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# Language Learning Abroad: How Do Gains in Written Fluency Compare with Gains in Oral Fluency in French as a Second Language?

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*Barbara Freed, Sufumi So, and Nicole A. Lazar*

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IN THE field of second language (L2) learning, the role that context of learning plays in what students learn and how they learn it continues to be debated. Some maintain that the process of second language acquisition (SLA) does not vary despite changes in the context of learning (Long); others claim that “SLA research . . . fails to account for . . . sociolinguistic dimensions of language . . . and obviates insight into the nature of language, most centrally the language use of second or foreign language speakers” (Firth and Wagner 285). Regardless of one’s position in this debate—whether context affects the SLA process or its influence is limited to the use of second languages—there is no question about the critical need to examine how differences in context might influence second language learning.

For American L2 learners, two particular contexts stand out as prime targets for comparison: the formal academic classroom at home (AH) and study-abroad (SA) settings, which combine classroom-based learning with immersion in the native speech community. Traditionally, SA has often been described as one of the surest ways to acquire fluency in a second language, although the term *fluency* itself is used in numerous, and often conflicting, ways (Riggenbach “Perspectives”). Despite the popularity of this belief, there is little empirical evidence to support it. In fact, there is not much more than accumulated anecdotal reports to fuel the devoutly held conviction that students who spend time abroad are those who become the most proficient in their use of target languages. As a whole, the extant research is inconsistent and often contradictory; thus meaningful educational conclusions cannot be drawn, and there are not sufficient data to inform and strengthen pedagogical, funding, programmatic, and policy decisions.

The research we describe here focuses on the acquisition of spoken and written fluency in French as an L2 by American students whose learning took place in the formal AH language classroom as contrasted to the acquisition by stu-

dents whose learning occurred, in part, in a SA context. Our discussion centers on two companion studies. The first, reported by Barbara Freed (“What”), addresses the acquisition of oral fluency by students of French who studied in these two different settings. The second, reported here for the first time, describes the acquisition of written fluency by these same students. Before we describe the project and its findings, a review of the relevant literature will provide a background to our investigation.

## Contexts of Learning and the AH Formal Language Classroom

Central to any discussion about the role that context plays in L2 learning is an understanding of what is meant by “context of learning.” For many this term includes the broad, general L2 speech environment that surrounds learners (and thus the L2 exposed to the L2 learner) both in and out of the classroom. Early explorations of this topic suggested that learner language<sup>1</sup> results from a combination of input, interaction with native speakers (NSs), and the role of innate predispositions for language learning.<sup>2</sup>

In the broader domain of L2 studies, a diverse array of scholars has addressed various aspects of L2 learning in the context of the formal classroom. In fact, the vast majority of research on adult L2 learning has been based on learning that takes place in this context; much of that re-

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search has been summarized by Dick Allright and Kathleen Bailey and by Craig Chaudron. These studies range from the examination of the nature and influence of teacher language to topics such as the role of instruction, teaching techniques, the impact of corrective feedback, the roles of input and output, assessment, individual differences, learner strategies, learner anxiety, motivation, and the role of universal grammar (UG) principles in the process of L2 acquisition.

Contextually oriented ethnographic studies have also been conducted on L2 learning in the formal classroom setting. Claire Kramsch, for example, has pursued the issue of socially constructed discourse in the context of a multicultural language classroom and emphasized the need to promote teaching language as social practice (“Making”). Carl Blyth has followed in kind by exploring classrooms as multilingual speech communities and articulating the need to “redefine the boundaries of language study” (145).

Furthermore, the work of sociocultural theorists (e.g., Hall; Lantolf) has brought a new orientation to the study of L2 acquisition, an approach that stresses socially constructed communicative practices. This orientation views learners as “active and creative participants in . . . sociocognitively complex tasks” (Lantolf 419). It also provides a redefinition of L2 classrooms and the learning communities constructed in them as the “fundamental sites of development [in which] teachers and students together develop understandings of what constitutes language and language learning” (Hall 304). The work by these scholars has expanded the meaning and interpretation of the formal language classroom, opening it to the influences of broader contexts.

### Study Abroad Compared with the Formal Language Classroom

Unlike the literature on L2 classrooms summarized above, the literature on L2 learning in a SA context is not well known; far less diverse in its foci; and, so far, less compelling in its findings. Recently, scholars have been intrigued by the lack of empirical evidence to support assumptions and intuitions regarding the linguistic advantages of time spent abroad. They have undertaken a series of studies that compare SA and AH students in their use of specific linguistic features. In these studies, SA students improved significantly more than AH students in oral expression. This improvement was characterized by a greater ease and confidence, a greater abundance and faster rate of speech, and fewer dysfluent-sounding pauses (Freed, “What”); by the use of a wider range of communicative strategies (Lafford); by more native-like sociolinguistic skills (Regan); and by a substantial increase in vocabulary (Milton and Meara).

While most studies have focused on oral aspects of linguistic gain during the time of studying abroad, some re-

searchers have dealt with various aspects of literacy. Both Thom Huebner and Rebecca Kline, for instance, addressed the social functions of literacy. They found that SA students had more positive attitudes toward reading and that their selection of reading material was influenced by their interactions in the native speech community. However, Dan Dewey’s recent study comparing intensive domestic immersion programs with SA learning showed that the domestic-immersion—not the SA-context—resulted in a greater gain in reading skill. With the exception of several studies that provide students’ self-reported assessments on gains in writing, no empirical study to date compares the acquisition of writing skills by SA and AH students.

Finally, SA students appear to develop a powerful set of beliefs about the process of language learning. Student perceptions—relatively well defined if sometimes inaccurate—as identified by qualitative analyses of the experiences of American SA students in Russia were shown to exert a strong influence on their actual learning (Brecht and Robinson; Miller and Ginsberg). Recent literature has also introduced a series of unexpected, provocative findings on student experiences in SA contexts. This literature signals caution with respect to common generalizations about the nature of SA students’ linguistic growth or to the nature of the SA experience itself. Stories told by many authors, often in their students’ voices, speak to the strikingly individual nature of students’ experiences and indicate that the SA experience and student interaction in the native speech community may be far more limited than has previously been believed (Polanyi; Rivers; Wilkinson).

While some tentative conclusions may be drawn from this preliminary work, many of these studies have significant shortcomings: the size or duration of the respective projects, the frequent lack of control groups, and particularly the use of test scores as the only criterion for evaluation.<sup>3</sup> With a few notable exceptions, the literature so far tells us little about actual language use or specific linguistic variables. Even so, it is important, given the powerful set of beliefs about the linguistic benefits that accrue to those who spend time in SA settings.

### Project Goals and Description

The central research focus of our project was the acquisition of spoken and written fluency in French as L2 by American learners whose learning occurred in one of two settings: AH formal language classrooms and SA settings that include classroom instruction complemented by interaction in the social context of the native speech community.

The construct of fluency was chosen as the linguistic feature to investigate because it is the term most frequently used to describe the language of students who have been abroad. Unfortunately there is no one commonly accepted definition for *fluency*. In the research

literature, its definitions span a continuum that includes underlying speech planning and production; “articulate, elegant, limitless, rapid, and appropriate” talk; and temporal and hesitation phenomena. While fluency is less frequently used to describe written language, there again it assumes a range of notions that include accuracy, quantity, flow of language, and stylistic appropriateness. In sum, the notion of fluency seems to be based on a combination of learner attributes that interact to create the perception of ease in language use.

Exploring the influence of context on L2 learning, we wanted to find empirical support for the common perception of fluent language use. Through this exploratory study, we hoped to provide more definitive answers to the questions about underlying constructs of oral versus written fluency and the transferability of oral to written fluency.

Freed studied the acquisition of oral fluency by students whose learning occurred in two contexts: one group spent a semester studying in Tours or Paris, France; language learning for the other was essentially limited to the formal on-campus classroom at their home university located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (“What”). A more recent study, using the same data, examined the acquisition of written fluency by the same SA and AH students. The goal of this project as a whole was to answer the following three questions:

Are the speech and writing of the SA students perceived by the native speaker (NS) judges as more fluent than those of the AH students?

What are the bases of the subjective evaluations provided by the NS judges?

Are these judgments supported by underlying linguistic and textual features? That is, is there any relation between the global ratings supplied by the judges and empirically identified underlying linguistic and textual features?

### The Student Population

The student population comprised thirty undergraduates: seven males and twenty-three females. Fifteen went abroad to study for the semester, and fifteen remained on campus. The first language of all but three students was English; those three possessed near-native fluency in English. Participants had studied varying amounts of French, ranging from a few intensive months to nine years, before this research project began. During the first semester, SA and AH students were registered in a variety of courses, ranging from the study of the French language to French literature, history, art history, economics, and religion. While in France, most SA students lived with their host families, although some lived in a “chambre de bonne” or the university residence. As usually happens, contact with native speakers of French varied considerably from student to student.

### Oral Fluency Study: Summary

As reported in Freed (“What”; “Is”), a wide range of data were collected for all students, including assessments of motivation, anxiety, aptitude, and pre- and posttests of oral and written proficiency. No differences were found in motivation or anxiety between the two groups. There was a significant difference in aptitude (as measured by the Modern Language Aptitude Test), but contrary to our expectations it was the AH group that demonstrated the greater aptitude for language learning.

Oral samples were collected through the Oral Proficiency Interview given at the very beginning and the end of the semester, in both the United States and France. These samples were subjected to two analyses. The first was a subjective evaluation by six nonteacher NS judges of several samples of each student’s speech. After a review of the judges’ ratings, linguistic analysis of the speech samples of eight students’ speech<sup>4</sup> was performed in an effort to identify features of fluency that might distinguish SA students from AH students. For this analysis, a cluster of fluency-related features was used to compare the spoken fluency of students in these two different learning contexts.<sup>5</sup>

The results of the oral fluency study demonstrated that the NS judges reliably detected differences in the speech of the two groups. In providing global perceptions of the students’ speech, they indicated that at the end of the semester those who had spent a semester in a SA context sounded more fluent. There were high inter- and intrarater correlations in these judgments, which meant we could be confident in the scores they gave to the students. After the judges’ subjective evaluations were analyzed, the judges were asked to describe, in writing, what they personally believed might have influenced their judgments.

In summary the judges related that they were influenced by the speed at which the students spoke, the accuracy of their grammar, vocabulary, the articulateness of their speech, the flow or lack of hesitation, and the tendency not to stumble over words. They used terms such as “ease,” “confidence in speech,” “enunciation,” and “accent rhythm of phrases.” When subsequently asked to review a list of eight possible components of fluency and to identify those they considered most important in selecting the students whom they had rated as more fluent, five of the six judges identified *rate of speech*, *smoother speech*, and *fewer false starts* as the most important factors. Four of the six judges specified *better grammar and vocabulary* and *fewer pauses and hesitations* as major factors.

After the judges’ account of their perceptions of global fluency, we sought to identify linguistic features in the speech of these eight (four AH and four SA) students. We found a number of speech features that seemed to support the judges’ perceptions. The SA students spoke significantly more and faster. In addition to the mere quantity and rate of their speech, there was also a tendency for their speech to be characterized by a number of

temporal features commonly associated with oral fluency. There were fewer clusters of dysfluencies such as unduly long pauses and groups of filled pauses. They also had longer speech runs. In short, the SA students were shown to have made greater progress than the AH students in both perceived fluency and actual speech features.

### Written Fluency Study: Procedures

While the speech corpus for the initial oral fluency study was collected, written samples were also gathered from the same group of SA and AH students. Using the oral study as a point of departure, we later undertook an analysis of written fluency and addressed the same three questions to determine if similar findings could be obtained.

For this aspect of the study, both the AH and SA students were asked to write an essay at the beginning of the semester (on the most memorable vacation or trip they took in the past year) and at the end of the semester (on the most memorable weekend or trip they had taken during that semester).<sup>6</sup> As in the study of oral fluency, rather than evaluate the writings of all thirty students who had participated in the study, we considered only the writings of the eight students whose speech had been closely analyzed for features of oral fluency.

The five nonteacher NS judges (three of whom had also participated in evaluating the students' oral fluency in the earlier study) were asked to evaluate the students' compositions for fluency. We gave the judges no definition of fluency, telling them that there was no right or wrong answer and that they were free to interpret *fluency* however they wished. They reported their subjective evaluations on a scale of 1 to 7, indicating those compositions that were "not at all fluent," "very fluent," or somewhere in between.

After the judges had reported their holistic evaluations of the written samples, we asked them, just as in the oral study, to tell us what they believed had most influenced their judgments. As a final step, we asked them to check off on a list which of the following textual features they believed most influenced their ratings: grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, organization, complexity of thought and of writing, length of composition, use of idiomatic expression, and other.

As in the oral study, we then analyzed specific textual features to determine if we could demonstrate a relation between the global ratings given by the judges and the empirically identified aspects of students' written texts. For this analysis we focused on several different textual features commonly used in text analysis research.

### Written Fluency Study: Results

The judges perceived the written fluency of the AH students, on average, to be higher than that of the SA

students in both pre- and posttests. Their perceptions of the written fluency of the SA students increased over the course of the semester, but the difference was not statistically significant.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the judges' holistic evaluations of the written fluency of the AH students appeared, on average, to decline slightly in the course of the semester. These results are unlike those of the oral fluency study. Nothing seemed to suggest that the SA students' writing was more fluent as a result of their having spent time abroad.

The NS judges' written responses included references to grammar, vocabulary, expression of thought, and organization. All five judges mentioned grammatical accuracy (e.g., "basic knowledge of French grammar"), the use of grammatical constructions like *singulier-pluriel*, *accords*, and *temps des verbes*. Four comments concerned vocabulary (e.g., "richer," "choice of words affects the quality"). Three judges referred to expression of thoughts (e.g., "flow of lines," "the expression of thought is more elaborate," "thoughts seemed well organized," "continuity of thoughts and executing them in stylistic form"). Text organization was mentioned by two judges.

On the checklist of textual features, the judges' responses were as follows: grammatical accuracy (5 of 5), vocabulary (5 of 5), organization (3 of 5), complexity of thoughts and of writing (2 of 5), length of composition (1 of 5), and use of idiomatic expressions (1 of 5). The unanimous agreement on the importance of grammatical accuracy and vocabulary was also expressed by the judges in the oral study.

The analysis of textual features considered the length (number of words, sentences, and T-units), grammatical accuracy (proportion of error-free T-units, correct noun-adjective agreement, subject-verb agreement, and past-tense usage), syntactic complexity (number of words per T-unit), and lexical density (proportion of *lexical words*).<sup>8</sup> The length of composition was measured in number of words, sentences, and T-units. We found some interesting differences between the two groups. The SA students tended to use many more words in their posttest essays than in their pretest ones. The opposite was true for the AH students. Similarly, the later essays of the SA students used more sentences than their earlier essays, while the opposite was true for the AH group. Further, the SA students showed increased use of T-units while the AH students' use of T-units decreased over the course of the semester.

We also analyzed error-free T-units and specific types of grammatical categories but found no difference between the two groups. None of the grammatical correctness measures revealed a significant difference between the two groups, when considering the change from pretest to posttest essay. This finding is consistent with the SA research literature to date, suggesting no comparative gain for SA students with respect to grammatical accuracy.

The length of T-units was measured to discriminate the levels of syntactic complexity of compositions on the

one hand and of lexical density on the other. Again, the analysis focused on the difference between the post- and pretest essays. The change in the average number of words per T-unit was similar in both groups. The lexical density of the SA students' compositions increased by the end of the semester, whereas that of the AH students' compositions stayed about the same. Note, however, that the increase for the SA group is due mainly to vast jumps in the lexical density of the essays of two students.<sup>9</sup> The rest of the SA students were comparable with the AH students.

In response to the original three questions that guided us through our research, we found the following.

In speech, the NS judges perceived that the SA students were more fluent. This difference was found consistently, reliably, and sometimes (statistically) significantly. Time spent abroad therefore appears to enhance certain aspects of oral fluency. In writing, however, the SA students were not perceived to be more fluent. Our study shows therefore that SA experience does not necessarily enhance learners' written fluency.

For both oral and written language use, the NS judges claimed that good control of grammar and rich vocabulary influenced their judgments of fluency (see table 1). These attributes of fluency, of course, differ according to the distinct features of oral and written language. With respect to oral language, the judges conveyed that they were most influenced by "better or more complex grammar" and "richness of vocabulary." They stated similarly that grammar and vocabulary were major factors in their judgments regarding fluency of student writing. The judges indicated that their decisions were also based on content and its organization (e.g., "the expression of thought is more elaborate," "continuity of thoughts," "thoughts seemed well organized," "logic of story followed through the whole text").

For spoken fluency, the judges' evaluations are supported by underlying linguistic and textual features. The amount and rate of speech, unfilled and filled pauses, clusters of dysfluencies, and fluent speech runs all correlate with the judges' global perceptions of oral fluency. For

written fluency, however, the answer is unclear. The judges did not perceive greater fluency in the SA students' essays, but those students' greater (though not statistically significant) development over the course of one semester abroad was indicated in the judges' ratings. Further, none of the textual features analyzed independently—except for length and possibly lexical density—showed a consistent pattern associated with the judges' global ratings or with the difference of the two learning contexts. The posttest essays written by the SA students were much longer and slightly denser in lexical use than their pretest essays. The AH students did not show this difference.

The results of our study suggest that the context of learning influences the acquisition of certain linguistic features in both speech and writing, particularly the length of spoken and written utterances and the amount of language used. Furthermore, the ever-elusive construct of fluency indeed appears to be supported by underlying linguistic features that can be empirically identified. Although we do not have robust support for this statement, the oral fluency study does provide support. In the written fluency study,<sup>10</sup> the essay length was the only measure that clearly differentiated the SA and AH essays when the development over the course of one semester was examined. As a matter of fact, fluency in writing is usually measured by counting the amount of production (Polio), and studies show positive correlations between the essay length and the quality (e.g., Gaies; Intaraprawat and Steffensen). Although this measure was not supported by the NS judges' global perceptions in our study, it may relate to other textual features, such as an "interestingness" or "boringness" factor, that may have influenced their decisions. Writers who had more interesting stories to tell (e.g., a trip to Turkey versus a weekend in Pittsburgh) and wanted to relate more interesting narratives might have written more.

With respect to written fluency, the judges may not have known explicitly, or have been able to define precisely, what it was that influenced their judgments, though they were asked. While the term *fluency* is frequently used in discussion of L2 learning, exactly what it means has rarely, if ever, been defined or seriously debated. Those who use this term may assume that there is some tacitly agreed-on meaning for it, but nothing could be further from the truth.

**Table 1**  
Bases of Subjective Evaluations Provided by the NS Judges

Oral Fluency	Written Fluency
Grammar	Grammar
Vocabulary	Vocabulary
Articulateness	Expression of thoughts
Speed	Text organization
Flow, lack of hesitation, no stumbling over words	
Ease, confidence in speech	

## Notes

A more extensive discussion of this general literature was presented at the ADL Seminar West (2002), and earlier versions of the specific research were presented at the 1998 MLA Annual Convention and the 1999 Annual Conference of the American Association for Applied Linguistics. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Barbara Freed, Department of Modern Languages, Baker Hall 160, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-3890 or e-mailed to [bf0u@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:bf0u@andrew.cmu.edu).

<sup>1</sup>Learner language is often realized as a simplified version of the target language used by native speakers in conversation with L2 learners, the register termed “foreigner talk” by Ferguson.

<sup>2</sup>This predisposition is essentially an assertion of Chomsky.

<sup>3</sup>The scores have pronounced ceiling effects, and they are only holistic in the case of the Oral Proficiency Interview tests.

<sup>4</sup>These students were selected to make the comparison valid and meaningful. The four AH students had never been abroad before; all eight students were native speakers of English; all were rated at the lower and mid levels of oral fluency in pre- and postconditions; they all had similar prefluency ratings; and they made significant progress in the course of the semester.

<sup>5</sup>These features are amount of speech; rate of speech; frequency of unfilled pauses; frequency of filled pauses; length of fluent speech runs; repairs such as repetitions of exact words, syllables, and phrases; reformulations or false starts; corrections or grammatical repair; partial repeats; and clusters of dysfluencies. These are temporal features of speech and a variety of dysfluency markers that have emerged in prior studies as most salient in characterizing different levels of fluency in nonnative speakers (e.g., Lennon; Olynyk, d'Anglejan, and Sankoff; Riggenbach, “Nonnative Fluency”; Temple).

<sup>6</sup>Students were told that the description should be as detailed as possible and that they should explain what made their experiences memorable. They were not to exceed both sides of one sheet of paper. They were given unlimited time to write their compositions, but the use of dictionaries or grammar books was not permitted. Later these essays were typed by a graduate student who was a near-native speaker of French, so that no possible prejudice could be caused by poor handwriting or a careless presentation. The typist did not alter any aspect of the students' written texts. The typed essays were double-checked by one of the researchers.

<sup>7</sup>In the two-sample T-tests calculated for the difference in the judges' scores, the findings were not significant.

<sup>8</sup>T-unit, or Minimal Terminable Unit, is a measure of the linguistic complexity of sentences, defined as the shortest unit that a sentence can be reduced to and consisting of the independent clause together with whatever dependent clauses are attached to it. *Lexical words* are so-called content words as opposed to function words. *Lexical words* refer to a thing, quality, state, or action and have meaning when the words are used alone. These features are frequently used in text-based studies (Polio; Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, and Kim).

Other measures attempted are cohesive devices drawing on the work of Halliday and Hasan, lexical features based on the French Lexical Frequency Profile (LFP), and topical structure analysis (TSA) (Lautamatti; Schneider and Connor). LFP, in which vocabulary profiles were produced from NS student writing on the basis of the frequency of the words, allows us to measure the proportions of frequent and infrequent words used in texts. TSA is a text-analysis technique that determines whether T-unit topics are linked through parallel, sequential, or extended parallel progression.

Where there was an indication that a measure might distinguish fluent from less-fluent essays but not the SA essays from the AH ones, that measure was not subjected to statistical analysis in our SA-AH comparison study.

<sup>9</sup>These same two students were those with the lowest oral scores, as measured both by the NS judges and the subsequent linguistic analyses. Also they had studied the least amount of French before their sojourns abroad.

<sup>10</sup>Aside from SA-AH comparison, we carried out a somewhat more sophisticated statistical analysis comparing essays of higher fluency ratings and those of lower ratings, which created a specific struc-

ture of the data. That is to say, for some students both pretest and posttest essays were categorized as fluent, for others both were categorized as less fluent. We found a number of borderline-significant measures that may distinguish fluent from less-fluent essays as judged by the NS judges. They are number of words, LFP percentage from the first list, LFP percentage from the second list, and percentage of TSA's sequential progression.

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This chapter explores free writing as a technique to improve students' writing fluency at two different high schools in Japan. It finds that in one high school gains in writing speed are considerable, while at the other they are less compelling, illustrating the importance of conducting contextualized research in order to verify the efficacy of pedagogic interventions. While individual teachers interpret fluency differently, most working in EFL agree that it has a considerable influence on the success or failure of students' language learning. In EFL contexts, the absence of fluency-based practice more. While individual teachers interpret fluency differently, most working in EFL agree that it has a considerable influence on the success or failure of students' language learning. 2003 Language learning abroad: How do gains in written fluency compare with gains in oral fluency in French as a second language? ADFL BULLETIN 34(3): 34-40. Grabe, W. & Kaplan, R.B. 2009 Changes in English as a foreign language students' writing over 3.5 years: A sociocognitive account. In *Writing in Foreign Language Contexts: Learning, Teaching, and Research*, R. Manchón (ed.), 49-76. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. Sasaki, M. Language learning abroad: How do gains in written fluency compare with gains in oral fluency in French as a second language? ADFL Bulletin, 34(3), 34-40. Gass, S, and Mackey A. (2015). Investigating fluency in EFL: A quantitative approach. *Language Learning*, 40(3), 387-417. Lightbown, P. M. (2012). Intensive L2 instruction in Canada: Why not immersion? in C. Muñoz, (ed) 2012. *Intensive exposure experiences in Second Language Learning*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. Llanes, A. (2012). The impact of study abroad and age. In C. Muñoz (ed) *Intensive exposure experiences in Second Language Learning*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. Llanes, A., & Muñoz, C. (2009). A short stay abroad: Does it make a difference? *System*, 37(3), 353-365.