

ENHANCING PROFICIENCY IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES: THE ROLE OF STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Research indicates that study abroad programs play a key role in promoting proficiency in foreign languages. The research on which this paper is based sought to investigate the role of study abroad programs in enhancing proficiency in African languages. The study population comprised 15 university students from United States who had traveled to Kenya in 2010 to learn Swahili for one semester. The students were exposed to various domains of the use of Swahili language and were immersed in a number of contexts where they received much input in the language. The analysis of the oral and written tests showed that learners were able to express themselves coherently, precisely and confidently in Swahili. In this the paper, therefore, the crucial role of study abroad programs in enhancing proficiency in African languages is affirmed. The paper concludes that study abroad programs are highly beneficial to learners of foreign languages.

Key words: Study abroad program; immersion; comprehensible input; proficiency

Introduction

Scholars in second/foreign language learning emphasize the importance of input in the acquisition process. Ellis (1985) defines input as the language, spoken or written, to which the learner is exposed and which serves as the data the learner must use to determine the rules of the target language. He goes on to say that second language acquisition can take place only when the learner has access to L2 input. Krashen (1982) argues that input is vital in language acquisition. This input may be in the form of exposure in natural settings or formal instruction. Ellis

(1985) adds that input is not only determined by the native speaker, it is also determined by the learner himself. The feedback the learner provides affects the nature of the subsequent input from the native speaker. If the learner's spoken or written language does not show competence, the native speaker identifies the particular challenge and guides that learner appropriately. Study abroad programs do not only provide this much needed input since learners are exposed to native-speaker input in both formal and informal communication situations, but they also provide the learners with opportunities to be guided by the native speakers of the language. In addition, the second language learners listen to the language they are learning being spoken by its native speakers and they also practise to speak it and to write in it like the native speakers.

Research findings show that mere exposure to the L2 is not enough and that learners need L2 data which are specially suited to whatever stage of development they are at (Ellis, 1985). In study abroad programs, second language learners are exposed to data which is specially suited to their stage of development. This is because native speakers are able to adjust their speech appropriately to be able to guide second language learners adequately. They do this through regression, unconsciously moving back through the stages of development that characterized their own acquisition of the language until they reach an appropriate level for the learner); matching (the native speakers assess the learner's language system and then imitate the language forms they identify in it); and negotiation (the native speakers simplify and clarify in accordance with the feedback that they obtain from the learner). Negotiation of meaning is particularly important as it enables the native speaker and the learner to overcome the communicative difficulties which are always likely to arise as a result of the learner's limited L2 resources.

As the native speaker uses strategies and tactics such as selection and switching of topics, using a slow pace, repeating utterances and requests for clarification to steer the conversation, the learner also contributes to the negotiation of meaning by giving a signal to indicate he has understood or not understood. This makes input comprehensible and greatly enhances proficiency.

The language being learnt is the medium in most social domains. The learners are exposed to communicative oriented instruction which is aimed at providing them with opportunities to communicate naturally. Ellis (1994) notes that input should be comprehensible through elaboration, interaction, modification and focusing on its source. Various kinds of activities are also vital such as language tasks and projects. This is because such activities provide the learners with opportunities to use the language and test some of the hypotheses they have as they learn the specific second or foreign language in question. In school, classes that are highly interactive, emphasizing student problem-solving and discovery learning through thematic experiences across the curriculum are likely to provide the kind of social setting for natural language acquisition to take place. Therefore collaborative interaction in which meaning is negotiated with peers is central to the language acquisition process, both for oral and written language development (Thomas & Collier, 1995; Freeman & Freeman, 1992; Goodman & Wilde, 1992; Wong Fillmore, 1991). Exposure to the language input, be it in the spoken or written form, is thus very important in language learning. Furthermore, Krashen (1988) adds that foreign students have the advantage of learning a language from each other and from the presence of peers who are slightly more advanced. When they use the language among themselves, the foreign students are able to learn through making mistakes and correcting each other, thus building their confidence.

Literature Review on Study Abroad Programs

Although there are many studies that discuss the effects of semester-long and year-long study abroad programs, there are few studies on the effects of short-term programs (Duperron and Overstreet, 2009). Lord (2006) reports that studies on shorter study abroad programs, such as summer terms, are inconclusive with respect to identifiable gains. In one of the short-term studies, Wilkinson (2002) says that short-term study abroad is characterized by under-development of pragmatic competence. This is possible since the L2 learners cannot within that short period get enough exposure to listen to the language as it is used in various situations and to also use it with confidence in those situations. As a result, Duperron and Overstreet (2009) conclude that short-term study abroad programs provide an appropriate fit for lower proficiency students. For higher proficiency students, long-term study programs will be more suitable. These are the students whose fluency, oral proficiency, pronunciation, lexical development, narrative abilities and discourse abilities will be impacted upon because of study abroad programs (Lafford, 2006). Certainly, those who take a longer time abroad will be more proficient than those who take a shorter time.

Apart from the length of time taken on study abroad programs, the other factor that determines the level of competence in learning the second language is the context of learning. Collentine (2009) affirms that context of learning is one of the most important variables that affects the nature and extent to which learners acquire a second language. Learners acquire the second/foreign language in two sub-contexts: *communicative context* as well as *learning context* (Batstone, 2002). Communicative contexts require that the learner use the second or foreign language to exchange information and engage in essential social and interpersonal

functions. Learning contexts manage input and output so that learners will attend to form and take intentional steps towards improving their linguistic expertise. Both the communicative context and the learning context are provided in the study abroad programs. Learners are put in situations which require that they use what they have learnt in formal and informal situations and they learn the rules of grammar as they use the language and hear others use it. This is an opportunity that second language learners will never get unless they go to the native speakers' country. If they choose to learn the foreign language in their own country, they will not gain as much as they do from the available communicative and learning contexts.

Indeed, Spolsky (1989) in his general model of second language learning says that social context leads to attitudes of various kinds towards a language which appear in the learner as motivation, besides providing learning opportunities. This motivation joins with other personal characteristics such as age, personality, capabilities and previous knowledge to determine the use the learner makes of the available learning opportunities, both formal and informal. It is this interplay between learner and situation that determines the linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes for the learner. Kenya provided the social context for these learners. It was the source of motivation for them to learn Swahili which they had already been exposed to. Together with the other factors such as these learners' age, personalities and capabilities, this enabled them to use learning opportunities provided to acquire more knowledge and understanding of the language and therefore gain competence in it.

Context is also helpful in enabling foreign language learners to quickly understand the language and start using it. Felicia Wong (2008) lists going to a foreign

country to learn a native language as the most important step in the journey to being fluent in that foreign language. She says that the learner immerses himself or herself in the community and this allows him or her to continuously hear the sounds, rhythms, and inflections of a new language-spoken on the streets, in buses, on television, etc. Once foreign language learners immerse themselves with the locals, listening to their music, getting knowledge of their culture, interacting with their media, politics, sports, family and so on, they will start imitating the native speakers' phrases and sounds and in the course of time the brain will start to process and interpret the new language. In addition, she notes that the foreign language learners will not only imitate native speakers' verbal communication skills, but they will also have opportunities to watch native speakers use nonverbal communication behaviour and this will greatly help them to enhance their ability to communicate effectively and therefore gain proficiency. Before long the foreign language learners will be able to use the phrases and nonverbal communication cues they have been imitating in the right situations and they will be able to pronounce certain sounds correctly.

In addition, Felicia Wong (ibid) says that context helps foreign language learners to question the natives and therefore learn from them various aspects of the language, mainly vocabulary and important expressions like greetings.

Cook (1989) argues that a second or foreign language learner has to be embarked on an exploration of three areas: language system, paralanguage and culture knowledge. Cook says that proficiency cannot be achieved in a language unless all these components are taught. The knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation alone cannot lead to proficiency in a second language.

Prior exposure to a foreign language is another important factor that determines the rate at which one gains proficiency in that language. Golonka (2006) presents evidence suggesting that pre-program linguistic (grammar, vocabulary, accuracy) and metalinguistic (self-corrected errors and sentence repair) levels predicted which study abroad learners would attain the highest levels of proficiency. Indeed, prior basic knowledge of the language will give foreign language learners an advantage when they finally go abroad to learn that language. They will learn faster than those who did not have any prior knowledge and they will learn more so that they polish the knowledge and skills already acquired. Such learners will have the ability to repeat phonological strings and to mimic sequences of sounds early enough, thus developing their phonological memory. The students who participated in the study abroad program on which this paper is based had had

elementary lessons in Swahili for three months before coming to Kenya for their study abroad program. This helped them to learn Swahili faster as they already had been exposed to the history, culture, basic vocabulary, syntax and phonology of the Swahili language among other vital aspects that enhance proficiency in a language.

In their study, Segalowitz and Freed (2004) found that, amongst Spanish second language learners, an initial threshold level of basic word recognition and lexical access processing abilities may be necessary for oral proficiency and fluency to develop significantly. Lafford (2004) surmises that advanced learners bring more formulaic expressions to study abroad communicative contexts and can therefore spend more attention resources on forms, whereas novices must attend primarily to meaning. This provides further evidence of the importance of pre-program exposure to a language before embarking on a study abroad program to ensure better results. In the study focused on in this paper, pre-program exposure is identified as one of the factors that contributed to quick progress in grasping concepts in Swahili and enhancing proficiency in both writing and speaking.

Many researchers and educators have argued that the study abroad context is the best for achieving global second language competence (Rivers, 1998). This paper also argues that study abroad programs are essential for enhancing proficiency in a second language. It also argues that this proficiency is not just limited to the second language, but it also extends to understanding the ever-present nonverbal communication behaviours and the native speakers' culture. Finally, study abroad programs lead to more interaction and more understanding at the global level as a result of the knowledge and understanding of the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Depending on the length of time taken and whether or not the learners had pre-program exposure to the foreign language, study abroad programs impact differently to different foreign language learners. However, they are greatly responsible for the rapid progress the learners make in gaining fluency in a second language. The level of proficiency that the learners will have achieved at the end of the program is dependent on these and other factors like motivation, age, and teaching methodologies.

Theoretical Framework

The study of a second language in a native country underlines the central role played by input. Acquisition and proficiency in a second language can only be successful if there is sufficient input. Input determines how and when a language learner can be said to have acquired a language. As a result, this paper has been underpinned by the Input Hypothesis theory. This hypothesis postulates that humans acquire language in only one way- by understanding messages, or by receiving 'comprehensible input' (Krashen, 1985). However, understanding messages or receiving comprehensible input is hardly enough to make a person proficient in a given language. It is important that the learner produces comprehensible output so that language acquisition can be said to have taken place.

To address this concern and make the hypothesis more effective, Krashen (1985) presents two arguments. The first one is that speaking is a result of acquisition and not its cause. Krashen argues that speech cannot be taught directly but it emerges on its own as a result of building competence through comprehensible input. Secondly, Krashen says that if input is understood, and there is enough of it, the necessary grammar is automatically provided. The language teacher need not attempt deliberately to teach the next structure along the natural order- it will be provided in just the right quantities and automatically reviewed if the student receives a sufficient amount of comprehensible input.

Thus Krashen holds that it is through comprehensible input that one acquires a language and that the grammar of that language is then automatically learnt.

Krashen then formulated ten lines of evidence in support of his hypothesis. They are:

a) The silent period

Krashen argues that during the silent period the learner is making use of the comprehensible input that they receive. That speech emerges once competence has been built. Krashen goes on to argue that acquirers use context, knowledge of the world and extra-linguistic information to understand the language spoken to them. However, Krashen fails to offer convincing arguments for the possibility of other factors being responsible for the silence of the learner. Such factors could include anxiety and shyness.

b) Age differences

Krashen argued that older learners progress more quickly in the early stages because they obtain more comprehensible input than younger ones. He gave three reasons for this. First, he argued that input is more meaningful to the older learners than the younger ones because of their knowledge of the world. Secondly, Krashen observed that older learners are able to participate in conversations earlier than younger ones because they rely on first language syntactic rules, second language vocabulary and repaired by the Monitor. Finally, older learners do better initially since they gain more comprehensible input through their superior conversational management skills.

However, these arguments contradict one of the main claims of the Input Hypothesis. This is the claim that simpler codes, such as caretaker speech in first language acquisition, provide ideal input for $i+1$, because they are easy to comprehend. Younger children are therefore expected to have an advantage over

adults because they are addressed in speech that is less complex grammatically and it contains more repetitions and more frequent vocabulary items, among others. Many other explanations for the superiority of older learners, including the availability of mnemonic devices, the need to speak about more complex and demanding topics and the ability to benefit from correction and training in grammar are possible (McLaughlin, 1984).

c) The effect of exposure

Krashen (1985) saw exposure to comprehensible input as evidence of support for the Input Hypothesis. According to him, studies show that the longer people stay in a country, the more proficient their language becomes. This, however, depends on whether they are exposed to the right kind of input. It is not easy to determine what this kind of input would be and therefore no way of testing the hypothesis.

d) Lack of access to comprehensible input

Language learners who do not have access to comprehensible input are delayed in their language acquisition. However, this also raises questions of what is comprehensible and what is not.

e) Immersion and sheltered language teaching

Krashen argued that the success of programmes in immersion and sheltered language teaching offered evidence of the Input Hypothesis. He argued that these methods are effective because they provide learners with comprehensible input through the use of subject matter instruction they can understand.

f) The success of bilingual programmes

Krashen argued that successful bilingual education programmes provide children with comprehensible input that leads to second language learning.

g) The reading hypothesis

Krashen argued that the Input Hypothesis 'may also apply to the acquisition of writing style'. He maintained that writing competence comes only from large amounts of self-motivated reading for pleasure and/or interest. Such reading gives the individual a 'feel' for the look and texture of good writing.

Three key arguments for the Input Hypothesis

The main tenets for the Input Hypothesis are based on the role of simple codes, research on the effect of instruction on second language acquisition, and methods of comparison research.

The role of simple codes

Krashen (1985) argued that simple codes, such as caretaker speech in first language acquisition, provide ideal input for learners because they are easily comprehensible and not finely tuned to the learner's needs.

Krashen (1982) pointed out that three characteristics of simple codes assist language acquisition: these codes are used to communicate meaning, not to teach language; they are 'roughly tuned,' not 'finely tuned' to the learners current level of linguistic competence; and they are used in speech that follows the 'here –and – now' principle-that is, directed to what the learner can perceive in the immediate environment.

The effects of instruction

Krashen (1985) argued that the Input Hypothesis ‘helps to settle’ an apparent contradiction in the research literature. Some studies indicate that formal instruction promotes second- language acquisition, while others seem to argue that informal environments are superior or just as good. In his attempt to resolve this contradiction, Krashen proposed that language classes are effective when they are the primary source of comprehensible input. This occurs when beginners find the input from ‘real world’ too complex to understand. Language classes are thought to be less helpful when the students are already advanced enough to understand some input from the outside world, and the input is available to them. Thus, Krashen argued, research suggests that English as a Second Language classes for foreign students in the United States benefit beginners, but are of little help to more advanced learners who can get comprehensible input from subject matter classes and from social situations.

Method comparison research

Krashen (1985) argued that research comparing the effectiveness of different methods indicates that methods that rely on providing learners with comprehensible input are clearly superior to grammar-based and drill-based methods. In particular, he argued for the superiority of the so-called ‘Natural approach’ (Krashen and Terrell 1983).

The Natural approach is predicted on Krashen’s belief that communicative competence, or functional ability in language, arises from exposure to the language in meaningful settings where the meanings expressed by the language are understood. Rules, patterns, vocabulary, and other forms are not learned as

they are presented or encountered, but are gradually established in the Natural Approach. If the teacher uses a grammatical syllabus, she is likely to be teaching structures that some learners know already and that are not far beyond other learners. If the teacher corrects errors, her students are not free to experiment creativity with the language.

Swahili Study Abroad Class

Fifteen students from the University of Washington, Seattle, USA, went through an elementary Swahili course for 3 months before coming to Kenya for the study abroad program. The elementary course was to enable them recognize some basic Swahili vocabulary to use in various domains and pronunciation prior to their arrival in Kenya. They also learnt some historical and cultural background of the Swahili people and the development of the Swahili language, to enable them contextualize what they were learning. Thus, when they arrived in Kenya, they could introduce themselves and say:

Hujambo? (Hallo?)

Jina langu ni... (My name is...)

Asante (Thank you)

Karibu (Welcome)

Study-abroad Course Syllabus

The goal of the syllabus was to guide the learner in achieving communicative competence in Swahili so that he/she was able to express himself/herself accurately, fluently, and precisely in the language. The course syllabus was designed along various themes that are central in Swahili culture. These include home, family, cultural events and clothing.

The inculcation of language skills was based on these themes and grammatical content was taught to enable students to construct comprehensible and accurate Swahili sentences.

Objectives of the course

At the end of the course, the students were expected to have acquired:

- Listening skills to be able to listen, understand, and respond to information and instructions in Swahili.
- Speaking skills to be able to use correct pronunciation, stress and intonation to express needs, feelings, convey information and relate experiences.
- Reading skills to be able to read and understand instructions, to read for information and for pleasure and to develop vocabulary and sentence structures.
- Writing skills and grammar to be able to express own feelings and ideas meaningfully and legibly in correct Swahili structures.

Course Content

The learners were taught greetings like *Hujambo?* (**How are you?**). They were also taught polite forms; body parts like *mdomo* (**mouth**), *macho* (**eyes**) and *kichwa* (**head**), among others. In self introduction, they were taught expressions like *Jina langu ni...* (My name is...). Furthermore, the learners also learned about activities done at home; different parts of the house; family and relations; people and objects associated with school; parts of speech; different times of the day; days of the week; months in a year; tenses; opposites; the clothes the Swahili people wear; money matters; the food the Swahili people eat; the sky; the solar system; domestic and wild animals; different shapes; common diseases; health and cleanliness.

Further, they were taught commodities sold at the market and in the shop. In the farm, they were taught about the crops grown. Other things included: insects around us; different types of sentences; different professions; means of transport; the number system in Swahili; telling the time in Swahili; people, objects and activities in the hospital; games and sports ; directions; homes of various animals; weapons used in the Swahili culture and similes, riddles and proverbs which are an inseparable element of the Swahili language. The learners were therefore exposed to as much input as possible. Being adults and already having knowledge of their own native language, in addition to the elementary exposure to Swahili they had received prior to the program, the learners easily grasped the concepts presented.

Teaching Methodology

The main method used during the teaching was group work, class presentation and display of objects in the classroom. There were field visits to the national parks, markets, weddings, shopping in the market, visiting homes and participating in cooking and washing, among other activities. Another interesting and participatory method used was that of songs. Popular Swahili songs such as *Kuna mtu shambani* (**There is someone in the farm**), *Malaika*, (**My angel**), *Utauona mpilipili na maua yake mchikicho* (**You will see a pepper tree and its flowers blossoming**). These songs were not only giving the learners a chance to improve their grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of Swahili words, they were also exposing them to the rich Swahili culture of using *vitendawili* (riddles) and *methali* (proverbs) in music. The lessons also employed online resources such as pictures and the Kamusi project. This was exciting as the learners were using skills they know to learn a foreign language. It made them learn faster as they were at this moment relying on knowledge of their first language. The learners also engaged in class discussions and they did a lot of homework. This certainly helped them to improve their writing and speaking skills.

Students' Progress

Within the ten weeks session, the students had been exposed to much input in Swahili. They had visited many social domains in which Swahili was being used as the medium of communication. For example, they visited markets and bought a number of items using Swahili. They did this on their own without receiving any help from any native speaker. Further, every student was attached to a specific home for a number of days. And it was first ascertained that the language

spoken in such homes was Swahili. Such exposure provided much needed practice in Swahili and provided rich input thus facilitating acquisition of Swahili in a natural context. The exposure provided an invaluable testing ground for the rules that the students had learned in their Swahili classroom. This provided them with the opportunity to make mistakes and correct themselves as they developed confidence in speaking the language.

By the end of the program, the students were able to speak, read and write coherent Swahili. They were able to teach one another various aspects of Swahili during the tutorials. The students were able to listen to taped Swahili dialogues and comprehend the message they heard. The fact that they could read Swahili passages and answer given questions and write precisely and accurately was commendable. Experience is the best teacher. Studying abroad in a foreign location is an experience of a life time. The students were able to understand and adapt to Swahili languages, customs, traditions and lifestyle easily as the interaction between them and the local Swahili speaking community in Kenya facilitated this ease in accommodation.

Samples of scanned Swahili text written by a student

Jina langu ni Ali. Nina ndugu mmoja; dada mmoja,
Dada yangu anaitwa Lela; Nina wazazi pia. Baba
yangu anaitwa Chuck na Mama anaitwa Judy. Mama
yangu ana ndugu wanane; dada mne na kaka
mne. Babu anaitwa John na Nyanya/Bibi
anaitwa Maureen. Nina binamu pia. Nina
binamu ishirini, Ninaishi Seattle lakini, binamu
yangu na babu na bibi wanishi Chicago.

Shangazi zangu wanaitwa Mary na Kathy
na Patty na Betsy. Mjomba yangu wanaitwa
John na Steve na Mike na Joe. Baba yangu
ana dada mmoja, anaitwa Cindy. Cindy
~~haya~~ sina watoto. Cindy anaishi Michigan.
Dada yangu anaishi Japan. Dada ni Mwalimu.
Mama yangu ni Muuguzi/nesi, Dada yangu
~~haya~~ sina mtoto bado, kwa hivyo Mimi sina
mpwa bado.

The sampled Swahili text was written by one student in the study abroad program. It was a task that the students were given towards the end of the

program and they were asked to write about themselves and their families. As the sample indicates, the student was able to communicate accurately in Swahili. The level of competence displayed through the performance in the written task is advanced, yet the learners had only been taught Swahili for about six months. The mode of teaching coupled with exposure to native speaker interactions complemented well to provide the much needed input. This is clear evidence that study abroad programs are highly helpful in enhancing proficiency in second language learning. Furthermore, the role played by the pre-program exposure to Swahili cannot be ignored. It must have contributed to making the learners improve their writing and speaking skills very fast.

Benefits of the study abroad program

Findings from the research showed that study abroad programs have a number of benefits. First, studying abroad enables one to master their foreign language skills in a native environment, thus improving their fluency and communicative competence in that language (<http://ling.ucsd.edu>). The opportunity also presents one with exposure to knowledge on how the academic field of linguistics is taught in other countries and cultures. One can, therefore, use such knowledge and exposure for further research and scholarship in linguistics. In addition, the experience of studying abroad gives students a competitive advantage in the job market and/or in pursuing graduate studies. Many companies now operate globally. Students who have had opportunities to study abroad are more advantaged when applying for international job opportunities because they have a deeper understanding of another culture. Since the world is now a global village, understanding of a different culture is crucial in promoting interactions for development and enhancement of tolerance.

Conclusion

To learn African languages or some cultural studies, going to the country where the languages or cultures are practiced is the best form of learning. Studying abroad programs allow students to immerse themselves in an environment filled with new customs and an entirely different culture that is completely unique. It is with this in mind that Coleman (1997), while writing on the European perspective of language learning and study abroad, points out that language skills are not merely mechanical: socio-cultural and intercultural competence are essential elements of the true linguistic proficiency which study abroad programs are expected to enhance. He observes that without intercultural competence, students cannot adopt the attitudes, strategies and behaviors in their interactions with the target language speakers which will enhance their language learning. It is, therefore, important to note that intercultural competence is the outcome and the essential pre-requisite of study abroad programs. In this setting, students will be able to acquire knowledge in both the classroom and the world. In the study featured in this paper, the content the students were taught on Swahili homes, relations, foods, dressing, songs and similes was meant to not only enable them build essential Swahili vocabulary, but also make the learners interested in understanding the culture of the Swahili community and appreciating the diversity of world cultures. This raised curiosity and motivated the learners to learn and know more Swahili and the culture of its speakers. The study abroad program was therefore very effective. The students loved it and they learned a lot. More students should be encouraged to participate in it as they improve proficiency in African languages tremendously because of a lot of input.

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