

# L2 Fluency Development During Study Abroad

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## Overview of the Study

Study abroad (SA) has always been believed to be a beneficial learning environment for language learners' speaking development in the target language, especially for lower proficiency learners. Previous SA research focused on fluency development in the target language often used specific aspects of fluency to measure change objectively, and found that learners exhibited faster speaking rates, longer runs without filled (e.g., uh, um) and unfilled pauses (e.g., silence in the middle of an utterance), and less repairs in utterances after studying abroad. However, more research is needed to make comparisons across different language groups, and it is unclear if general oral proficiency ratings, such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language's (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview and the Center for Applied Linguistics' Simulated Oral Proficiency Interviews (SOPI), correlate with the specific fluency gains measured objectively. To fill these gaps, this study investigated the fluency development from groups of learners of three different languages studying abroad in different locations, and if any fluency gains measured objectively could be found in the general oral proficiency evaluation.

## Methodology

A total of 75 students participated in a semester-long SA program in one of the following countries: China, Russia, and Chile. Each language group had 25 learners of various proficiencies based on the ACTFL guidelines, and took the SOPI at the beginning and end of their study abroad semester. The SOP tasks included a picture description task (the student describes the assigned picture), a picture narration task (the student tells a story based on the given picture), a personal description task (the student shares his or her personal habits), and a "dis/advantages task" (the student explains the advantages and disadvantages of a certain situation). All SOPIs were evaluated holistically by trained raters and analyzed objectively within and across language groups for specific fluency measures.

## Results

Across all language groups, there were significant gains in speech rate and average speaking length after study abroad. However, there were differences in other specific fluency changes between groups, which could be due to the linguistic differences between the three target languages or to the language learners' initial proficiency levels. Learners also made more progress in their fluency development, which was not related to the ratings given on their general oral performance. This finding reveals that in holistic oral assessment, such as the SOPI, raters may consider other speaking factors to evaluate the learner's speech performance besides fluency.

## Practical Implications/Significance

This study shows that despite the complexity of fluency development across different groups of language learners, there is clear evidence of the learners' progress in fluency after study abroad. In order to capture fluency gains from studying abroad, holistic oral assessments could incorporate specific fluency measures for raters to attend to in evaluating the learner's speech.

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