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# Oral fluency, sociolinguistic competence, and language contact: Arabic learners studying abroad in Egypt



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the development of oral fluency and sociolinguistic competence in 21 U.S. university Arabic learners studying for four months in three programs in Egypt. Two measures of oral fluency (speech rate and mean length of run) were measured in pre and post sociolinguistic interviews. Sociolinguistic competence was operationalized as the percent of Egyptian phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical items used in the post interview (students had not been extensively exposed to Egyptian dialect prior to study abroad). The results demonstrate that while students made gains in oral fluency on average, not all students made gains. However, all students gained in sociolinguistic competence, implying that this measure of oral performance may not be captured by fluency measures. Observation and interview data were used to analyze the experiences of high and low gainers on each measure. These results show that high gainers socialized in Arabic with both study abroad students and Egyptians, while low gainers primarily socialized with other study abroad students in English. Program components helped shape social networks and language use. The study concludes with recommendations for measuring oral gains during study abroad and program interventions.

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## 1. Introduction

While study abroad is sometimes viewed as an unparalleled opportunity for language learning, research on linguistic gains during study abroad reveals considerable variation in language development abroad (Freed, 2008; Kinginger, 2009). To understand this variation, researchers have turned to more detailed measures of linguistic gain and students' experiences abroad (e.g. Baker-Smemoe, Dewey, Bown, & Martinsen, 2014b; Kinginger, 2008; Regan, Howard, & Lemée, 2009). This paper furthers this research by examining gains in the oral fluency and sociolinguistic competence of U.S. university learners studying Arabic for four months in Egypt. It also analyzes the relationship between these two types of oral performance, and between oral performance and student experiences abroad. The results demonstrate that while students generally made gains in oral fluency, some did not. However, all students gained in sociolinguistic competence, indicating that this measure of oral performance may not be captured by fluency measures. While language contact correlated positively with gains in oral performance, there was extensive individual variation. Using qualitative data to examine the experiences of high and low gainers on each measure demonstrates that while the high gainers socialized in Arabic with both study abroad students and Egyptians, the low gainers tended to socialize in English with other study abroad students. Program components helped shape social networks and language use.

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## 2. Literature review

Oral performance has been a primary focus of research on linguistic gains during study abroad, as real-life interactions in the target language are an expected benefit of this experience. Oral performance has been examined through a variety of measures, including global proficiency tests, fluency measures, and analyses of sociolinguistic variation.

### 2.1. Global proficiency measures

Global proficiency measures test students based on recognized proficiency standards such as those developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) or Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). In research on study abroad, the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) appears to be the most commonly used measure of global oral proficiency. Studies measuring oral proficiency using the ACTFL OPI have typically found that students improve their oral proficiency test scores following study abroad (e.g. Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014b; Davidson, 2010; Magnan & Back, 2007; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009). However, these studies also demonstrate that not all students make gains abroad, and that there is considerable individual variation, even among students in the same program. Furthermore, global proficiency measures may mask gains within a given proficiency level, especially at more advanced levels (Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014b).

### 2.2. Oral fluency

To look more closely at linguistic gains abroad, researchers have used complexity, accuracy, and fluency measures, as these represent distinct dimensions in second language acquisition (Housen, Kuiken, & Vedder, 2012). Fluency features consisting of temporal and hesitation measures are the most frequently examined. Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey (2004) used nine measures of fluency and oral performance to compare students studying abroad, at home, and in domestic immersion. They found that these gains were only significant for three measures in the context of domestic immersion (total words, longest turn, and speech rate) and there were not significant gains for study abroad. Comparing study abroad and at home groups using eight measures of fluency and oral performance, Segalowitz and Freed (2004) found that only the study abroad group made significant gains, and only on four measures (number of words in the longest turn, speech rate, absence of filled pauses, and number of words in the longest fluent run). Looking at three measures of fluency (total number of characters, speech rate, and longest turn), Du (2013) found that learners studying in China improved on all three measures. In terms of accuracy and complexity, Collentine (2004) found that study abroad students did not improve on measures of grammatical accuracy or lexical ability, although they did have higher narrative abilities. García-Amaya (2009) examined learners at home, abroad, and in an intensive program abroad on 12 measures of fluency and oral performance and found that no one group was superior on all measures, and there was individual variation in each measure within each group. Thus, while measuring progress on complexity, accuracy, and fluency measures gives a more detailed picture of students' linguistic development than global proficiency tests, the overall results are similar: while students generally improve on some measures, not all students make gains, and there is considerable individual variation.

### 2.3. Sociolinguistic competence

The acquisition of sociolinguistic variation is a third area of oral performance that has been examined in research on study abroad. This research focuses on learners' abilities to use sociolinguistic variables like native speakers, an important part of language acquisition (Regan et al., 2009). Sociolinguistic variables are those linguistic elements that vary according social factors such as register, gender, or race (Bassiouney, 2009; Howard, 2012). They can include regional variables, which index belonging to a geographically located social group (Bassiouney, 2009).

Research demonstrates that while there is considerable individual variation among learners, they tend to overuse formal variants of the language. Much of this research has focused on learners of French, and analyzed sociolinguistic variables that vary according to the formality of the situation, as well as social factors such as age, gender, and geographic location (Howard, 2012; Regan et al., 2009). Studies of French learners abroad report that learners begin to acquire nativelike patterns of variation for sociolinguistic variables, but that they generally do not approximate native speaker norms (Howard, 2012; Howard, Lemée, & Regan, 2006; Regan et al., 2009).

Li (2010) examined the Chinese sociolinguistic variable DE, which is sometimes obligatory and at other times optional. When it is optional, it is more formal, and the learners in Li's study tended to use it much more than native speakers. However, more advanced learners and learners with longer residence in China were more likely to delete it. Thus, these results are similar to the findings for French learners, in that study abroad caused learners to move towards using the variable in sociolinguistically appropriate ways, if not meeting native speaker norms.

However, studies on Spanish learners have found limited use of Castilian regional variants, even after study abroad in areas where these features are nearly categorical (Geeslin & Gudmestad, 2008; George, 2014; Knouse, 2012; Ringer-Hilfinger, 2012). In the case of regional variants, students can still operate at the correct level of formality while using non-local variants, and Ringer-Hilfinger (2012) notes that students who reported more contact with Latin American Spanish speakers than locals in Spain were least likely to report use of the Spanish regional variant, and some students specifically avoided using it.

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