

# **L3 English Lexico-Grammatical Growth in At Home and Study Abroad Learning Contexts**

**Maria Juan Garau, Joana Salazar Noguera,  
and José Igor Prieto Arranz**

*Universitat de les Illes Balears*

## **Abstract**

In the present article two different L3 learning contexts are distinguished: formal instruction at the home university (AH) and study abroad (SA). We analyse the effect of both learning contexts on EFL students' lexico-grammatical development. A study was carried out with 31 subjects in order to compare and contrast their linguistic performance as measured by a cloze and a sentence rephrasing test at three different data collection times: at the beginning of their formal instruction period at the home university (T1), after 80 hours of formal instruction AH and prior to SA (T2), and after a compulsory three-month SA in a target language country (T3). Statistically significant findings were found for L3 learners' linguistic improvement over time in both learning contexts. Implications of the study are presented and discussed.

## **1. Introduction**

Learning context has been signalled as an external factor of pervasive importance in the process of second language acquisition (SLA). Two different types of learning contexts stand out: Stay Abroad (SA) and Formal Instruction (FI) in the home country, also referred to as *At Home* (AH). In the SA context learners study a foreign language in the target culture, which requires 'exchanging information and participating in important social and interpersonal functions', whereas in the AH context, attention to form is emphasised: 'input and learner output are fashioned, normally with the assistance of a teacher, so that learners attend to form and take risks toward the ultimate goal of improving their expertise' (Batstone, 2002, qtd in Collentine and Freed, 2004: 155).

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

Recently, a good deal of attention has been given to naturalistic learning contexts, which have been widely defined as ‘potentially rich contexts’ (Dufon and Churchill, 2006: 1). Consequently, the bulk of research on SA contexts has been mainly concerned with students’ gains in the target language and altogether there is ample evidence that the oral production ability is enhanced after a SA period, with an increase of the students’ overall fluency (Allen, 2002; Isabelli-García, 2003; Segalowitz and Freed, 2004). A large number of studies have also revealed that SA students improve their foreign language communicative skills and strategies while learning abroad (Lafford, 1995; Collentine and Freed, 2004). Similarly, research also indicates that their acquisition of sociolinguistic and sociocultural knowledge improves during SA.

Despite the outlined benefits of SA, recent literature also suggests that SLA in naturalistic contexts is unexpectedly complex. As DeKeyser states, the ‘progress found in many SA studies is narrowly limited’ (2007: 23). More precisely, some studies on narrative development in SA contexts show that not all learners improve in the same way (Segalowitz and Freed, 2004). Equally, Rodríguez (2001) finds that pragmatic competence does not develop quickly in SA contexts and DeKeyser (2007) concludes that SA learners do not improve in accuracy. Moreover, Freed, So and Lazar (2003) report no significant progress in written fluency during a semester abroad.

The effects of learning context on grammar gains have only been studied recently and the findings are still contradictory when SA and AH contexts are compared. As Dufon and Churchill assert, ‘studies to date that compare learning at home and abroad have found little to indicate that the SA context is more advantageous for the acquisition of grammar’ (2006: 8). Many studies support this claim. For example, Longcope (2003) perceived that SA learners of English improved in fluency, but not in grammatical accuracy or syntactic complexity. Torres (2003) reported that SA was not found to be more advantageous than AH for the acquisition of clitics, although SA learners bettered their discourse and pragmatics, and were able to use language more effectively.

In spite of the number of studies covering the differential effects of SA and AH learning contexts on the learners’ grammatical and lexical abilities, results cannot be made conclusive. Many fail to

combine observational and experimental research methods, as well as various assessment tools, or to consider students' behaviour and the initial learners' proficiency level as influencing the experience abroad. This suggests that further research is needed in order to establish a better comparison between learning contexts and the effects produced.

In this study we will compare the learners' L3 lexicogrammatical development in English after a Formal Instruction AH period and a SA period in order to measure possible context effects.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants in the study ( $n=31$ ) have been selected from a pool of 1<sup>st</sup> year advanced L3 English students enrolled at the *Universitat Pompeu Fabra* (UPF) in Barcelona and reading for a degree in Translation and Interpretation. They are all bilingual Catalan/Spanish speakers.

### 2.2. Design of the study

The participants' performance on the two tests described below, which form part of the SALA project battery of tests,<sup>1</sup> has been analysed at three different data collection times: T1 (at the beginning of the FI period at the home university), T2 (after some 80 hours of FI and prior to SA), and T3 (after a 3-month SA in an English-speaking university).

The production data analysed in the present study was obtained from a cloze test and a rephrasing test. Cloze tests are global tests in that several language skills are simultaneously required for their successful completion, including mastery of vocabulary, grammar, discourse and even reading skills. The main aim of the cloze test in our study is to measure the learners' lexicogrammatical competence. The

---

<sup>1</sup> 'El factor estancia en el país de lengua meta en la adquisición de una lengua extranjera (inglés). Efectos a corto plazo y variables de éxito. Contraste con la instrucción formal' (HUM2004-05442-C02-01/FILO).

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

same can be said of the sentence rephrasing test, in which participants are asked to rewrite 20 sentences starting with a given word(s) in such a way that the resulting sentences are as similar as possible in meaning to the original ones.

To ensure reliability, tests have been piloted, administered and marked consistently. Additionally, items have been analysed using two classical measures, the *facility value* and the *discrimination index*. In the case of the cloze test, we have excluded three items (13, 15, 20) from our final counts at T1, T2 and T3, as they proved too difficult and had very low discrimination indexes.

### 2.3. Research questions

The present study addresses the following research questions:

- To what extent can a two-term FI period AH optimise L3 lexico-grammatical competence?
- To what extent can a one-term SA optimise L3 lexico-grammatical competence?
- Is one of these learning contexts (AH and SA) more beneficial for advanced L3 learners?
- Do the aforementioned learning contexts benefit high and low scorers alike?

We hypothesise that some lexico-grammatical gains will be obtained after both the AH and the SA periods with a more perceptible effect for low scorers. We additionally hypothesise mixed context effects on the students' lexico-grammatical development on the basis of the literature review.

## 3. Data analysis and results

### 3.1. Cloze test

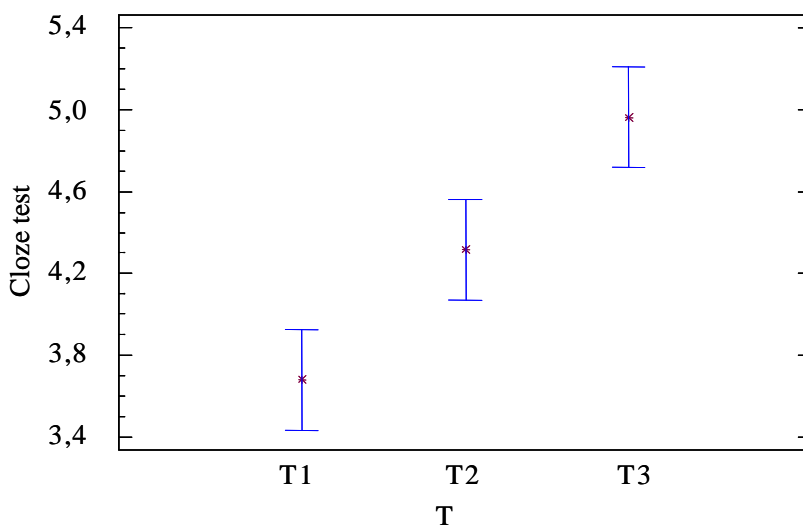
The descriptive statistics corresponding to cloze test scores (on a 10-point scale) at T1, T2 and T3 can be found in Table 1 below. The mean column reveals that there is indeed some improvement for L3 learners over the periods under study, i.e. between T1-T2 and T2-T3. The participants' scores on the cloze test were submitted to a repeated-

measures one-way ANOVA with time (T1, T2, T3) as the independent variable and performance on the test as the dependent variable. The results showed an overall significant effect for time ( $F[2,60]=13.59$ ,  $p<.0001$ ) on the subjects' performance, indicating a steady improvement in subjects' lexico-grammatical competence in English (see Figure 1 below). We then subtracted T1 gains from gains at T2 and T2 gains from gains at T3. A post-hoc comparison of the resulting improvement mean AH (T2-T1) and during SA (T3-T2) was carried out to see if participants experienced more gains in one of the learning contexts examined. It produced no significant results, although the SA context was slightly superior to the AH context.

Table 1. Cloze test descriptive statistics

	Mean	Median	Max.	Min.	Range	S.D.
<b>T1</b>	3.68	3.50	7.70	0.60	7.10	1.93
<b>T2</b>	4.32	4.70	8.20	0.60	7.60	1.97
<b>T3</b>	4.96	4.70	9.40	1.80	7.60	2.05

Figure 1. Means and 95.0 percent LSD intervals



## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

The regression line corresponding to times T1-T2 (AH), on the one hand, and T2-T3 (SA), on the other, has been calculated in order to find out whether low scorers or high scorers seem to benefit the most from each learning context according to cloze test scores. In the case of T1-T2, the value of the slope (i.e. the angle of the regression line), is .79 ( $p<.000$ ), which appears to indicate that low scorers make further progress than high scorers. In the case of T2-T3, the slope value is quite similar (.74,  $p<.000$ ), pointing in the same direction.

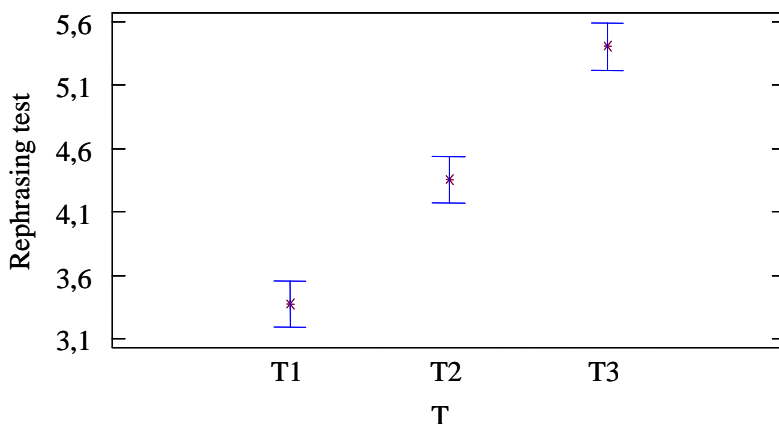
### 3.2. Sentence rephrasing test

The descriptive statistics corresponding to the sentence rephrasing test (on a 10-point scale) at the three data collection times are provided in Table 2 below. As in the cloze test, the mean column reveals that there is continued improvement for L3 learners over time. L3 learner scores were also submitted in this case to a repeated-measures one-way ANOVA, which again produced significant differences between the reported means ( $F[2,60]=61.06, p<.0001$ ). The steady growth in the L3 learners' lexico-grammatical performance on this test is visualized in Figure 2, which presents the means and their 95% confidence intervals on the basis of post-hoc comparisons using least square differences (LSD). Further matched t-test comparisons between the mean gains obtained AH (T2-T1) and during SA (T3-T2) have revealed no significant context effects, even though there is a certain advantage for the SA context which is more perceptible in this test than in the cloze test.

Table 2. Sentence rephrasing test descriptive statistics

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Max.</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>S.D.</b>
<b>T1</b>	3.37	3.50	8.00	0.50	7.50	2.37
<b>T2</b>	4.35	4.50	9.00	0.50	8.50	2.30
<b>T3</b>	5.40	5.50	9.50	2.00	7.50	2.48

Figure 2. Means and 95.0 percent LSD intervals



The regression line corresponding to times T1-T2 (AH) and T2-T3 (SA) has also been calculated for scores on the rephrasing test. As in the cloze test, the slope value corresponding to T1-T2 (.88,  $p < .000$ ) is indicative that low scorers improve more than high scorers. In the case of T2-T3, however, the slope value is close to 1 (.98,  $p < .000$ ), meaning that high scorers and low scorers make very similar progress during SA.

### 3.3. Relationship between cloze and sentence rephrasing tests

Correlation analyses have been run on our data in order to establish the relationship between the scores on the two tests used. Pearson correlation coefficients are provided in Table 3 below. They show significant correlations between the two sets of scores at all three data collection times. These results appear to indicate that the cloze and sentence rephrasing tests are measuring largely the same, i.e. lexicogrammatical competence. The degree of overlap between the two measures,  $r^2$ , has also been provided. It is considerable in all three cases, particularly at T3, where the overlap is 71%.

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

Table 3. Correlations between cloze test scores and sentence rephrasing test scores (Note.  $n = 28$ , run with two-tailed tests, \* $p \leq .05$ )

	Rephrasing T1	Rephrasing T2	Rephrasing T3
Cloze T1	.807* ( $r^2 = .65$ )		
Cloze T2	.767* ( $r^2 = .59$ )		
Cloze T3			.842* ( $r^2 = .71$ )

### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The present study has analysed the impact of two learning contexts, a FI period AH and a SA, on the acquisition of L3 English by advanced university learners. As can be seen from the results, participants in the study significantly improved their performance over both the FI period AH (between T1 and T2) and the SA (between T2 and T3) in both the cloze and the sentence rephrasing tests. The findings of this study appear to indicate that both learning contexts brought out significant gains in students' L3 lexico-grammatical competence. It could be argued that they benefited from both the explicit formal instruction AH and the increased opportunities to practise declarative knowledge provided by the SA context (see DeKeyser, 2007). The differences in improvement means between the two contexts, however, did not reach significance, although there was a certain advantage on both measures for the SA context. It is remarkable that students with lower linguistic scores generally improved their performance the most, especially in the AH context –see Klapper and Rees (2003) and Dekeyser (2007) for similar claims. The tests used also showed high correlation coefficients, indicating that they largely measured the same learner abilities.

Our results on L3 improvement in two learning contexts are consistent with other findings in the same area. Collentine (2004) also reports lexico-grammatical gains for both his AH and his SA group. His AH group demonstrates greater development on discrete grammatical and lexical features, while the SA learners are seen to improve their narrative abilities. Similarly, Juan Garau and Pérez Vidal (2006) report mixed findings on the effect of learning context in their students' lexico-grammatical competence as reflected in a written task. Students



produce a higher proportion of subordinates AH, thus increasing their syntactic complexity, but become more accurate and exhibit higher lexical density abroad. Juan Garau, Prieto Arranz and Salazar Noguera (2007) have pointed to the differences in acquisition according to the learners' target language levels and have concluded that low scorers benefit more from a FI context.

Certain limitations, however, impinge upon our findings. To some extent, it could reasonably be argued that the L3 students' (un)familiarity with test types, as well as their different learning styles and cognitive capabilities, may have influenced the final results. The results presented in this study are quantitative. Further qualitative analysis needs to be undertaken in order to have a more complete picture, based on knowledge grounded in the students' language performance. Finally, future research is planned in order to take other variables that may affect our participants' acquisition process into account, namely contact variables during SA and learner attitude, and see how they relate to students' individual improvement rates.

## References

- Allen, H. W. 2002. *Does Study Abroad Make a Difference? An Investigation of Linguistic and Motivational Outcomes*. Ph. D. Dissertation. Emory University. *Dissertation Abstracts International A* 63: 4. 1279.
- Batstone, R. 2002. "Contexts of Engagement: A Discourse Perspective on 'Intake' and 'Pushed Output'". *System* 30. 1–14.
- Collentine, J. 2004. "The Effects of Learning Contexts on Morphosyntactic and Lexical Development". *SSLA* 26. 227–248.
- Collentine, J. and B. F. Freed. 2004. "Learning Context and its Effects on Second Language Acquisition". *SSLA* 26. 153–171.
- DeKeyser, R. 2007. "Study Abroad as Foreign Language Practice". *Practicing in a Second Language: Perspectives from Applied Linguistics and Cognitive Psychology*. R. DeKeyser. Ed. 208–226. Cambridge: CUP.
- Dufon, A. and E. Churchill. 2006. "Evolving Threads in Study Abroad Research". *Second Language Acquisition. Language Learners in Study Abroad Contexts*. A. Dufon and E. Churchill. Eds. 1–30. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

- Freed, B., S. So, and N. A. Lazar. 2003. "Language Learning Abroad: How do Gains in Written Fluency Compare with Oral Fluency in French as a Second Language?" *ADFL Bulletin* 34: 3. 34–40.
- Isabelli-García, C. L. 2003. "Development of Oral Communication Skills Abroad". *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 9. 149–173. Fall 2003. <[http://www.frontiersjournal.com/issues/vol9/vol9-07\\_isabelligarcia.htm](http://www.frontiersjournal.com/issues/vol9/vol9-07_isabelligarcia.htm)>.
- Juan Garau, M. and C. Pérez Vidal. 2006. *Oral and Written Competence in English after a 'Stay Abroad' Period: Contrasting Gains and Contact Effects*. Paper presented at the 16<sup>th</sup> EUROSLA Conference, Antalya, Turkey, 13-16 September.
- Juan Garau, M., J. I. Prieto Arranz and J. Salazar Noguera. (2007). *The Effect of a Formal Instruction Context on the Lexico-Grammatical Development of Advanced Learners of L3 English*. Paper presented at the 24th AESLA Applied Linguistics Conference, Murcia, Spain, 19-21 April.
- Klapper, J. and J. Rees. 2003. "Reviewing the Case for Explicit Grammar Instruction in the University Foreign Language Learning Context". *Language Teaching Research* 7: 3. 285-314.
- Lafford, B. 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*. B. F. Freed. Ed. 97–121. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Longcope, P. D. 2003. *What is the Impact of Study Abroad on L2 Learning? A Descriptive Study of Context, Conditions and Outcomes*. Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania. *Dissertation Abstracts International A* 64: 4. 1199.
- Rodríguez, S. 2001. *The Perception of Requests in Spanish by Instructed Learners of Spanish in the Second- and Foreign-Language Contexts: A Longitudinal Study of Acquisition Patterns*. Ph. D. Dissertation, Indiana University. *Dissertation Abstracts International A* 62: 2. 554-555.
- Segalowitz, N. and B. F. Freed. 2004. "Context, Contact, and Cognition in Oral Fluency Acquisition". *SSLA* 26. 173–199.
- Torres, J. P. 2003. *A Cognitive Approach to the Acquisition of Clitics in Spanish: Insights from Study Abroad and Classroom Learners*. Ph. D. Dissertation, Cornell University. *Dissertation Abstracts International A* 63: 12. 4298.