

Acquisition and Retention of an L2 Regional Dialect:

The Effects of Study Abroad and Social Factors on Dialect Retention

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Introduction

Learning a second or new language entails many different sociolinguistic factors that complicate the false dichotomy between “knowing” and “not knowing” a language. One such factor—and one often overlooked in L2 classrooms—is that of regional or geographical variation within a particular language. Language can and does vary significantly depending on location, but oftentimes in the United States, L2 learners are taught only one particular variety or “standard” version of a language. Students wishing to increase their sociolinguistic competence by learning a particular dialect are often expected to do so outside of the classroom, often in short-term study abroad programs in a country that predominately uses the student’s L2. The present study aims to contribute to the small but growing field of literature on the acquisition of an L2 regional dialect through a study abroad experience, and more specifically, on the retention and use of that dialect after having studied abroad. This particular study will focus on the experience of four American English-speaking college students who studied abroad in Santiago, Chile for a semester. The current study is important in order to begin to understand how students of a new language continue to shape and negotiate their L2 speaker identities after an immersive experience, and to understand how continued or discontinued use of L2 after returning from abroad plays into processes of dialect retention. The hypothesis made in the present study is that the more experience using Spanish in the United States that the learners have after studying

abroad, the lower their retention of Chilean dialect forms acquired during their abroad experience. Chilean Spanish is a dialect less commonly spoken in the United States, and therefore students using more Spanish in the United States will not retain Chilean dialect forms as well because they are more commonly exposed to other varieties of Spanish.

Literature Review

Factors Influencing Acquisition. There are many personal and social factors that may influence second language acquisition, and this is certainly true where dialect learning is concerned. As outlined by Isabelli-García (2006), even in a highly immersive environment with many opportunities for L2 interaction, individual experiences of acquisition vary depending in part on attitudinal and motivational factors. In her research on study abroad social networks and learner attitudes, she focused on four case studies of university students studying in Buenos Aires, Argentina, for five months. After analyzing each student's social networks and weekly journal entries, she concluded that in general, positive attitudes influence students' desire and drive to build new, open social networks while abroad, which in turn correlates to improvements in L2 acquisition. Isabelli-García also applies the acculturation model developed by Bennett (1986) to describe the several stages of ethnocentrism that language learners in a study abroad context must pass through before reaching a state of ethnorelativism, or acculturation. In turn, she writes, this openness to another culture and set of linguistic practices can often facilitate second language acquisition. This study serves as an example of the importance of understanding personal, social and attitudinal factors in second language acquisition in a broad sense; however, because of the multiple geographical, historical and political complexities that may be associated

with any particular regional variety of a language, it may be said that dialect learning places a particular emphasis on learners' personal and social identities. For this reason the present study aims to contribute to a small but growing conversation around factors influencing dialect acquisition in particular.

Reasons for Dialect Learning. The topic of dialect learning has been a subject of debate within the literature on sociolinguistics and L2 acquisition (Ringer-Hilfinger, 2012; Shenk, 2014; Shiri, 2013). In Ringer-Hilfinger's (2012) study on patterns of interlanguage variation and attitudes of L2 Spanish learners about the use of the phoneme /θ/ before, during and after a study abroad experience in Spain, she noted the importance of the accommodation theory to the acquisition of regional variants in L2 learning. The theory, originally laid out by Giles and Ryan (1982), holds that L2 learners (particularly those in an immersive study abroad context) tend to adopt native speech patterns in order to reduce linguistic dissimilarities between their own speech and that of native speakers. This in turn allows the learners to gain some level of membership within the specific speech community of the region that is hosting them during their study abroad, which can also have a profound effect on learner attitudes and motivation in L2 learning. In Ringer-Hilfinger's study, she found that learner attitudes and motivation (or lack thereof) to use /θ/ greatly influenced their level of use of the phoneme and thus their acquisition (or not) of the Peninsular Spanish dialect, and that participants' level of accommodation into the Peninsular Spanish speech community was low due to their low level of use of the Spanish /θ/ phoneme. Accommodation, therefore, can greatly influence learners' ability to acquire a particular regional variant in their L2.

Shenk (2014) also makes an important argument for the inclusion of dialect teaching in the L2 classroom in her review of *voseo* usage in L2 Spanish classes. Teaching the *voseo* construction (a largely South American phenomenon), she writes, allows instructors to avoid oversimplifying the complex case of how to address “you” in different contexts in Spanish. She argues that students are likely to come into contact with *voseo* users in the United States and Latin America; by including it in the L2 classroom, this helps them avoid later confusion and broaden their sociolinguistic understanding of the language. Similarly, in Shiri’s (2013) study on study abroad participants’ attitudes toward dialect learning in L2 Arabic, she found that pro-dialect learning attitudes (i.e. that learning a dialect is important or very important) increased dramatically after participation in a short-stay study abroad program. According to participants’ survey responses, this was largely due to improved interactions with locals when speaking in the local dialect. Respondents also reported finding that knowledge of regional variation is very important for understanding media sources and culture in different host countries. These studies serve as examples that dialect learning can increase learners’ sociolinguistic competence and confidence in their L2, but it remains clear that the body of research on dialect learning remains small; the present study hopes to expand upon these topics and connect them to the experience of study abroad.

Study Abroad as an Arena for Language Learning. A third and final topic to consider in the literature is the overall effectiveness of study abroad as an arena for language learning. As mentioned previously, study abroad is often relied upon to give language learners sociolinguistic experience of regional variation outside of the classroom. But how effective are study abroad programs in aiding learners’ L2 acquisition? Lafford and Collentine (2006) reviewed several

different aspects common to many study abroad programs and assessed them for their effectiveness in facilitating language learning. They found that, in general, interactions with a host family had a positive effect on learners' acquisition, in contrast to a lower general rate of acquisition amongst students living in apartments or dormitories (this sentiment is echoed in Isabelli-García, 2006). Furthermore, after examining differences in study abroad program type and length, they determined that although programs are trending towards shorter stays and fewer pre-departure language requirements, learners have been found to benefit most in terms of language acquisition from longer, more in-depth and immersive study abroad experiences. In this way, it may be seen that, although studying abroad may have many positive effects on learner acquisition of their L2 or L2 dialect of choice, there are several complicating factors that make study abroad programs not necessarily equal to each other in effectiveness. The present study aims to broaden this conversation and connect these topics surrounding study abroad to the acquisition and retention of L2 regional dialects, a topic which has been little-explored in sociolinguistic research conducted to date.

Method

This study focuses on the experiences of four American senior undergraduate students who all participated in an immersive, semester-long study abroad program in Santiago, Chile. The participants were all English-speaking learners of Spanish, aged 21 or 22 years old, and consisted of one male and three females. They all studied abroad during the same time period (July to December, 2014) and at the time the study was conducted, they had been back in the United States for one year.

Participants were contacted through the researcher's social network and were asked to participate in a 30-minute interview about their experiences with Chilean Spanish. Interviews were conducted in a question-and-response format, with roughly the first half of the interview conducted in Spanish and the second half conducted in English. The portion of the interview conducted in Spanish was qualitatively and quantitatively assessed for the number of times participants used Chilean dialect forms in their speech, according to the researcher's own prior knowledge of particular Chilean dialect forms. Speech forms assessed in this study were the lack of final "-s" aspiration and a specialized lexicon of various slang terms and other vocabulary frequently used in Chile. Participants were asked various questions in both English and Spanish in order to qualitatively assess their background in Spanish learning, their conceptions of Chilean Spanish, their reported use of Chilean dialect forms, and their continuation or discontinuation of Spanish use after studying abroad.

Sample interview questions include, but are not limited to:

- Before studying abroad in Chile, had you studied Spanish? If so, for how long? In what type of setting?
- What is your current conception of Chilean Spanish? How would you describe it? What aspects does it include?
- While studying abroad, do you think your Spanish improved? Why? If yes, in what ways?
- While studying abroad, did you incorporate Chilean linguistic forms into your speech? Why or why not? If so, in what contexts?

- o Upon returning from study abroad, did you incorporate Chilean linguistic forms into your speech? Why or why not? If so, in what contexts?
- o Do you presently incorporate Chilean linguistic forms into your speech? Why or why not? If so, in what contexts?
- Did you continue to study Spanish in a university setting after studying abroad?
- Would you recommend studying abroad in a country with a distinct “dialect”? A country with a more “standard” variety of Spanish? Why/why not?

Results

Based on both qualitative analysis of participants’ interview responses and on quantitative analysis of participants’ speech patterns in Spanish, the study’s initial hypothesis was supported. Participants who currently had a higher level of use of Spanish in their daily lives in the United States showed less use of Chilean dialect forms. Participants who used Spanish less regularly showed a higher level of use of Chilean dialect forms. What follows is a brief summary of the results of each individual interview.

David. In his speech in Spanish, David exhibited a consistent lack of “-s” aspiration at the end of words, which is a speech form very common in the Chilean dialect. Other than that, although David reported a high awareness of Chilean slang terms and was able to name several, he did not use any in his own personal speech. David is a Spanish major in college and reports having had approximately seven total years of formal Spanish education, although they were non-consecutive. Along with frequent use of Spanish in the classroom, David had one of the highest rates of social Spanish use among the participants, partly because he formed a very

strong bond with his Chilean host family and communicates with them often, and partly because Spanish is frequently spoken in his hometown in California and he uses it with at least one family friend. David reported a high desire to accommodate into the Chilean speech community by using Chilean forms, wanting “to feel cool” and to identify as a Chilean speaker, but when asked about his habits of use of Chilean dialect forms, he reported only using them with friends from study abroad or with Chilean native speakers. He said he tries to avoid them in other settings and particularly in the classroom because he doesn’t “want to cause confusion.”

Victoria. When asked about Chilean speech forms, Victoria exhibited a very high awareness of the Chilean dialect, including variations within different regions of the country. However, in her own personal speech in Spanish, Victoria maintained her use of final “-s” aspiration and only used one term that is more frequently used in Chile than other countries (*liceo*, “school”) but that cannot be considered a uniquely Chilean word in and of itself. Victoria is a Spanish supplementary major in college and has had approximately seven years of formal Spanish education; she reported having a “basic knowledge” of the language before studying abroad. Like David, Victoria reported having one of the higher rates of social use of Spanish among the participants, mainly because she made several Chilean friends during her time abroad and is in touch with them daily, both in speech and text. In fact, Victoria is the only one of the study’s participants who has since returned to Chile after studying abroad and expects to return again in the near future. Victoria explained that most of the improvement she felt in her Spanish while studying abroad came from an increase in confidence speaking more than from changes in her speech or dialect itself. While studying abroad, she did not incorporate many Chilean dialect forms into her speech for fear of sounding like an “imposter.” She says that she does currently

aim to use Chilean forms at times, and more so in text than in speech. When asked about study abroad programs in countries with a distinct dialect, she encouraged “pushing yourself” with dialect learning while abroad because other forms of Spanish will then be easier to understand.

Mary. Mary exhibited one of the higher rates of Chilean dialect forms in her Spanish speech. She used some final “-s” aspiration but lacked it at other times. She also used three Chilean slang or vocabulary words: *una lata* (“a pain”), *sí po* (“yes;” emphatic), and *pieza* (“bedroom”). Mary is a native English speaker who attended a Spanish language immersion kindergarten and thus was relatively fluent in Spanish as a child, but through later lack of use she reported losing nearly all of her knowledge of the language. She has since studied Spanish throughout high school and during three semesters at college, but has otherwise not continued to take Spanish classes after study abroad. Because of this, Mary had one of the lowest rates of current Spanish use among the participants, mainly using Spanish only sometimes in conversations with other American friends from study abroad. However, she did report choosing the Chile study abroad program in part because of its “hard dialect,” which was aligned with her other goals for travel, as she considered knowing one of the “hardest” dialects an advantage when learning to understand dialects elsewhere. While studying abroad, like Victoria, she consciously limited her use of Chilean dialect forms because she did not want to appear to be “trying too hard”—however, back in the United States, she likes to use Chilean dialect forms when talking with friends from study abroad in order to reinforce their friendship in a particular speech community. She considered study abroad programs in any location where L2 is spoken to be beneficial; programs that took place in an area with a strong “dialect” are not necessarily better or worse for learners than locations with a more “standard” variety of one’s L2.

Christine. Christine exhibited perhaps the highest frequency of Chilean dialect forms while speaking in Spanish of any of the participants. She had a consistent lack of final “-s” aspiration and used three Chilean vocabulary terms: *fome* (“boring”), *po* (emphatic), and *acá* (“here;” not used only in Chile, but more common there than elsewhere). Christine is a Spanish supplementary major in college with approximately eight years of formal study. She regularly uses Spanish in classroom settings, but rarely uses it in social contexts and did not keep in touch with her host family after studying abroad. Christine exhibited a high awareness of Chilean speech patterns and of diversity of speech throughout the country and reported using Chilean speech forms often; she said it was “hard not to pick up” dialect forms while studying in a highly immersive context. She reported no very strong desire to return to Chile in the future, but did recommend dialect learning when studying abroad, because she believes that knowing one dialect can help with learning others.

Discussion

As stated previously, the qualitative and quantitative data collected in this study supports the initial hypothesis that a higher use of Chilean dialect forms would be found among participants who used Spanish less regularly after studying abroad. The two participants who used the most Chilean forms during the portion of the interview conducted in Spanish—Mary and Christine—were also the two participants who used less Spanish in their daily lives, particularly in informal, social settings. David and Victoria, on the other hand, more frequently used Spanish in social settings and used fewer Chilean dialect forms in the Spanish portion of the interview. One reason for this result might be that the more learners use Spanish in the United

States, the more they are exposed to non-Chilean Spanish speech patterns, and thus they adapt to what they are more likely to hear around them. However, it is important to note that David and Victoria's social speech in Spanish was mostly with Chilean native speakers. Because of this, it seems likely that their limited use of Chilean dialect forms may result from tension existing between a desire to accommodate to the particular speech community—as described in Ringer-Hilfinger (2012) and by David in his desire “to feel cool”—while also not wanting to appear to be “trying too hard” as described by Victoria and Mary. Another axis of difference between those who used many Chilean dialect forms and those who used few was the nature of their relationship with their respective host families after studying abroad, which echoes the sentiments found in Lafford and Collentine (2006). While David had a very strong relationship with his host family and keeps in touch with them regularly, Christine had a less positive relationship with her host family and does not keep in touch with them at all. This is an example of how careful placement in different study abroad housing situations can be very important to the overall experience of study abroad and particularly to the experience of language acquisition.

Limitations of the study. The present study was limited by its very small sample size of only four participants; a much broader-scale study would be necessary in order to generalize results with any amount of certainty. Furthermore, because no scholarly articles are currently available on speech patterns of Chilean Spanish, the conductor of this study had to rely on her own personal knowledge of the Chilean dialect in order to assess participants' level of use of Chilean speech forms. The study may have benefitted by including an interview with a Chilean native speaker as a control subject to help more clearly define the Chilean dialect of Spanish.

Further research directions. In addition to broadening the scope of the current study in order to make its results more generalizable, it would be interesting to look more in-depth into other aspects of second language acquisition post-study abroad. For example, one possible research direction would be to assess how L2 classroom behavior changes after an immersive study abroad experience (Are students more or less likely to participate in class after study abroad? How does their motivation change in the classroom, if at all? And how does this in turn affect their own personal learning behavior?). Another possible research topic might examine the processes involved in learning a second dialect in one's L2 after previously having learned one during a study abroad experience. Several participants in the present study reported believing that knowing one dialect of Spanish would help when learning another one. It would be interesting and valuable to the literature to examine to what extent this belief is founded or unfounded.

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