Investigating Long-term Oral Fluency Development during Study Abroad

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Abstract

Previous SA research focused on SA for a short duration, which might not be able to explore the impact of SA on L2 development fully. Therefore, this study examines how oral fluency develops in a long-term four-years study abroad in China. Oral data of an Italian L2 Chinese learner was collected from 2019 to 2022. The measure of speech rate was adopted. Results showed that SA had beneficial effects on Chinese oral fluency development and that the development was in a progressing but not linear pattern across time. Results also suggested accelerating fluency development during SA, shedding new light on related studies. Besides, the results proposed the combing effects of formal instruction and informal learning in SA and the potential influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on L2 learning. Such results allow us to understand L2 fluency development in SA better while presenting a full picture of fluency development in a long-term SA.

Keywords: *Study Abroad, CSL, oral fluency development, long term*

1. Introduction

Study Abroad (SA) has been claimed as an effective and efficient way of L2 learning (Kinginger 2013). It is taken for granted that abroad experience can promote L2 proficiency. Research on SA has covered various fields, from linguistic performance to nonlinguistic domains and intercultural competence (Isabelli-García et al. 2018). However, previous SA investigations focused on SA experience in a short duration, for example, weeks in Llanes and Muñoz (2009), months in Juan-Garau (2018), a summer in Han and Maeng (2014), a semester in Ding and Xiao (2016) and Du (2013), and a summer term, a spring/fall term, and a full year in Dewey (2004). Such durantions might not be able to explore the impact of SA on L2 development fully. Sasaki's (2009) study is one of few studies with a long SA period (3.5-year), which confirmed the belief on the better effect of a longer stay; however, the study focused on the written development, for which the beneficial effects of SA were mixed. Therefore, we conduct a study to investigate how oral fluency develops in the process of a four-year SA to examine the effects of long-term SA on L2 development.

2. Research questions and participant

The current study aims to explore how fluency develops in a long-term SA and what factors might affect the development with two research questions: (1) RQ1. How does SA benefit Chinese oral fluency development in CSL? (2) RQ2. What factors might affect Chinese oral fluency development during SA in China?

Our participant is a registered L2 Chinese student in a CSL program for a bachelor's degree in a southern Chinese university. He is a young male from Italy between 18 and 25. Although there are diverse interpretations of SA and mixed understandings of those who go abroad for a degree, we believe that the participant is a SA case in that he came to China to learn Chinese, and he has been in the state of study as a student during the investigation.

3. Research design and data collection

To measure development over time, the study's design is longitudinal. Investigations started in 2019 with the participant's consent and spanned the following years until 2022. In his first and second years (before the covid-19 pandemic), the participant was inclined toward a university life around classmates and learning buddies. During the vacation, he went back to Italy. In the pandemic, he turned to online learning in 2020 and 2021. He started his internship in Shanghai in June 2021.

Table 1 shows the collection points and traces during the study. Data were collected eight times in 2019, one time for 2020, and one for 2022. In the first semester of 2019, data was collected every month from March to June in T1, T2, T3 and T4, and in the second semester, every month from September to December in T5, T6, T7 and T8. For semesters in 2019, the first collection took place after the participant returned for formal instruction, and the last collection took place when he finished formal instruction. T9 and T10 data collection were at the beginning of each semester.

Table 1. Data collection

Year	2019					2019					2020			2022
semester	first					Second					first			first
	T1	T2	T3	T4	○,1	T5	T6	T7	T8	○,2	T9	○,3	○,4	T10

Note. ○,1○,2 Vacations; ○,3 the Covid-19 pandemic; ○,4 the internship period.

Two basic data collection methods were adopted, including a questionnaire and ten rounds of oral evaluations. Every evaluation consisted of warm-up questions and a narrative task on life experiences. The measure of speech rate was adopted as a distinguishing feature of fluent Chinese (Jin & Mak 2012). The transcription followed Ding and Xiao (2016) in segmenting syllables/words. Considering the specific syllable and word relationship in the Chinese language, the metric of syllables per minute was adopted as in previous CSL research (Du 2013; Wright & Zhang 2014).

Speech Rate. The total number of syllables/morphemes per minute.

4. Results

As in Table 2, oral data from 2019 to 2022 showed a complicated result. During the two semesters in 2019, data showed a general increasing pattern yet with slips. The speech rate from T1 to T4 was 108 syllables per minute, 125, 118 and 137, respectively. After a vacation, there was a lower start at the beginning of the second semester. Following came a strong bounce from T5 to T8, from 128 syllables per minute at T5 to 168 at T6, 194 at T7 and 192 at T8. A similarly lower start at the beginning of a semester was identified in 2020, with 141 syllables per minute. In 2022, the speech rate reached a magnificent figure of 227 syllables per minute.

Table 2. Speech rate from 2019 to 2022

Year	2019	2019	2020	2022

semester	first					Second					first			first
Time	T1	T2	T3	T4	○,1	T5	T6	T7	T8	○,2	T9	○,3	○,4	T10
Speech rate	108	125	118	137		128	168	194	192		141			227

Note. ○,1○,2 Vacations; ○,3 the Covid-19 pandemic; ○,4 the internship period.

Figure 1 shows fluency development in four years straightforwardly. The participant's fluency development had an upward tendency in the first semester of 2019 though with a slip (T3). Similarly, the developing line in the second semester shared similar progress with a slip (T4). It should be noted that while the speech date in the second semester had a lower start (T5) compared to that at the end of the first semester (T4), it was better than that at the beginning of the first semester (T1). Moreover, another similar lower start in 2020 (T9) also found a better speech rate than at the beginning of the second semester (T5). In 2022, there was a leap development of fluency at T10. There is a progressing tendency for fluency development with occasional downs, particularly at the beginning of each semester. In a word, the fluency development evidenced spiral escalation from 2019 to 2022.

Figure 1. Fluency development from 2019 to 2022
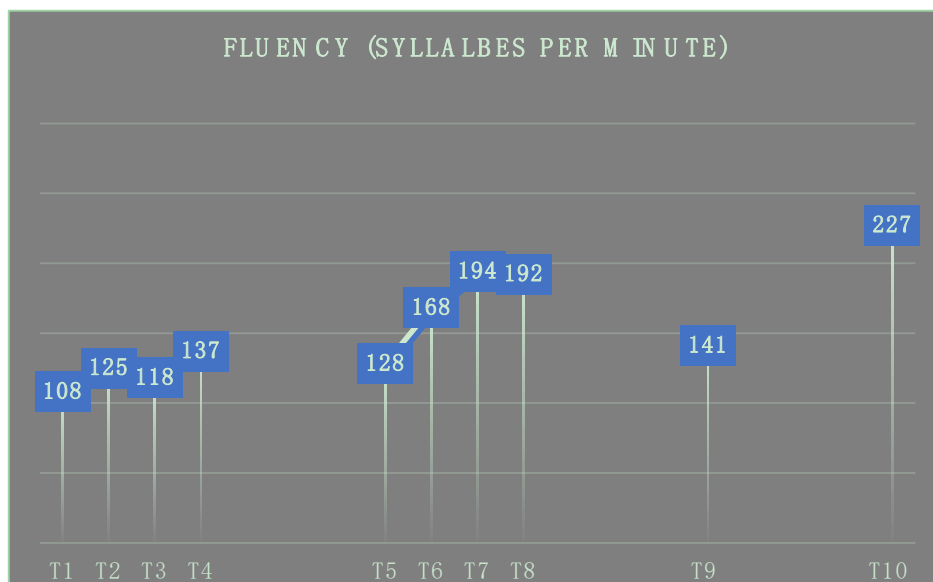
5. Discussion and conclusions

RQ1: the participant's fluency developed from 108 syllables per minute in 2019 to 227 syllables per minute in 2022, suggesting that SA experience positively affected oral Chinese fluency development. Such findings showed that SA had beneficial effects on Chinese oral fluency development, confirming previous research on the effect of SA (cf. Du 2013; Ding & Xiao 2016; Wright 2018). The different performances due to different lengths also confirm the effects of SA duration on linguistic attainment, in line with research holding beliefs on the longer the stay, the greater gains (Dewey 2004).

The findings also showed that fluency development was in a progressing pattern of spiral escalation. Even in the context of SA, fluency development fluctuated. It was not a linear development across time, and there were occasional slips. In addition, the development in the second semester had an accelerating manner compared to that in the first semester, suggesting that the effects of SA might be in an accelerating pattern with a longer stay. This accelerating manner can also be found between

2020 and 2022. While confirming the nonlinear development at varied development rates, such findings provide a new perspective on the length, the greater hypothesis.

RQ2: the participant's fluctuating performance suggested that fluency development was subjected to the influence of varied factors. The lower start at the beginning of each semester, particularly T5 and T9, indicated the potential impact of returning to one's native country. As noted, the participant would go back to Italy during the vacation, suggesting potential reasons for retrogressing. Such findings call for attention to post-SA continuation or durable impact as in Juan-Garau (2018) and post-SA instruction.

Our data did not cover 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic in December 2019. After the pandemic became serious in 2020, the university was closed, and international students turned to online education. The stresses on teachers and students with online education and the pandemic made data collection hard, although the participant remarked his struggle in the study with little progress. Thus, it suggested a potential influence of Covid-19 on language learning.

Luckily, the data collection went well in 2022. Data in 2022 showed a remarkable development, for which the participant commented with confidence. The development can attribute to the field practice starting from mid-2021. The participant had an internship in Shanghai, serving as an assistant on study abroad in Italy in an education consultancy. The internship provided abundant exchanges with native speakers on daily exchanges and work issues, including translation and interpretation. The remarkable result can be the outcome of the live SA experience and the aforementioned accelerating development. It is worth noting that the internship in a Chinese environment might have a better effect than just staying in the country to learn the language as the former provides opportunities for profound discussions, which is more demanding and more beneficial than surficial exchanges in SA daily life. Such results propose that fluency development and L2 development in SA might combine well with formal instruction in the classroom and informal acquisition outside the classroom.

To conclude, our results confirm previous research on the beneficial effect of SA and the length of SA on fluency development while pointing to nonlinear fluency development. We would like to emphasise the potential accelerating effect of SA associated with the length of SA. Besides, our results propose that fluency development is influenced by varied factors, including the Covid-19 pandemic and different SA environments on L2 learning. Such results give us a chance to understand better L2 fluency development in SA and an opportunity to examine the factors that characterise the effects of SA. Limitations of the study lie in the limited number of participants and the missing data concerning online education during the pandemic in 2021.

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