

The results of the present study suggest that classroom instruction does not foster lexicon development neither in size nor in depth of vocabulary knowledge. In relation to this deeper level of lexical knowledge, there is evidence that indicates that analytic and paradigmatic associations are more likely to be acquired in classroom contexts than syntagmatic ones. In contrast, study abroad students experience an increase in both levels, improving at the breadth level to a greater extent than at the associative one. Additionally, native-like competence can be achieved in terms of vocabulary size provided enough exposure to the target language in the second language community. Conversely, native-like proficiency at the associative knowledge is harder to accomplish. A subdivision of this associative knowledge into the three mentioned categories indicates that a period of study abroad of around 6 months (Group D) seems to foster improvement in analytic associations while there is no effect in the syntagmatic and paradigmatic categories. A more extended stay in the L2 community (Group E) seems to trigger vocabulary development in all three categories. However, while there is a remarkable expansion of syntagmatic knowledge, it is nevertheless still far from being native-like.

The findings reported in this paper suggest that deeper level of vocabulary knowledge is more likely to be acquired in study abroad contexts since classroom instruction does not seem to offer the appropriate elements to trigger its development. This finding should promote future studies to look for ways to improve vocabulary teaching in classroom contexts as the methods used in today's teaching do not seem to be very effective in this aspect. This paper also aims to generate awareness among researchers in the field of applied linguistics about the importance of studying vocabulary acquisition in all its layers for it can be a good indicator of students' overall language improvement (Milton and Meara 1995). For that purpose, the tests used for its study should be further developed and improved so that they enable us to make more accurate assessments on vocabulary knowledge. The results described here should also divulge the importance that study abroad programs have in language development.

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