



Canan AYDINBEK¹

FRENCH LEARNERS' OPINION ABOUT THE EFFECT OF STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE ON LANGUAGE LEARNING²

Abstract

According to the majority of learners and educators, the best way to learn a foreign language is to live in a country where this language is spoken. To become proficient, study abroad is admitted as 'sine qua non'. Several studies demonstrated the positive effect of study abroad. But, they usually measured language gains by test scores. Fewer studies consider the value of learner's views of their personal and linguistic development. The aim of this study is to enlighten the perceptions of Turkish learners of French about study abroad and how a L2 is learned. The data was obtained by a semi-structured interview. The participants are six candidate French teachers studying in French Language Teaching Department in Anadolu University. They studied in France during 2012-2013 academic year, with Erasmus exchange program. According the results, the oral skills of participants have improved and their self-confidence have developed after the experience.

Keywords: study abroad experience, foreign language learning, proficiency, fluency.

FRANSIZCA ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN YURTDIŞI EĞİTİMİN DİL ÖĞRENMEYE ETKİSİ İLE İLGİLİ GÖRÜŞLERİ

Özet

Öğrenci ve öğretmenlerin çoğuna göre, bir yabancı dil öğrenmenin en iyi yolu o dilin konuşulduğu ülkede belli bir süre yaşamaktır. Bir yabancı dili çok iyi öğrenmenin olmazsa olmaz koşulu yurtdışı eğitim olarak kabul edilir. Birçok araştırma sonuçları yurtdışı deneyimin yabancı dil düzeyi üzerindeki olumlu etkisini göstermiştir. Ancak, bu araştırmalar genellikle başarıyı dil testlerinden elde edilen notlarla ölçmüştür. Bu çalışmanın amacı Fransızca öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin yurtdışı deneyimleri ile ilgili görüşlerini ve genel olarak bir yabancı dilin nasıl öğrenildiği konusundaki algılarını ortaya çıkarmaktır. Veri toplama aracı olarak yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme kullanılmıştır.

1 Yrd. Doç. Dr., Anadolu Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi Fransız Dili Eğitimi A.B.D.,
caydinbek@anadolu.edu.tr

2 This study is an extended version of a paper presented at ICOINE (International Conference on Interdisciplinary Research in Education) at 28 October 2014 in Milano.

Katılımcılar, Anadolu Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi, Fransız Dili Eğitimi Anabilim Dalında öğrenim gören ve Erasmus değişim programı ile 2012-2013 öğretim yılında bir ya da iki dönem Fransada öğrenim görmüş olan 6 fransızca öğretmen adaydır. Sonuçlara göre öğrencilerin yurt dışı deneyimden sonra özellikle sözlü dil becerileri ilerlemiş (akıcılık düzeyleri artmış) ve özgüven düzeyleri artmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: yurtdışı eğitim deneyimi, yabancı dil öğrenme, yeterlilik, akıcılık.

INTRODUCTION

According to a common belief in the field of foreign language learning, the most effective way of learning a foreign language is to live in a country where the foreign language is spoken as a mother tongue. Undoubtedly, the learning environment is one of the most important causal variables in L2 acquisition. Studying abroad offers many benefits to L2 learners. First of all, during the period spent abroad the learner has maximum opportunities for interaction with native speakers and through the large amount of authentic language input, learners' communicative skills improve considerably.

L2 input is considered by foreign language acquisition models as one of the crucial factors in foreign language acquisition (FLA). For them, input means "raw (primary) L2 data that reaches the non-native audience, that is, the foreign language system which is noticed by the audience" (Nižegorodcew, 2007). In the classroom settings, the input is limited to the L2 spoken by the teacher and what heard by learners from teaching materials (CD, radio, recorded dialogs, etc.). According to Interaction Model proposed by Long (1983), "the input provided by native speakers for non-native speakers must be adjusted in interaction to become comprehensible" and "there exists an indirect causal relationship between linguistic and conversational adjustments and SLA" (Long, 1985, cited in Nižegorodcew, 2007). Therefore, the interaction seems to be a central event to the process of SLA. Because "the type and amount of input available is conditioned by the environment and interaction with interlocutors" (Regan, 1998). The context of immersion can facilitate at a great extent various interactions with native speakers that provide to L2 learners a big amount of comprehensible input. Thus, some researchers have focused on the role of input and learning through interaction (Day, 1986; Doughty, 1996; Pica, 1992, cited in Regan, 1998).

However, the fact that how much contacts and feedback a learner gets from native speakers depends on individual differences. Some L2 learners can get maximum profit from interactions with native speakers, but others who are much less willing to communicate do not improve their L2 level as the first ones. To have successful and abundant interaction with native speakers "is related to learner characteristics such as openness, ability to make oneself socially salient, persistence in working to gain access, and tolerance for and attention to unmodified input" (DuFon, Churchill, 2006).

Another advantage of study abroad context for the L2 learner is that living for some time in L2 speech community is a big source of motivation. "Many learners with a desire to integrate into the second language community need to understand what it is to sound like a native and so are motivated to master native speech norms" (Regan, 1998).

Beyond the linguistic skills, during the study abroad period, the sociolinguistic competence of learners could improve as learners have chance to discover themselves the social life of native

speakers and the social aspects of L2 in use. We know that learning solely grammatical, morphological, phonological and lexical rules of L2 does not ensure the achievement in L2 learning process. Yet it must be acquired other components of communicative competence such as discourse competence, strategic competence and sociolinguistic competence. Sociolinguistic competence “requires an understanding of the social context in which language is used: the role of the participants, the information they share, and the function of the interaction. Only in a full context of this kind can judgments be made on the appropriateness of a particular utterance” (Savignon, 1983, cited in Brown, 1994). In a study abroad context, the learner has multiple possibilities to comprehend the relation between different variables of a native speaker speech.

The results of numerous studies and experiences have proven that the common belief concerning the positive effect of a sojourn abroad on L2 learning is true to a large extent. One of them, carried out by John Carrol (1967) with 2.782 college seniors majoring in French, German, Italian and Russian demonstrated that the students who spent time abroad tend to acquire greater proficiency in the second language than those who studied at home.

The study of Willis and his colleagues has also supported the linguistic growth (measured by scores) of 88 British students who spent abroad more than a year (Willis, Doble, Sankarayya and Smithers 1977: 5). Similar studies pointed to the linguistic advantages of a period spent abroad: Dyson (1988), Veguez (1984), Magnan (1986), Foltz (1991), Meara (1994), Coleman (1996)... (Freed, 1998, 5).

The study of Brecht, Davidson and Ginsberg (1991, 1995) and that of Lapkin et al. (1995) considered both student's prior learning experience in order to predict success abroad. Despite different student populations and target languages (Brecht and al. studied with American students studying Russian and Lapkin et al. with Canadian adolescents who have participated in a bilingual interprovincial exchange program) two studies have shown certain similarities.

A series of research (Lafford, 1995; Freed, 1995b; Huebner; 1995, Milleret, 1991) have compared language skills acquired in classroom context and during study abroad period (Freed 1998). These studies have provided a description of some specific linguistic features as fluency and accuracy which differ in the language of two compared student groups. Despite individual variations noted by Fred and Coleman,

“on the whole, an increase in natural exposure to the L2 through a study-abroad experience seems to contribute more to fluency and naturalness of speech (i.e., higher speech rate and fewer disfluent, silent pauses) than to accuracy and complexity of speech. Compared with gains in fluency and naturalness of speech, the improvement in grammar, listening, and reading is relatively low”.

Möhle and Raupach (1984) studied German learners of French and French students of German in a study abroad context. As a result, they found that, grammar in terms of frequency of mistakes or syntactic complexity of sentences, did not change by German students. However the speech rate has changed and the number of pauses decreased.

Rapauch (1984) showed that the fluency of a German learner of French was due to her use of formulae, standardized “fillers, modifiers, and organisers” and has argued that the quantitative difference between performance before and after the stay in France can be attributed to procedural learning and automatization resulting from practice.

According to DeKeyser (1991) there was not a big difference in oral skills between the abroad group and the stay at home group but there were improvements in fluency in the study abroad learners. Laudet (1993) found that Irish students of French for Business had a substantial increase in fluency as a result of residence abroad. Student's speech was enhanced by a reduction in pauses, appropriate native sounding draws for hesitations.

However, the extent to which the language is learned and which aspects of L2 have improved depends on numerous variables. These variables include individual differences in motivation, aptitude, learning styles, age, level of pre-program language proficiency, the features of the language to be learned, the length of time spent abroad, homestay placements, whether the students have received formal classroom instruction and the degree to which they are immersed in the second language community, in other words, the frequency of their contact with the native speakers. Consequently, it is certain that a period spent abroad accelerates to a large extent the language learning process. Nevertheless a research should not only state the linguistic growth of students but also it should specify the conditions in which the maximum linguistic development may occur.

A series of qualitative studies enhance the research of study abroad by offering a view from the perspective of the students who participate in these programs. These researches emphasized multiple individual factors that play an immense role in study abroad experience. (Klein, 1993; Pellegrino, 1997; Siegal, 1995) Such as the investigation of Wilkinson that focused on participant's backgrounds and expectations (Wilkinson, 1998). "The texture and richness of students' perceptions of the study abroad experience provide tremendous insights into the benefits and costs of in-country language study in terms of linguistic development, cultural understanding, and personal growth" (Pellegrino, 1998: 114). Despite the apparent scientific limitations of qualitative methods, they allow pedagogues and administrators to anticipate student's difficulties encountered abroad in order to enhance the positive effect of study abroad experience. These findings are also of great benefit to students who are preparing to go abroad and to researchers who need to discover student's personal experience from their own perspective. In addition, student's thoughts on their own experience and how they conceive language learning process may give some ideas for best organization of formal instruction setting.

It is clear that the classroom context is different from study abroad setting in many respects. First of all, formal instruction is more focused to accuracy and grammar than fluency and communication. Whereas in study abroad context achieving a communicative goal and spontaneity are more important than accuracy. This is why the students mostly tend to produce correct sentences without knowing in which communication situation they should be used. As a result, the fear of making mistakes prevent the natural speech of students.

"According to the classroom-based view, meaning that 'successful L2 use is measured by correct grammatical form and target expressions, rather than achievement of the communicative goal. Thus, if learners fear failure and perceive grammatical mistakes as negative and experimental phraseology as leading to potentially incorrect L2 usage, they may reject opportunities to experiment if they believe they are unable to do so accurately" (Pellegrino, 1998: 97).

It should be noted that the frequent contact with native speakers allows students to get rid of the fear mentioned above. Consequently, at the end of a period spent abroad students feel more fluent and self-confident.

METHOD

The main objective of this study is to understand students' perspective on their study abroad experience and to reveal the changes in their beliefs on the L2 learning process. Thus, the following questions were addressed in this study:

1. Was the period spent abroad sufficient to improve students' French level?
2. What changes in the learners' French language proficiency occurred during the study-abroad program?
3. What changes in the learners' beliefs about foreign language learning process occurred during the study-abroad program?
4. What type of communicative difficulties students encountered in the classroom and out of the classroom during study abroad period?
5. Did students have problems due to cultural differences between their own culture and the target culture?
6. According to students what is the most efficient way to learn a L2?

Participants

Six undergraduate students studying in French Language Teaching as a Foreign Language Program have participated in this study. They study French for 2 or 3 years and they learn French as a foreign language in the preparatory class during an academic year, after having studied English as a foreign language in high schools. None of them have been abroad before this program except one who have been in France before for 3 months. They are supposed to be at level B2 before participating to the exchange program. They spent one or two semesters in France. Three of them have spent 4 months, two have spent 9 months and one of them have spent 11 months in France for studying.

Instruments and Data Analysis

In this study, we used semi-structured interview as a qualitative data collection tool. Participants were asked to answer to 13 questions which 7 were closed-ended, 6 were open-ended questions regarding their period spent in France, their experiences, and opinions on language learning process. Interviews were one-on-one, lasted approximately ten-fifteen minutes, and were audio-taped and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in Turkish, the data was transcribed and translated to English language. Firstly, the transcripts have been read many times and coded by the researcher. As Maxwell says, "simply reading the notes or transcripts is an important step in the analytic process. Researchers should make frequent notes in the margins to identify important statements and to propose ways of coding the data..." (Maxwell 1996:78-81). The analyses permitted to identify the following codes: communication, accuracy, anxiety, motivation, linguistic variations, cultural differences, communicative strategies, fluency, pronunciation, practice, self-confidence and exposure to L2. As a validation strategy, the

transcripts were read by a peer and the codes are checked in order to get a consensus between the researcher and the reviewer. Secondly, we identified salient patterns and themes that emerged from the codes. Finally, to display the data, we created a table that permit to make a comparison between L2 learning settings abroad and learning L2 at home.

RESULTS

According to the answers of the first and second questions, the students who have spent 3 months think that this period is not enough to improve L2. The first student precise that it depends on what you do abroad. That means, on condition that take advantage of frequent contact with native speakers, 3 moths may be sufficient. The students who have spent 9 and 11 months in France think that this period is absolutely sufficient. Because during first weeks and first semester they try to accustom to new conditions.

The third question was about the differences in students' French level before and after the study abroad experience and the sixth question is in correlation with it, asking which language skill has most developed after the stay abroad. The students think that their fluency and oral skills have improved after study abroad. They all had communication problems especially during first weeks. But they used dictionary, gestures and facial expressions to overcome these problems. It seems that students did not have an important problem due to cultural differences except to of them who did not like the food. The table below indicates the important statements as well as words used by students.

Table 1: Summary of Transcriptions of Interviews

Number of question	Std.1	Std.2	Std.3	Std.4	Std. 5	Std.6
1. Period spent abroad	4 months	4 months	4 months	9 months	9+3=11 moths	9 months
2. Was that period sufficient to improve your L.2 level?	Yes, but it depends on what you do there.	Non	Non	Yes	Yes, but it depends on what you do there.	Yes.
3. What are the differences in your L.2 level before and after the experience?	At home: accuracy, grammatical point of view, anxious about making errors. Abroad: oral skills, vocabulary and pronunciation improved, street French.	at first, consternation, different pronunciation, after practice became familiar.	progress especially in speaking, self-confidence, self-assurance, non-fluent before the experience.	Now I'm fluent, before abstract, I couldn't correlate or associate some things, it was in the air. lack of automatism.	you hear, you see and you are exposed to L.2. Visually and you are forced to speak all the time.	especially oral skills improved. To get rid of shyness or timidity, Express herself easily, fluency.
4. What kind of difficulties did you have in the classroom and outside the classroom?	Outside: First week, I had, I used dictionary, in the classroom, different accent of the teacher, he spoke slowly, than I didn't have difficulty.	Outside: yes, at the restaurant and during the shopping. In the classroom: Non, same courses.	at first, at the airport, different language, different country, senseless phrases, accent, intonation problems, than I progressed. In the	: First semester yes, spoken language and language of the books are different. In the classroom I was only listener 1. Semester. But 2. Semester, I	Outside the classroom, non. In the classroom: sometimes. Unknown vocabulary but same courses, same terms.	Outside, non, I used gestures and facial expressions, not a big problem. In the classroom, sometimes, the majority of students were French.

French Learners' Opinion About The Effect Of Study Abroad Experience On Language Learning

			classroom: non, teachers explained word by word.	could explain my ideas.		Couldn't ask the meaning of unknown words. Little problem.
5. Have the differences between French and Turkish culture created problems during your stay in France?	Absolutely, about the food, different breakfast, I don't eat pork, there is a strange smell. Teacher's attitudes were different. We grew up more disciplined.	Non, I already stayed with a Turkish family.	Non, students from different nationalities are interested in Turkish culture.	Non, there isn't big differences. I'm from İstanbul. I don't have oriental culture. Only with foods	Non, there is not big differences between two cultures.	Not a big problem, I study in French Department so I'm familiar with French culture.
6. Which language skill has most developed during your stay in France? Reading, writing, oral expression, oral comprehension?	Oral expression and comprehension. Especially expression. In Turkey, we turned to writing, oral skills were lacking, more you speak, more you are motivated.	oral skills. Accent and pronunciation. In country we had already a certain reading-writing level.	First, reading skill. Because I read free journals. Secondly, oral skills have developed.	Oral skills	Oral skills	Oral skills
7. Which courses you followed at your university were useful during your stay in France?	Writing course. Because I learn better by writing.	Oral communication.	Oral communication. Grammar is useless. Nobody speak with grammar rules. Writing too, but I didn't use it too much.	role playing, dialogues. (Oral communication)	Oral communication. When we are abroad, we don't communicate by writing.	Oral communication. Grammar and writing too. But especially oral communication.
8. According to you, what are the advantages of learning French in France	L.2 is learned in the country where it is spoken. This is a reality for everyone. Learn language and culture together. You don't memorize, it's spontaneous, improvised.	advantage for pronunciation. The way they speak in France is different. They speak faster.	In Turkey, we speak Turkish outside the classroom, but there you speak French everywhere, you hear daily French and in the classroom you hear academic French, more grammatical and accurate language.	You have a chance to practice what you learn in the classroom. In Turkey you don't have this chance. This experience is has many advantages.	You can comprehend the language and culture faster. You know what to say where and how. There are differences between two languages like the differences between two cultures.	I think you can learn French everywhere but you can improve it in France. For the pronunciation, it's a big advantage.
9. For you, what is the best method of learning French?	I studied French in Turkey and I went to France to practice it. I think it is necessary to stay in the country where the L2 is spoken.	The best way to learn French is to speak and to listen. This is better than to read and to write. To watch films, to listen songs and to communicate with others is the best way. Learning words from others is	L.2 is learned by experiencing it. To watch films, to listen the songs, to listen radios and programs of some channels. You can record programs and listen again and again, it's possible today. To watch film	to stay in the country is the best way to learn a L.2, not bay writing but by playing games and roles. Input is important. To use films, songs and poems is very efficient.	First of all, you have to know grammar than you practice and develop oral skills. You have to communicate all the time. When you speak with the people who doesn't speak very well	Contact French people is important. The most important thing is to get rid of shyness. If you are shy, even if you know all the vocabulary, you can't speak, in France or in another country.

		very efficient.	with subtitles explaining the words help to understand, you can use Internet for this.		French, you can't correct your errors.	
--	--	-----------------	--	--	--	--

CONCLUSION

The comparison based on students' own expressions are illustrated in the table below:

Table 2: Comparison between Study Abroad Settings and the Classroom (at Home) Context

Study abroad setting	Instructional learning context
Oral skills, speaking, fluent, vocabulary, pronunciation, accent, to express herself easily, spontaneous, improvised	Accuracy, focus on writing, grammatical point of view, no fluent, lack of automatism
Street French, daily French	Language of the books
To learn what to say where and how, to experience the L.2	Things abstract, non-correlation, things in air
To practice, to hear, to see and to learn visually	To memorise
To be exposed to L.2	
Self-confidence, to get rid of shyness, to correct errors	Fear of making errors, anxiousness, timidity
To be forced to speak all the time, to speak French everywhere	To speak French only in the classroom
To learn language and culture together	Focus on language rather than culture

We can summarise the findings as follows:

- Instructional teaching is focused on grammar, writing, and accuracy rather than achieving communicative goals.
- There are some differences between the French thought in the classroom namely the textbook's French and that spoken by native speakers.
- In the classroom, students learn about the language but they don't learn enough how and when to use these information. In other words, they can't associate the correct sentences with the communication situation in which they are supposed to be used.
- In study abroad settings, students learn by experiencing, practicing and solving real communicative problems. Or, in the classroom they usually tend to memorise knowledge.
- During study abroad period, usually students get rid of the fear of making errors and as a result they feel more self-confident.

- Learning a L2 at home, in the classroom, is limited to a few hours per day or per week and out of the classroom students don't have any chance to practice the L2. However, a stay in country allows students to use the L2 anywhere and anytime. That is to say, they are totally immersed in the community speaking French.
- A stay abroad offers many opportunities for understanding and learning the target culture better than the classroom context does.
- The students have encountered communication problems outside of the classroom and they used dictionary and gestures to solve them. In the classroom, some of them had difficulties due to vocabulary. But the courses were similar to the courses they fallow in Turkey. Thus they didn't have big problems.
- The students attested that they didn't have difficulties sourced by cultural differences and that there is not big differences between their own culture and the target culture. Except two students who had problem with foods and strange smell.
- They all think that the oral skills have most developed during the period spent abroad, one of them specified that his reading skills have also improved.
- Oral communication course that they fallowed before study abroad was very useful for their study abroad experience. One student says that writing course was useful because she learn better by writing.
- According to students, the best way to learn a language is to stay in a country where this language is spoken. But they pointed out the importance of oral communication and contacting native speakers. They recommend to use films, radio and television programs, songs, poems and Internet in self learning as well as in the classroom in order to develop linguistic skills. In could be concluded that teachers should consider this information in their teaching process in order to get more effective results and to improve linguistic and communicative skills of the learners.

REFERENCES

- Amuzie, G.L., & Winke, P. (2009). Changes in language learning beliefs as a result of study abroad. *System*, 37, 366-379.
- Brown, H.D. (1994). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry&Research Design*. California:Sage Publications.
- Day, R. (1986). *Talking to learn. conversation in second language acquisition*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.
- Deweale, J.M. (1992). L'omission du "ne" dans deux styles oraux d'interlangue française. *Interface. Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 7,1, 3-17.
- Doughty, C. (1991). Second language instruction does make a difference: Evidence from an empirical study on SL relativisation. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 13, 431-69.
- DuFon, M.A., & Churchill, E. (Ed.). (2006). Evolving threads in study abroad research, *Language Learners in Study Abroad Contexts*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Freed, B.F. (1998). An overview of issues and research in language learning in a study abroad setting, *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 4, 2, 31-60, Fall (29.09.2014). <http://www.frontiersjournal.com/issues/vol4/index.htm>.

Kinginger C. (2008). Language learning in study abroad: Case studies of americans in France, *The Modern Language Journal*, 92, 1, 1-124, December, 2008. DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-4781.2008.00821.x (29.09.2014).

Lafford, B. (Ed). (1995). Getting into, through and out of a survival situation: A comparison of communicative strategies used by students studying spanish abroad and “at home”. *Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad Context*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Laudet, C. (1993). Oral performance of erasmus students: An assessment. *Teanga*, 14, 13-28.

Miles, .B., Huberman, A. M. & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. California: Sage Publications.

Nizegorodcew, A. (2007). *Input for instructed language learners: The relevance of relevance*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Pellegrino, V.A. (1998). Student perspectives on language learning in a study abroad context. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 4, (20.09.2014) <http://www.frontiersjournal.com/issues/vol4/index.htm>.

Raupach, M. (Ed). (1984). Formulae in second language speech production. *Second Language Production*, 114-137. Tübingen: Gunter Narr.

Regan, V. (Ed.). (2004). From speech community back to classroom: What variation analysis can tell us about the role of context in the acquisition of french as a foreign language. *Focus on French as a Foreign Language: Multidisciplinary Approaches*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. 28 september 2015.

Rivers W.P. (1998). Is being there enough? The effects of homestay placements on language gain during study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals*, 31, 4, 492-500.

Wilkinson, S. (1995). Foreign language conversation and the study abroad transition: A case study. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania State University.

Wilkinson, S. (1998). On the nature of immersion during study abroad: Some participant perspectives. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 4 (29.09.2014) <http://www.frontiersjournal.com/issues/vol4/index.htm>.

Wilkinson, S. (2008). Study abroad from the participants perspective: A challenge to common belief, *Foreign Language Annals*, 31, issue 1.

Vija G. Mendelson, “Hindsight is 20/20:” Student Perceptions of Language Learning and the Study Abroad Experience.