

**STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE IMPACT OF STUDY ABROAD
ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF ORAL LANGUAGE SKILLS
AND SELF-CONFIDENCE**

Bachelor's thesis

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Kasvaneiden mahdollisuuksien ja globalisaation myötä vaihto-opiskelu on lisääntynyt huomattavasti viime vuosikymmeninä. Vaihdoissa käyminen liitetään yleensä kehittyneeseen kielitaitoon kohdekielessä, ja erityisesti kehitystä näyttää tapahtuvan suullisen kielen osa-alueiden suhteen.</p> <p>Aikaisempi tutkimus vaihdossa käymisen vaikutuksista suullisen kielitaidon kehittymiseen on perustunut pääosin tapaus- tai vertailevien tutkimuksien tuottamaan dataan. Tällöin painotus on ollut selkeästi taitojen mittaamisessa tai kvalitatiivinen data on ollut peräisin yhdestä esimerkkitapauksesta. Siksi tämän tutkimuksen lähtökohtana oli tarkastella ilmiötä uudesta näkökulmasta ja tutkia nimenomaan opiskelijoiden omia kokemuksia. Tarkastelun kohteena olivat vaihdon vaikutus suullisen kielitaidon kehittymiseen, kielijännittyneisyyteen, itsevarmuuteen sekä kommunikaatiohalukkuuteen. Tutkimuksen keskiössä olivat yliopisto-opiskelijat, jotka olivat suorittaneet englanninkielisen vaihdon, jonka kesto oli joko lukukauden tai -vuoden.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittivat, että opiskelijoiden mielestä vaihto-opiskelulla on pääasiassa positiivinen vaikutus kaikkiin edellä mainittuihin ilmiöihin, mikä tuki aiempaa hypoteesia. Toisaalta tutkimus tuotti myös dataa, joka toi uusia näkökulmia ilmiöstä, haastaen samalla osin myös aiempaa tutkimusta. Nämä uudet näkökulmat loivat mahdollisuuden ymmärtää paremmin yksilöllisiä eroja, joita vaihtoon osallistuvilla on, ja jotka vaikuttavat vaihtokokemukseen ja jopa sen jälkeiseen elämään. Tutkimusta vaihtokontekstin vaikutuksesta opiskelijoiden kielitaitoon tulisi vielä kuitenkin tutkia lisää. Tulosten tuomien oivallusten myötä suomalaista kieltenopetusta voitaisiin auttaa kohtaamaan niitä epäkohtia, joihin nykyisen koulutusjärjestelmämme opetus ei vielä pysty vastaamaan.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad for a term or a whole semester has increased greatly in the last few decades for various reasons. Study abroad (hereafter = SA, also known as exchange) combines classroom-based learning and residency in the target country (Freed 1995, cited in Allen and Herron 2003; 370), therefore, yielding great comprehensible input and learning opportunities for students. Regarding study abroad, there is always a strong assumption that it results in better linguistic abilities, especially when it comes to oral skills. However, developing one's linguistic skills is nowadays rarely the only or even the main reason students take part in exchanges. Many participate in an exchange, for instance, to travel, experience something new, or learn about the culture. The shift from needing or wanting to learn a language to the beforementioned reasons, for example, might explain why some studies about the study abroad context's effectivity have produced mixed results (see e.g., Allen and Herron 2003: 373). Nevertheless, the study abroad context and linguistic development form a combination worth more thorough research.

The present study will examine students' views and experiences on studying abroad from the perspective of English oral skill development and psycholinguistics. On the contrary to previous research (see e.g., McManus et al. 2020; Allen and Herron 2003), the focus of the present study is more on qualitative research, although it offers quantitative data as well. Furthermore, the intention is not to highlight development of oral skills through test scores or case studies but to provide insight on students' own experiences on the matter. For many languages, the choice of the target country is usually limited to the "native" country itself, whereas for the English language the opportunities are greater. Students can take part in SA with English as the target language in various countries, as many higher education institutions provide degrees with English as the medium of instruction. The present study does not focus only on researching SA contexts that are "native" but contexts that share the same target language, English. This is due to the assumption that both native and non-native context can provide great learning opportunities. Moreover, the non-native study abroad context might generate different type of development and should therefore be included in research.

The aim of the presents study is to give the voice to the students and their experiences and thus, look at the phenomenon from a different perspective. Consequently, the intention is to better understand the role of foreign language anxiety, self-confidence, and willingness to

communicate on oral skill development in the study abroad context, as well as their impact on each other. The results from this study will enlighten which factors in the study abroad context support students' oral skill and psycholinguistic development, and vice versa. Moreover, the results will provide answers on aspects of oral skills that students find the most important and how long lasting the effect of study abroad is.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, I am going to explain the concepts of oral language skills, foreign language anxiety, and willingness to communicate and how they might fit into the context of study abroad. Furthermore, I will discuss previous research regarding the study abroad context and its effect on students' language abilities.

2.1 Oral language skills

Oral language skills can be understood and defined in many ways (Tergujeff and Kautonen 2019). Gordillo (2011, cited in Herrera Díaz and González Miy 2017: 75), for example, defines oral skills as the ability to express oneself vocally for the purpose of communicating, whilst using a language's linguistic principles. Whereas Gordillo's definition mainly focuses on the linguistic aspects of a language, Canale and Swain (1980, cited in Tergujeff and Kautonen 2019) acknowledge the role of communicative competence, thus, basing their definition on it. In addition to the linguistic skills, Canale and Swain's explanation recognises sociolinguistic abilities, such as conversation norms, and strategic abilities, such as non-verbal communication, as part of oral language skills.

As a consequence of various definitions for oral language skills, there are also many different indicators that can be used to study oral skills and their development. Herrera Diaz and González Miy (2017), for example, introduced four different indicators of oral skills in their study: fluency and coherence, lexical resources, grammatical range and correctness, and pronunciation. Although these indicators can well measure the linguistic aspect of one's oral language skills and, thus, fit my study, they do not explain the whole phenomenon. As Freed (1995) explains, only a little attention has been given to students' linguistic experiences and changes in their communicative language skills, regarding the study abroad context. Therefore, it is beneficial for the present study to also consider the aspect of communicative competence rather than focusing exclusively on linguistic competence.

2.2 Foreign language anxiety

Foreign language anxiety is a complicated and multidimensional phenomenon which functions as one of the predictors of foreign language achievement (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey & Daley 1999). It has various definitions; each a little different from the other but all share the general idea that language anxiety has a negative effect on people. Language anxiety is reported to appear when learning or using a new language, and it can cause feelings of nervousness and unease (Mitchell, Myles and Marsden's 2013: 298; MacIntyre 2007). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986: 127) further explain that foreign language anxiety is closely connected to three components of performance anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Of these three components, communication apprehension is most closely related to oral skills, because it is described to appear as fear or anxiety in communication situations. Therefore, it is recognised to be a great factor in foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al. 1986).

It could be argued that participating in study abroad and developing one's oral and communication skills can have a positive effect on language anxiety. For instance, Allen's and Herron's (2003) study showed that participants that had been studying abroad had lower feelings of anxiety when communicating in the target language, and improvements in their oral skills were also substantial. As my thesis focuses on oral skill development in the context of study abroad and further takes into consideration the aspect of self-confidence, it is important to understand language anxiety's effect on the process. It is known that language anxiety has a negative effect on second language learning (Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide and Shimizu 2004), and as feelings of anxiety are very individual, it is hard to state whether the study abroad context affects people's experiences. Therefore, it is essential to study the aspect of willingness to communicate together with language anxiety.

2.3 Willingness to communicate

Willingness to communicate (hereafter = WTC) is one of the key concepts in second language or foreign language learning, as it is strongly connected to feelings of anxiety and further, spoken communication. Using the literature on language anxiety and language learning motivation, the scholars draw a conclusion that the decision to initiate communication is indeed a volitional act (MacIntyre 2007). As a result of this conclusion, a concept of willingness to

communicate was introduced, and its degree was argued to change rapidly based on the situation one is in.

As explained in the previous subsection, it is important to look at language anxiety and willingness to communicate as related processes. In Yashima's et al (2004) model, willingness to communicate is affected by various factors, one of which was *Confidence in L2 communication*. It is related to self-confidence which is generally defined as being confident about one's own abilities and oneself. However, in the context of willingness to communicate, self-confidence is considered essential, as it includes both recognition of one's communication competence and a lower level of anxiety (MacIntyre 2007; Yashima et al. 2004). People's oral language skills and their development are, therefore, greatly impacted by all three: language anxiety, self-confidence, and willingness to communicate, and they all go hand in hand.

2.4 Study abroad as a language learning context

Study abroad is "a period of residence in another country or province where the target language is spoken, combined with classroom-based language and/or content area study" (Freed 1995, cited in Allen and Herron 2003; 370). Study abroad usually takes one or two terms to complete in the higher education level, but Martinsen (2010) explained that short exchanges that take around two months are becoming more popular nowadays. They then continue to explain that the length of the SA influences the linguistic development; a longer stay in the target country generates more opportunities for learning, but even short periods in the target country benefit students. Moreover, there is support for a hypothesis, according to which students with lower level of skills in the beginning have greater level of development (see. e.g., Freed 1995). Still, it is important to note that researching those with more experience, offers a possibility to study the understanding of context and its effect in later stages of learning (McManus, Mitchell and Tracy-Ventura 2020).

Many of the studies about SA have been either comparison studies of skill outcomes or case studies. Regarding linguistic skills, especially oral skills, the results have been diverse. However, there is evidence that SA has generally a positive effect on both. Firstly, for accuracy and complexity, there was a gradual growth, with substantial environmental variables at play (McManus et al. 2020). Secondly, SA students had a more extensive range of communication methods after a semester abroad, they created more words in a conversational environment, and had more self-repairs in their speech than repetitions (Lafford 1995, cited in Allen and Herron

2003:373). Lastly, students participating in SA reported decreased feelings of anxiety when speaking and considerable development in their oral and listening skills (Allen and Herron 2003).

Although study abroad is a quite broadly researched area, the previous research has mainly focussed on SA and its input on development of linguistic aspects and L2 performance areas, thus, leaving out the effect of different linguistic elements on each other (McManus et al. 2020). The comparison studies have shown SA being a more effective approach compared to traditional classroom learning, regarding the development of some linguistic capabilities. Still the comparison studies have also provided mixed results (Allen and Herron 2003:373), meaning that not all benefit from the SA context. Martinsen's study (2010) proved that cultural sensitivity had the strongest correlation with improving in oral language skills. As cultural sensitivity is more easily acquired in SA than in a classroom environment, and it has great effect on oral skill development, it could be argued that SA is indeed a good environment for oral skill development, not just in the context of language immersion.

Krashen (1982: 21) once said "Going for the meaning first, then we acquire structures as a result", which I think applies well to the SA context. One of the first obstacles a student faces when studying abroad is probably the difficulty to be understood in the target language. Instead of focusing on producing grammatically correct language, the student tries to convey meaning, use gestures and other means to be understood. After a while, the student ought to be adjusted to the new environment and learned new vocabulary, thus, making the speech more fluent and correct. As Krashen explains it, the fourth part of his input hypothesis is "Production ability emerges. It is not taught directly" (1982: 22). By this Krashen means that fluency in spoken communication forms over time when the individual is provided with comprehensible input. They further explain that early speech production is rarely grammatically correct. The accuracy improves with time as the acquirer gets the opportunity to hear and understand more input. Krashen's theory suits well to the SA context since students are exposed to the target language most of the time. It could be assumed that if an individual would be able to improve in accuracy and develop their language skills, especially in spoken communication, their feelings of anxiety when producing spoken language would decrease.

In their study, Allen and Herron (2003) collected data with pre-, during and post study data collection. The changes in oral skills were measured in four areas: amount of communication,

fluency, quality of communication and comprehensibility. Improvements in all four areas were recorded, but the most significant improvement was comprehensibility, which was defined as the ability to convey meaning and make oneself understood (Allen and Herron 2003: 382). Consequently, Martinsen (2010) explains that previous research has demonstrated that gains in oral proficiency are common when participating in SA. They then continue to point out that these studies have also shown that large minorities of the participating students do not indicate any significant gains in their speaking skills; thus, SA's and oral skill development's relation cannot be straightforwardly explained.

Study abroad is a very different learning context from a classroom learning environment. Study abroad offers possibilities to hear and use the target language daily, whereas classroom learning is limited to certain hours in a week and guided by curricula and programs, for instance. However, study abroad can be seen as a more challenging context, as it requires the student to be willing to communicate and be able to function independently and self-confidently in various situations. Therefore, it could be argued that SA causes very individual experiences that are coloured by personality, educational background, and such. Therefore, I think it is important to examine students' views and experiences on SA learning context and how they perceive it influences their oral skills and self-confidence.

3 RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS

The aim of this research is to find out whether students' think taking part in a study abroad helped them develop their English oral skills and self-confidence in producing spoken communication. To do this, the study will focus on the following research questions:

1. Does studying abroad help students to acquire better English oral skills in their view?
Does the development focus on a specific point of the study abroad?
2. Were students able to notice gains in their confidence to produce spoken English and further, did it affect their level of language anxiety?
3. Does the SA increase students' willingness to communicate with others through English?

4 DATA AND METHODS

In this section, I will introduce the participants of the study and motivate the chosen methodology for data collection. I will further discuss how the data collection was carried out and explain the used methods for analysis.

4.1 Participants

For the present study, I sent out a questionnaire regarding students' view on the impact of studying abroad on the development of oral language skills and self-confidence in the English language. All fifty-four (n=54) participants were currently students in a Finnish University, and their age varied from 20 to over 26. A large majority of participants were female but also men and others were represented in the study. All departments of the university in question, except one, were represented in the study. The participants had been studying abroad for a term or a whole semester either in high school or during their studies at the university. All the participants had English as the target language in their SA context. The average level of oral language assessed by participants before participating in the exchange was 6.6 where 1 = poor, 5 = average, and 10 = excellent. This assessment is reflection on something that has happened in the past and, thus, cannot be taken as "pure truth". Nevertheless, it demonstrated that the general skill level of the participants was around average, and it might have affected the results of the presents study. The questionnaire was answered anonymously.

4.2 Data and data collection

In order to cover my research aims, I designed a self-completion, online questionnaire that was sent via email to mailing lists of all subject organizations inside the chosen university. The questionnaire was available only in Finnish to receive more participants and possibly more thorough answers. One of the reasons for choosing a questionnaire was the fact that questionnaires are in fact the most frequently used method in second language research context (Dörnyei and Tatsuya 2010: xiii). Although the study could have been executed as an interview, the decision to use questionnaires was also made to gather more information and thus, get a wider picture of the phenomenon. Furthermore, using questionnaires allows researchers to collect data from a variety of respondents and it is easily accessible to the respondents as well. Since questionnaires can be answered almost anywhere and at any time, it gives the participants more time to respond, unlike interviews that are usually conducted at a specific day and time.

As Dörnyei and Tatsuya (2010: 6) well summarize, the main advantages of questionnaires are indeed their efficiency concerning researcher time and effort and financial assets.

As for the present study, choosing a questionnaire for data collection enabled the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. The questionnaire yielded three types of data, which matched Dörnyei and Tatsuya's (2010: 5) division of factual, behavioural, and attitudinal data. Firstly, factual data was gathered, for instance, by asking respondents' age, department, and gender. These questions were asked with *Choose from a list of options*-questions and resulted in quantitative data. Secondly, behavioural data was collected by asking about the SA and skill level, further focusing on the development of WTC. These questions were asked with open-ended questions and ordinal scales. Lastly, attitudinal data was collected by asking about participants' experiences and views about their development regarding oral skills and self-confidence. The questions were mainly open-ended or answered on a Likert scale. As a final note, the decision to use questionnaires is justifiable also from the ethical perspective, as questionnaires work well to protect respondents' anonymity because they can be confidently distributed.

4.3 Methods of analysis

As the present study provided both qualitative and quantitative data, the data needed to be analysed with both qualitative and quantitative methods. Thus, the questionnaire produced nominal and numeric data that were turned into percentages and averages, and qualitative data, such as written opinions.

The questions with clearly quantitative data were first analysed in terms of descriptive statistics and relative frequencies and then organised so that the data was easily readable and comparable. The main goal of the quantitative part of the questionnaire was to provide data that is easy to compare, such as percentages or tables. As discussed earlier, the factual questions provided nominal data, which helped to quantify the population, thus making it possible to refer to amounts, for instance (Denscombe 2014). In addition to the factual data, the data from Likert Scales also generated quantitative data or more specifically, ordinal data. Ordinal data enabled the comparison of categorical data, meaning two answers could be ranked based on which one had lower or higher score (Denscombe 2014).

The qualitative questions produced more information on some of the questions that otherwise would have only produced quantitative data. The “additional” information that the open-ended questions provided, were used to get a clearer picture of the students’ views, and to gain more in-depth information as well. The open-ended questions were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Denscombe 2014), focusing on the views and experiences of participants, and drawing conclusions based on them. After reading the answers thoroughly, I formed categories based on my research questions and how frequently the participants reported the same answer.

5 ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE

In this section, I will present the results of the present study. Firstly, I will report the findings from the close-ended questions, which give quantitative data on all my three research questions. I will present the data by dividing them according to the research questions. Secondly, I will introduce the results from the open-ended questions, which provide deeper understanding of the answers from the close-ended questions.

5.1 Closed-ended questions

When it comes to the questionnaires closed-ended questions, the main function of them was to produce easily comparable data on the phenomenon at hand. Table 1 shows the distribution of answers to the sixth question of the questionnaire, where participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on eight different statements. All the statements provided answers to my first research question “*Does studying abroad help students to acquire better English oral skills in their view? Does the development focus on a specific point of the study abroad?*”. As Table 1 shows, the majority of the participants seemed to either ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with most of the statements. The least variation between the participants’ answers can be seen regarding the development of communication skills in the seventh statement. Of all the participants 40.74 % agreed with the statement and 59.26 % strongly agreed. The statement regarding speech fluency produced slightly more variation, as some of the participants rated ‘neutral’ as their level of agreement. Although the answers regarding speech fluency varied more than the answers regarding seventh statement, more participants strongly agreed on speech fluency being developed because of studying abroad (66.77 %) than the communication skills (59.26 %). The speech fluency-statement had the highest “strongly agree” rate out of all the eight statements.

Table 1. Answers (n=54) to the question 6: “Please rate how well you agree with the following statements regarding the English language.”

	<u>Strongly disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly agree</u>
1. I was actively working to improve my language skills during the exchange	3.71%	1.85%	11.11%	42.59%	40.74%
2. My pronunciation improved because of the exchange	0.00%	5.56%	5.56%	33.33%	55.55%
3. My speech became more fluent because of the exchange	0.00%	0.00%	7.41%	25.92%	66.77%
4. My vocabulary increased because of the exchange	0.00%	5.56%	3.70%	40.74%	50.00%
5. I learned new, complex structures because of the exchange	5.56%	25.93%	24.07%	22.22%	22.22%
6. The intelligibility of my speech increased because of the exchange	0.00%	5.55%	16.67%	40.74%	37.04%
7. My communication skills developed because of the exchange	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	40.74%	59.26%
8. My language skills would be at my current level even if I hadn't been on an exchange	22.22%	57.41%	11.11%	5.56%	3.70%

Looking at Table 1 and the statements 1-7, all except one implicate that majority of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed with these statements. However, the fifth statement showed highest disagreement rates out of the first seven statements and the variation of the participants' answers were high. Although the results show more 'neutral' or to slightly agreement with the statement, it is important to give enough weight on the answers that showed disagreement, as the percentage of 25.93 was still higher than agreeing or strongly agreeing.

When it comes to the statement number eight, it is important to separate it from the other statements, as the results are “reversed”, meaning the higher 'disagreement' the better the answers fit my hypothesis and are consistent with the answers from statements 1-7. As Table

1. shows, the eight statement *“My language skills would be at my current level even if I hadn’t been on an exchange”* summarise the first seven statements to a broader statement about one’s overall view of the effect of the study abroad on language skills. Although the answers varied from ‘strongly agreeing’ to ‘strongly disagreeing’, the weight was on the disagreeing as almost 80% of the participants either ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ with the statement.

In Table 2 one can see the distribution of answers to question nine of the questionnaire, where participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on three statements. Statements 1 and 2 provide answers to my second research question *“Were students able to notice gains in their confidence to produce spoken English and further, did it affect their level of language anxiety?”* and thus, are presented separately from the second statement. As Table 2 demonstrates, none of the participants answered, ‘strongly disagree’ to statements 1 and 2. In statement 3 participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on the statement *“Taking part in exchange increased my confidence (in using the English language)”* and over 85 % of the participants strongly agreed with it. Only one of the participants (n=54) disagreed with the statement and the same applies to one person having a ‘neutral’ view. With statement 1, the percentage of ‘strongly agreeing’ participants reported about 20 % less than in statement 3. However, only three out of forty-five participants rated ‘disagreement’ or ‘neutral’ as their view and rest agreed with the statement. The results from Table 2 reveal that majority of the participants felt studying abroad reduced their language anxiety and increased their confidence to produce oral language.

Table 2. Answers (n=54) to the question 9: “Please rate how well you agree with the following statements regarding the English language.

	<u>Strongly disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly agree</u>
1. The exchange reduced the anxiety / stress caused by producing oral language	0.00%	3.70%	1.85%	27.78%	66.67%
2. The exchange increased my willingness to communicate in English	0.00%	3.70%	5.56%	33.33%	57.41%

3. Taking part in exchange increased my confidence (in using the English language)	0.00%	1.85%	1.85%	11.11%	85.19%
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The second statement from Table 2 focused on my third research question “*Does the SA increase students’ willingness to communicate with others through English?*”. The results on Table 2 show that none of the participants ‘strongly disagreed’ with the statement and less than 10 % of participants ‘disagreed’ or had a ‘neutral’ view. Furthermore, a strong majority (> 90 %) of the participants felt that studying abroad increased their willingness to communicate in English.

5.2 Open-ended questions

In the seventh question of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to reflect on the aspects in their study abroad context that affected their oral language skills and give reasoning for their answers. This question provided more profound answers to my first research question “*Does studying abroad help students to acquire better English oral skills in their view? Does the development focus on a specific point of the study abroad?*” than the closed-ended questions. Furthermore, the answers from this question better explain which things in the study abroad context contributed to the development of their oral language skills, and which did not. The most common reasons for oral skill development given by the participants were divided into five categories. The first category included daily interaction, exposure to the language and no other choice but to use the language, the second included living with a host family or with roommates, the third included studies in English, lots of conversations during lectures and oral exams, the fourth focused on establishing and maintaining relations and the fifth, the target country or the L1 of other exchange students. Out of all participants some gave several reasons, some only one, and some answers did not fit any of the categories mentioned above.

As the study abroad context is very different from an ordinary classroom environment, it is no surprise that being exposed to the language has a great effect on language learning. In fact, the most common reason the participants gave for oral skill development in the study abroad context was being exposed to the language and having to interact and use the language daily, as can be seen from Example 1.

Example 1: *Päivittäinen kanssakäynti, sekä kaikkien asioiden käsittely vain englanniksi auttoivat suullista kielitaitoa selkeästi. Pitkäaikainen vieraskielinen ympäristö laski kynnystä muotoilla asiat englanniksi ja vieraskieliseen asiointiin ja ajatteluun tottui. Kynnys asioiden sanomiseen laski.*

Daily interaction, as well as handling all matters in English only, helped oral language skills clearly. The long-term foreign-language environment lowered the threshold for formulating things in English and one got used to running errands and thinking in a foreign language. The threshold for saying things came down.

The daily exposure and interaction seemed to have generally quite positive effect on the participants and their oral language skills, whereas with the fifth category, also negative effect could be noticed. As Example 2 illustrates, the lack of native speakers in the SA context did not provide as qualified environment for language learning, thus maybe resulting in slower development of one's own language skills.

Example 2: *Kielitaitoni ei kuitenkaan parantunut huomattavasti, koska kanssakeskustelijat olivat enimmäkseen myös vaihto-opiskelijoita muista kuin englantia puhuvista maista.*

However, my language skills did not improve significantly as the people I talked with were mostly also exchange students from non-English speaking countries.

Despite the few negative answers regarding exchange friends and their accents or skill levels affecting the participants own language development, other exchange students and the target country also had positive effects. For example, being able to talk with native speakers was found helpful, as well as having peer support from other exchange students when facing difficulties with the target language.

When it comes to the third category, the participants felt that studies in the target language supported their language skill development. One factor that appeared several times in the answers was the difference in teaching in the study abroad context. Many reported that the lectures had a more conversational atmosphere than the "mass lectures" in Finland. Furthermore, many stated that they needed to give oral presentations or take part in oral exams when studying abroad. As Example 3 demonstrate, these were considered helpful when developing oral skills that are needed also in the academic environment.

Example 3: *Myös opetus oli vaihtokohteessani huomattavasti suullisesti osallistavampaa ja vuorovaikutteisempaa professorin ja oppilaitten välillä luentojen aikana. Aktiivisuutta odotettiin. Myös esimerkiksi esitelmää luokan edessä pidettiin kaikilla kursseilla joille osallistuin. Myös kaikki tenttini olivat suullisia. Tämä oli erittäin hyödyllistä nimenomaan akateemista ja formaalia kielitaitoa ajatellen.*

Teaching at my exchange destination was also significantly more orally inclusive and interactive between the professor and the students during the lectures. Active participation was expected. For example, presentations in front of the class were also given in all the courses I attended. All my exams were also oral. This was very useful precisely in terms of academic and formal language skills.

Relationships and being able to communicate with others were considered as an important factor in oral skill development. Furthermore, living with roommates or a host-family and establishing and maintaining social relations were also frequently mentioned in the answers. For example, one of the participants had seven roommates which resulted in having to use English as the means of communication. With host-families, the family supported the development of oral and communicative skills, as well as worked as a safe environment to make mistakes and learn from them.

Whereas it was important to understand the factors that affect the oral skill development in SA context, it is also important to know whether the development is steady or limited to a specific point of exchange. The answers on the eight question “In your opinion, was the development of your oral language skills steady, did it fall on a certain point of the exchange (e.g., start, end) or did it end somewhere at the point of the exchange?” provided answers to the latter part of my first research question “*Does the development focus on a specific point of the study abroad?*”. The five most frequent answers were: halfway through the exchange, in the beginning, in the end, steady or continuous development, and that there was variety in development regarding different areas of oral language. As before, the participants gave an answer that fit either one, several or none of the categories above. The majority thought that their oral skill development was either steady or continuous. With the specific point of exchange, almost half of the participants answered that the development was strongest in the beginning of the exchange, compared to halfway or to the end of exchange, which fit my hypothesis. However, as Example 4 shows, the reasons for later development can be strongly connected to external factors, such as relations.

Example 4: *Koen että kehittymiseni keskittyi eniten vaihdon loppupuolen, tämä johtui siitä että löysin ystäväni vaihdossa vasta vaihdon loppupuoliskolla, jolloin eri asioista tuli juteltua syvemmin -> sanavarasto pääsi kehittymään hurjasti. Tämä ajankohta johtunee siitä että uusien tuttavien kanssa vaan jutellaan pintapuolisesti, mutta kun keskustelukumppanit ovat tuttuja niin silloin uskallusta puhumiseen on enemmän ja kehittyminen on täten huomattavasti nopeampaa.*

I feel that my development was most focused towards the end of the exchange, this was because I only found my friends in the exchange during the second half of the exchange, when things got to be discussed more deeply -> vocabulary developed wildly. This time point is probably due to the fact that we only talk superficially with new acquaintances, but when the interlocutors are familiar, then there is more courage to talk, and the development is much faster.

From the tenth question of my questionnaire “In your opinion, how did the exchange study affect the above-mentioned language tension, willingness to communicate and self-confidence? Justify your answer”, I got more profound answers to my second and third research questions. When it comes to the second research question “*Were students able to notice gains in their confidence to produce spoken English and further, did it affect their level of language anxiety?*”, nearly all participants reported increased confidence to produce spoken English. As Example 5 demonstrates, positive experiences and comments on one’s abilities were considered to enhance confidence and language anxiety decreased because of frequent use of language and realization of what is essential in communicating.

Example 5: Tärkeintä ei ollut kielen absoluuttinen oikeellisuus, vaan se että ymmärsimme toisiamme. Olen toki tietoisesti miettinyt tätä aiemminkin, mutta vaihdon aikana oikeasti tunsin sen, ja siten myös arkuus puhua englanniksi väheni.

The most important thing was not the absolute correctness of the language, but that we understood each other. Of course, I have consciously thought about this before, but during the exchange I really felt it, and so the insecurity to speak English also decreased.

Furthermore, it was mentioned in Example 6 that the “necessity” to use the language functioned as a decreasing factor in language anxiety.

Example 6: ”...koska kieltä oli pakko käyttää jos halusi tulla ymmäretyksi vähensi se sellaista en kehtaa puhua, jos mokaan.”

“... because the language had to be used if one wanted to be understood, it reduced the kind of thing I dare not speak if I mumble.”

Although most of the participants felt that the exchange affected their confidence and language anxiety positively, the exchange had negative effects as well. It was stated a couple of times, as well as in Example 5 that the participants experienced anxiety and lack of confidence when returning home because of people’s unrealistic expectations of one’s linguistic abilities after SA. Furthermore, it was mentioned that confidence and lack or anxiety were not always everlasting. If one is not using the language and feels “rusty” in the target language, feelings of anxiety and lack of confidence were reported to arise again.

Example 7: Vaihto-opiskelu toi kuitenkin takaisin Suomen päässä paineita, sillä muut odottivat että osaan täydellisesti englantia vaikka asia ei näin tietenkään ollut. Välillä edelleen nolottaa kertoa, että olen ollut vaihdossa, koska oletan että muut olettavat minun täten osaavan englantia paremmin (etenkin suullisesti) mitä tällä hetkellä osaan.

However, the study abroad brought pressure when returning to Finland, as others expected me to be fluent in English, although this was not the case, of course. Sometimes I am still embarrassed to say that I have been in an exchange because I assume that others will thus assume that I know English better (especially orally) than I currently know.

Lastly, the answers from the tenth question of the questionnaire provided information regarding my third research question “*Does the SA increase students’ willingness to communicate with others through English?*”. Most of the participants agreed, like in Example 8, that studying abroad affected their WTC positively as they realised, they are being understood even though they make mistakes while speaking. One of the participants stated that after the “language barrier” was torn down, their WTC increased as it was possible to learn a lot about people, their culture, and country by directly talking and asking them. Similar thoughts were shared by another participant, according to whom willingness to learn about culture and people functioned as a stronger factor on WTC than the language or learning it. When it comes to factors that affect WTC negatively, one participant explained feeling less willing to communicate when acknowledging that someone in the situation speaks British English. This was stated to cause pressure and sometimes comments about one’s own accent.

Example 8: Kun huomasi että minua ymmärretään, rohkeus puhua kasvoi. Sitä kautta aloin puhua enemmän ja kehityksen huomattessa motivaatio kasvoi kommunikoidaan, jotta kehitys jatkuisi.

When I realized I was being understood, the courage to talk increased. Because of it I started talking more and as I noticed the development, it motivated to communicate more so that the development could continue.

6 DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this section, I will explain the results of the present study in relation to my research questions and further, to previous research. I will also discuss the relevancy of my study by explaining how the results may be used in the future. Moreover, I will address the limitations and strengths that the presents study has and give suggestions about possible future research.

6.1 Discussion

Regarding my first research question “*Does studying abroad help students to acquire better English oral skills in their view? Does the development focus on a specific point of the study abroad?*”, the results from both closed- and open-ended questions show that studying abroad has a positive impact on oral language skill development, at least from the students’ point of

view. This confirms previous findings (McManus et al. 2020; Martinsen 2010; Allen and Herron 2003) on the phenomenon. As Example 1 demonstrates, the SA environment provided different type of input to a normal classroom and further, made thinking and speaking in English easier. Furthermore, the different teaching approach, mentioned in Example 3, was stated to support participants' learning. Although Example 5 provided data related to the second research question, it also produced relevant answers regarding the first research question. As it was stated in Example 5, the realisation of not needing to master the language to be understood, was an "eureka moment" for the participant and thus, helped them to develop their language skills. This realisation is related to Allen and Herron's (2003: 382) results presented earlier about comprehensibility being the most strongly improved area of oral skills and to Krashen's (1982) input theory. As Krashen explained, fluency is a result of being exposed to comprehensible input and speech is rarely grammatically correct at the early stages of speech production. The results from the closed questions seemed to be in line with previous research, since all participants either agreed or strongly agreed that their communication skills improved, and majority seemed to agree with increased intelligibility as well.

As explained in the background section, Martinsen (2010) pointed out that oral skill development and SA do not have a clear and straightforward relation. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the answer in Example 2, according to which the exchange environment can in some cases have a lower effect on one's oral skills than is generally expected. For example, if the country of residence is not an English-speaking country, it may not provide as much comprehensible input than staying in Australia, for instance. Consequently, also the language aptitude of other exchange students can function as a grand factor, positive or negative, especially if they form the student's inner social circle. As previous research has focused mainly on languages that are also the official or main language of the target country, and my research did only require the target language to be English, the results I got may contradict with previous research. Thus, this point about result about other exchange students' role might enlighten and bring new knowledge on the phenomenon.

When it comes to the latter part of the first research question, the results strongly advocate that the development of oral skills is situated mainly to the beginning of the exchange but is also considered to be either steady or continuous. These results agree with Martinsen's (2010) statement about longer SA providing more opportunities to learn but shorter exchanges also promote students' learning. As the study abroad context differs a lot from an ordinary classroom

environment, exchange students are generally receiving more input during exchange. Furthermore, many of the obstacles exchange students face, such as language barrier, are dealt with in the beginning of the SA, which could explain the participants' answers. However, as Example 4 illustrates, it is possible for the development to be more rapid closer to the end of the exchange as deeper relations with people provide more meaningful conversations, thus making the conversations more versatile. This does not rule out any development before the end but demonstrates that the SA context is very different for each individual.

The answers regarding my second research question "*Were students able to notice gains in their confidence to produce spoken English and further, did it affect their level of language anxiety?*", produced both contrasting and confirming results compared to previous research. As the results demonstrated, a strong majority of students experienced less language anxiety after participating in SA. Similar results were introduced in Allen's and Herron's (2003) study that lasted only six weeks, whereas the participants in the presents study had stayed in the target country for half or the whole academic year. As it was discussed in the background section, from previous research's perspective, language anxiety is generally considered to have a negative effect on people and language learning (Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide and Shimizu 2004). However, in Example 6, the participant stated that the "necessity" to communicate in the target language and deal with language anxiety helped and decreased the level of anxiety. According to the participant, the realisation of having to communicate even though it might not go perfectly, reduced the "shame of mumbling". This example shows that having to face the anxiety "eye to eye", may indeed function as a positive factor and thus, result in better oral and communication skills.

Although the results from the present study mainly confirmed Allen's and Herron's (2003) results about decreased anxiety after SA, contradicting answers were also collected. It was stated in Example 7 that the language anxiety emerged again after returning home due to other people's presumptions about SA leading to mastering the target language. This is connected to Horwitz et al.'s shared thought about fear of negative evaluation being one of the factors in performance anxiety and further, in foreign language anxiety. It is interesting how the change of the environment can cause resurfacing of language anxiety. However, I believe it is a phenomenon strongly related to one's personality and, to Finnish culture.

McManus et al. (2020) explained that previous research has not focused much on the effect that different linguistic elements have on each other. The results from the present study have proved that more research on the matter should be conducted, as there seemed to be a strong relation between self-confidence, foreign language anxiety, and WTC. As I explained in the background section, Yashima et al. (2004) stated that confidence in L2 affects one's communication. The results regarding my third research question "*Does the SA increase students' willingness to communicate with others through English?*" quite clearly supported Yashima and colleagues' idea. As Example 8 well demonstrates, the realisation of one's own abilities resulted in higher self-confidence and, consequently, lower anxiety. Being more aware of the development increased motivation and WTC. Interestingly, the only reason for increased WTC was not the motivation to learn a language but rather, to learn about culture and people. This confirms Martinsen's (2010) results on cultural sensitivity being strongly correlated to improvement of oral skills, at least to the point of cultural sensitivity being a motivator to communicate with the target language. The results from the present study also support MacIntyre's (2007) definition, according to which WTC is strongly related to situation one is in. According to the results, the presence of a British English-speaking person, for example, can rapidly decrease participant's willingness to communicate.

6.2 Conclusion and implications

For the present study, my aim was to better understand the factors that affect oral skill development in the study abroad context and further investigate them from students' point of view. Regarding my first research question about whether studying abroad helps to acquire better English oral skills and if the development focuses on a specific point, quite consistent answers were collected. Most of the participants experienced development in various sectors of oral skills and gave reasonings that either confirmed or contradicted with previous research. However, the results do generally prove that SA is a desirable environment for language learning, especially for oral skills development. Furthermore, as the results regarding the latter part of the first research question show, even shorter exchange periods provide scope for language learning, as the "great leaps" generally happen in the beginning of the exchange.

As for my second research question about gains in confidence to produce spoken language and its effect on language anxiety, many reported increased confidence and lowered anxiety. As well as with the first research question, there were various reasons and factors that the participants mentioned to have affected their experience. However, some of the answers

differed from the general idea, as it was mentioned that the lowered anxiety was in fact related to the exchange “bubble” and thus, the anxiety rearose back home. These results are important, as they point of individual differences and provide results that could provoke new research. For the third and last research question about willingness to communicate as a result of SA, hardly any participants experienced decreased willingness to communicate or gave reasons that could affect their WTC negatively. Therefore, it could be argued that SA will quite definitely increase exchange students’ willingness to communicate in the target language, and in the presents study, in English.

Like any other study, the present study also has its limitations. Not all departments were represented equally, as the number of participants from each department varied a lot. Therefore, the results represent the whole university in question, unequally. This could give certain type of results, as for some degrees in the higher education level taking part in SA can be obligatory. Consequently, the necessity to complete SA can either increase or decrease students’ motivation; if one studies language or communication studies, for example, the SA may be seen as an opportunity, whereas for some other degree, it might not be as beneficial. For the present study to be well generalizable, it should have significantly more participants and the data should be more quantitative. On the other hand, mixed-method studies or qualitative studies are not necessarily intended to provide generalizable data, only new insights into phenomena.

One of the strengths of the present study is its different approach compared to previous research. As explained earlier regarding the research gap, the present study focuses on students’ views and experiences rather than on pre- and post-SA test results or individual case studies. Moreover, the presents study does not only focus on linguistic abilities but takes also into account the psycholinguistic variables of language learning and individual differences. Especially the contradicting results or the new findings from the present study, function as an enriching information about the phenomenon, thus generating deeper understanding and even new research. The results demonstrated that the development of oral skills is strongest for many in the beginning of the SA. Therefore, it would be beneficial to look more closely into the benefits of short SA’s, as for some people the longer exchanges can be too stressful mentally or even financially. Furthermore, a study focusing on one-week-exchanges that are usually promoted in high schools, would be beneficial, as they are more accessible for everyone. It would be interesting to examine, if significant improvements of oral skills or similar answers regarding language anxiety and WTC, could already be noticed after a week. Overall, students’

beliefs and views of the effectivity of study abroad on oral skill development, language anxiety, and willingness to communicate, were quite positive. Moreover, it seems that SA really is an effective way to develop one's oral skills and psycholinguistic variables that intertwine.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Questionnaire.

The questionnaire has been revised for anonymity so that the university at hand cannot be recognised from the questions.

Tutkimus opiskelijoiden kokemuksista vaihdossa käymisen vaikutuksesta englannin suullisen kielitaidon ja itsevarmuuden kehittymiseen

KYSELY KANDIDAATIN TUTKIELMAA VARTEN

Tervetuloa vastaamaan verkkokyselyyn!

Tässä Jyväskylän yliopiston englannin kielen opintosuunnan kandidaatintutkielmassa pyritään kartoittamaan opiskelijoiden näkemyksiä ja kokemuksia vaihdossa käymisen vaikutuksesta suulliseen kielitaitoon ja sen myötä myös suullisen kielen tuottamisen itsevarmuuteen. Vastaajan tulee siis olla 18 vuotta täyttänyt yliopisto-opiskelija ja suorittanut joko lukukauden tai -vuoden mittaisen opiskelijavaihdon lukion tai yliopiston aikana ja vaihdon kohdekieli on ollut englanti.

Kysely on suomenkielinen ja koostuu sekä monivalinta- että avoimista kysymyksistä. Vastaamiseen kuluu noin 15 minuuttia.

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SUOSTUMUS TIETEELLISEEN TUTKIMUKSEEN

Vastaamalla tähän kyselyyn vakuutat olevasi vähintään 18-vuotias ja annat luvan vastaustesi käyttämiseen yllä mainitussa kandidaatintutkielmassa. Vastaamalla myös myönnät perehtyneesi tutkimuksen kuvaukseen, kuuluvasi kohderyhmään ja vastaavasi kyselyyn vapaaehtoisesti. Kyselyssä ei kerätä henkilötietoja ja tulokset raportoidaan siten, että yksilöä ei ole niiden perusteella mahdollista tunnistaa. Kyselyn voi keskeyttää missä vaiheessa tahansa.

1. Sukupuoli *

- mies
- nainen
- joku muu

2. Ikä *

3. Missä yliopiston tiedekunnassa opiskelet? *

- A
 B
 C
 D
 E
 F

4. Opiskelijavaihtosi kesto *

- Yksi lukukausi
 Yksi lukuvuosi

5. Arvioisi englannin suullisen kielitaitosi tasosta ennen kuin lähdit vaihtoon asteikolla 1-10, (1=huono, 5=keskiverto, 10=erinomainen) *

0		
Huono	Keskiperto	Erinomainen

6. Arvioi, kuinka samaa mieltä olet seuraavien väittämien kanssa liittyen englannin kieleen. *

	Täysin eri mieltä	Jokseenkin eri mieltä	Ei eri eikä samaa mieltä	Jokseenkin samaa mieltä	Täysin samaa mieltä
Pyrin itse aktiivisesti parantamaan kielitaitoani vaihdon aikana	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ääntämykseni parani vaihdon seurauksena	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Puheeni muuttui sujuvammaksi vaihdon seurauksena	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sanavarastoni kasvoi vaihdon seurauksena	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Opin uusia, komplekseja rakenteita vaihdon seurauksena	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Puheeni ymmärrettävyys lisääntyi vaihdon seurauksena	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Kommunikointitaitoni kehittyivät vaihdon seurauksena	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Täysin eri mieltä	Jokseenkin eri mieltä	Ei eri eikä samaa mieltä	Jokseenkin samaa mieltä	Täysin samaa mieltä
Kielitaitoni olisi nykyisellä tasolla, vaikka en olisi käynyt vaihdossa	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. Reflektoi, mitkä asiat vaihto-kontekstissa vaikuttivat suulliseen kielitaitoosi ja miksi. *

8. Oliko suullisen kielitaitosi kehitys mielestäsi tasaista, sijoittuiko se tiettyyn kohtaan vaihtoa (esim. alku, loppu) vai loppuiko se kokonaan jossain kohtaa vaihtoa? Voit myös käsitellä asiaa eri suullisen taidon osa-alueiden näkökulmista, joita käsiteltiin kohdassa 6. Perustele vastauksesi. *

9. Arvioi, kuinka samaa mieltä olet seuraavien väittämien kanssa liittyen englannin kieleen. *

	Täysin eri mieltä	Jokseenkin eri mieltä	Ei samaa eikä eri mieltä	Jokseenkin samaa mieltä	Täysin samaa mieltä
Vaihdossa käyminen vähensi suullisen kielen tuottamiseen aiheuttamaa ahdistusta/jännittyneisyyttä	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Vaihdossa käyminen lisäsi haluani kommunikoida englanniksi	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Vaihdossa käyminen lisäsi itsevarmuuttani (englannin kielen käytössä)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. Miten vaihto-opiskelu vaikutti mielestäsi edellä mainittuihin kielijännitykseen kommunikaatiohalukkuuteen ja itsevarmuuteen? Perustele vastauksesi. *