Chapter 2
Learning Languages Abroad: The Influence of the Length of Stay on Communicative Competence

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ABSTRACT
This chapter presents research on language learning abroad and its influence on the development of oral expression. By using biographical-narrative research methods, specifically linguistic life stories, this work examines the experiences and beliefs of a Japanese student of Spanish who has studied this language in Spain on several occasions. This study attempts to determine how study abroad has influenced his language training and the development of his communicative competence, in particular oral expression. At the same time, it describes how the length of each stay abroad has helped or hindered the language learning process, the interaction with native speakers, and the practice of speaking skills.

INTRODUCTION
Foreign language teachers and students share a widespread belief that spending time in a country where the Target Language (TL) is used as a communications medium is necessary for anyone who wishes to learn and master the language, as well as to understand the culture or cultures in which it is used. One of the reasons for the conviction that studying a language abroad promotes and facilitates the acquisition of communicative competence is the belief that this context may allow students to receive more input and interact with native speakers and use the language more
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intensively than when they are studying in their own ‘home’ country. There exists research, however, that criticizes these ideas and puts under question the advantages of study abroad. For example, Lafford (2006), and Coleman and Chafer (2010) rejected the belief that students who learn a language abroad are more likely to interact with native speakers and that they learn more quickly than those studying in their home countries. Freed et al. (2004) questioned the usefulness of studying a language abroad and conclude that the advantages are the same or lower than those acquired in an intensive immersion program taken in one’s own country.

The methodology used in the majority of studies is also criticized. Coleman (2013), for instance, questioned the validity of the studies and the methodology that researchers have frequently used in this type of research. One of the aspects criticized is that often researchers use linguistic tests to try to evaluate the gains in linguistic knowledge, without taking into consideration extra-linguistic factors—such as the length of the stay or the living conditions—that may deeply influence the learning process abroad. We share these concerns and think that it is necessary to conduct research about second-language acquisition in the study abroad context in a different way than has been done to date. We believe that it is essential to examine the extra-linguistic factors that may influence the learning process, taking into account the student’s perspective.

Thus, this chapter reports on a study of the influence of length of stay in the learning process and the development of communicative competence by using a biographical-narrative methodology. Through the analysis of the linguistic life story of a Japanese student of Spanish, who has studied in Spain on several occasions, and for different durations, we aim to describe how the length of the stay has helped or hindered the language learning process, the interaction with native speakers, and the practice of speaking skills.

BACKGROUND

Development of Communicative Competence Abroad: Oral Expression

A number of investigations conducted over the last decade analyzing the effects of the study abroad experience in relation to communicative competence coalesce in affirming that this learning context helps to improve oral expression skills, in particular those of fluency and pronunciation. The majority of these studies consider that advances in oral expression are produced because the students have more opportunity to use the language outside the classroom. Allen and Herron (2003), for
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