spectrum. Given that those with lower levels of oral proficiency pre-departure tend to show the greatest improvement post-study abroad (Cubillos, 2013), the progress of advanced students in the area of fluency should be underscored.

Despite the positive impact for nearly all of the students, there was an outlier. One student actually saw a decreased sub-skill fluency score. This could be due to other adjustment factors, such as intrapersonal dynamics, that merit attention in consideration of proficiency gains from study abroad (Quan, 2019). Interestingly, while fluency received the most gains in this study, this was not the skill most impacted in the Cubillos (2013) study, which had fluency ranked third out of the four skills.

RQ5) What effects on **pronunciation** are observed from a three-week undergraduate immersion class in Spain as measured by a pre- and post-Versant for Spanish test?

Pronunciation as measured by the pre and post Versant test and was substantively positively affected by SA, even if the results were not statistically significant. Every student but one improved from their pre-SA score. There were two intermediate level shifts from Intermediate Mid to Intermediate High and from Novice High to Intermediate Low. The novice level pre-score was the only student who tested Novice in pronunciation pre-departure. Moving into the Intermediate level is expected

based on the premise that novice learners will see the most gains (Cubillos, 2013). One student tested Advanced before departure and improved a sublevel from Advanced Low to Advanced Mid. Given that it is more difficult for advanced students to improve (Cubillos, 2013), this is, again, notable. Despite these promising gains, one student did decrease in fluency, again, echoing the need to consider other factors impacting growth from study abroad (Quan, 2019).

Limitations

This study is limited by the small sample size. This group was primarily female and Caucasian. Greater breadth and depth of subjects would lend legitimacy to these results. This trip is conducted every other summer. So, comparing student groups across year as well as increasing the number of participants in the oral proficiency study herein are interesting avenues of pursuit.

Furthermore, this study only tested proficiency pre- and post-study abroad without considering factors that could affect oral proficiency. While the experience was overwhelmingly positive for nearly every student, there was one who did not seem to benefit in relation to oral proficiency. While this student's oral proficiency level of IL remained consistent pre- and post-trip, there were decreased scores in vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation. Unfortunately, the scores do not tell us why the experience was different for this student. Self-reported immersion experiences, quality of homestays, motivation, and more could help researchers identify why this student did not appear to benefit and it would also bolster the findings in general. As they are, the results for the group explain that growth is observable in three weeks abroad, but not why. Incorporating these factors into a future study would certainly be of merit and interest to language educators.

It may also be worthwhile to test oral proficiency at different points of the three weeks. It could be tested before departure, at week one, at week two, and at the end. This would allow researchers to plot progress points to see how oral proficiency changes throughout the experience. However, the effects of test fatigue and anxiety should also be considered in comparison to the potential benefit to research. The purpose of the study abroad was to create an enjoyable immersion experience and to minimize the already stress-inducing action of studying abroad. Any research must not interfere with the educational purpose of the intervention.

Finally, it may have been interesting to have a control group of students who studied language in a more traditional setting in the U.S. to compare to the students who traveled abroad. A greater number of participants would be needed to achieve

this. The students would need to have comparable levels of oral proficiency to the students before study abroad. The class might also need to mimic the classroom hours abroad, five hours per day and five days a week, to control for the more concentrated instruction time in Spain.

Conclusion

The results indicate that three weeks of intensive immersion abroad in Spain had significant effects on students' oral proficiency. Students signed immersion contracts and were graded on their commitment to immersion. During the travel portion of the course, students spent one week traveling with faculty and two weeks with host families and taking courses at a local language school. Gains were statistically significant when analyzing overall oral proficiency. The subskills of sentence formation, vocabulary acquisition, fluency, and pronunciation were also analyzed. While a mean increase was noted, the impact on sentence formation was not of substantive importance. Substantively important effects were observed, nonetheless, for the subskills of vocabulary acquisition, fluency, and pronunciation. Students with intermediate and novice levels pre-departure experienced the most improvement. But advanced students also saw improvement, particularly in the subskills of fluency and pronunciation.

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Appendix A: Immersion Contract

I understand that numerous studies show that the best way to learn a language is to be immersed.

I understand that every time I use English, I set my language learning brain back.

I understand that the expectation is that I will not speak English on this trip.

I understand that this will be challenging.

I understand that if my professors have to correct me, I will have to meet with them that evening.

I understand that if I speak English, my grade will be penalized.

I understand that I traveled across the world to improve my Spanish and that using English here is a waste of my time and money.

I understand that my professors are here to help me.

I understand that the goal is NOT to understand every single word, but to gather general meaning.

If you agree, please sign (type your name) and date.