A longitudinal study of second language oral ability development during study abroad: The role of linguistic domains and individual differences

Hui Sun
Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom

It has been widely found that study-abroad experience is beneficial for L2 oral gains in specific linguistic domains including fluency (Freed et al., 2004), pronunciation (Martinsen et al., 2014), grammar and vocabulary (Hardison, 2014), and that the L2 oral gains can be influenced by a range of individual differences such as L2 contact, motivation (Yu, 2010), age, aptitude (Serrano & Llanes, 2015), initial proficiency level (Golonka, 2006), etc. However, only a few researchers have investigated the overall L2 oral gains (measured by ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview) and mixed findings were reported regarding which variables play a key role in determining successful study-abroad experience (e.g., ”L2 contact” for Hernández, 2010; ”social network & cultural sensitivity” for Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014).

Building on this line of L2 research, this study examines the same topic but focusing on two different aspects of learners’ global L2 oral ability development—enhanced comprehensibility (ease of understanding) and reduced accentedness (linguistic nativelikeness). Specifically, comprehensibility is a relatively learnable domain as the more learners use L2, the more they will be understandable, whereas accentedness is a domain less likely to be improved (Derwing & Munro, 2013). Thus, the main objective of the research project concerns a longitudinal investigation of the complex relationships between L2 oral ability development, two linguistic domains and individual differences.

Data will be collected from oral tests (picture narratives, rated by English native speakers), aptitude tests (LLAMA; Meara, 2005), questionnaires (based on the L2 Motivational Self System; Dörnyei, 2005) and interviews with at least 30 Chinese learners of English at the beginning and end of one semester within their first year study abroad. L2 learners are hypothesized to have more gains in comprehensibility than in accentedness. L2 contact is hypothesized to be the strongest indicator of gains in comprehensibility while aptitude of gains in accentedness.

Keywords: comprehensibility, accentedness, L2 oral ability, study abroad.