

What we don't learn in the classroom: the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence during study abroad

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This study examines the acquisition of target-like patterns of variation by 23 American learners of French during study abroad (SA) in France and correlates such acquisition with the creation of dense, multiplex, exchange-based social networks (Milroy 1980) with native speakers (NSs) during the SA period. In this study, naturalistic speech data are recorded via sociolinguistic interviews (Labov 1966) and structured elicitation tasks at multiple points during the academic year (13 students) or semester (10 students) in order to provide empirical evidence for the acquisition of 3 phonological variables showing stylistic variation in NS speech: 1) the elision of clitic nucleic vowels (je vois [ʒœvwa] ~ [ʒvwa] 'I see'; tu es allé [tyeale] ~ [teale] 'you went'); 2) the elision of /l/ in third-person subject pronouns (il vient [ilvj] ~ [ivj]), and; 3) the reduction of word-final consonant clusters (notre maison [notœmʒ] ~ [notmʒ] 'our house'). Speech data are compared and correlated, using multivariate analysis and logistical regression, with the results of a social network strength scale (SNSS, Milroy 1980:139) designed by the researcher for the SA learning context and completed by each learner. The SNSS includes both density and multiplexity measures related to the number of hours spent interacting with NSs, the strength and number of links between members of the social network, and the breadth of activities and topics covered in these interactions.

SA programs have long been regarded as essential to achieving advanced L2 competency; however, longitudinal studies on the benefits of SA are lacking in both quantity and clarity of results. For example, numerous studies indicate that at-home learners progress equally or more rapidly than SA learners on grammatical measures (Herschensohn 2003, Collentine 2004, Freed 2004) and factors such as living with a host family fail to yield significant results (Magnan and Back 2007). In the area of sociolinguistic competence, studies of L2 French learners in both SA and immersion classroom contexts have shown that the length of time spent in a francophone environment and/or in non-classroom interactions with NSs is the most influential factor in the learner's development (Mougeon et al. 2010; Nagy, Blondeau, and Auger 2003; Regan 1996; Regan, Howard and Lemée 2009; Sax 2003). Clearly, sociolinguistic competence is not acquired in the L2 classroom, yet we lack empirical evidence demonstrating how SA may facilitate such acquisition. Results for this study include approximately 6,000 tokens (where 'token' indicates a site for elision or reduction) of clitic nucleic vowels, 2,000 tokens of /l/ in subject pronouns, and over 500 tokens of word-final consonant clusters from sociolinguistic interviews alone. Structured elicitation tasks (reading passage, word list) provide an additional 9,000, 4,500, and 3,000 tokens respectively. Global and individual results demonstrate a significant role for the creation of social networks with NSs, a hierarchy of acquisition for the three phonological variables, and a sensitivity to morpho-syntactic variation (ne deletion, use of on vs. nous, done as a discourse marker) that precedes acquisition of target-like patterns of phonological variation.