

# **AAUSC Issues in Language Program Direction**

## **Advanced Foreign Language Learning: A Challenge to College Programs**

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Heidi Byrnes  
Hiram H. Maxim  
**Editors**

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Advanced Foreign Language Learning: A Challenge to College Programs

*Heidi Byrnes and Hiram H. Maxim, Editors*

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# Study Abroad for Advanced Foreign Language Majors: Optimal Duration for Developing Complex Structures<sup>1</sup>

Casilde A. Isabelli

## **Abstract**

*SLA research has explored the many benefits of study abroad programs. However, there is limited research that explores syntactic gains made abroad by the advanced learner and addresses the question: How does length of stay abroad affect language acquisition, particularly advanced L2 features? The present study addresses this question from a UG perspective by evaluating 31 advanced learners of Spanish L2 who spent an academic year abroad in Barcelona. The development and acquisition of the properties of the null subject parameter were measured at one month (representing a summer abroad), four months (representing a semester abroad), and nine months (representing an academic year abroad). A discussion follows on some additional factors that need to be considered when sending an advanced language learner on a study abroad program.*

## **Introduction**

Every year thousands of North American undergraduate university students enroll in summer, semester, or year-long study-abroad programs from all disciplines. During the 2000/01 academic year 154,168 undergraduate students spent a semester or longer studying abroad (*Open Doors 2002*). Of those studying abroad during the 2000/01 academic year, 12,697 were foreign language majors. It is undeniable that students, professors, administrators, and researchers see study abroad as essential for developing advanced proficiency in a second language (L2).

VanPatten and Lee (1990) described second language acquisition (SLA) as the intersection of three areas. The first area is classroom-based SLA, defined as L2 learning or use that occurs in the target language country. The second area is classroom-based L2 learning, defined as the teaching or learning of an L2 outside of the L2-speaking community. The third one is natural second language learning, defined as learning outside a formal educational context. The authors further argued that untutored natural use of the L2 is essential to acquiring a second language. In foreign language classrooms, students enjoy this benefit only to a limited extent because their L2 input is restricted to three to five hours a week and opportunities for productive use are shared among 15-25 other language learners. To compensate for minimal exposure or lack of natural L2 input and for limited or missing occasions for L2 use, many motivated language learners participate in study abroad programs lasting a summer, a semester, or even a year. Although, ideally, input in a communicative classroom is contextualized, the L2 learner within the target language environment is exposed to greater quantities of such contextualized input. In a study abroad context the L2 learner is exposed to the language as it is spoken by native

L2 speakers, and “the kind and quantity of opportunities for real language use are considerably greater for the L2 learner” (VanPatten 1987b, p. 3).

Once foreign language majors decide to study abroad they need also to determine what length of stay would benefit them most linguistically. To date, there is a lack of empirical studies addressing the question: How does length of stay abroad affect language acquisition, particularly advanced L2 features? Exploring the issue from a universal grammar (UG) perspective, Schwartz (1993) states that grammar building, which leads to L2 acquisition, is based on three fundamental components: access to UG, a learning procedure, and contextualized input. The more contextualized the input is, the better the chance that UG will be triggered. Chomsky (1988) proposed that an innate UG bridges the gap in first language (L1) acquisition (and is extended to L2 acquisition) between the type of input and attained competence (i.e., a complex adult grammar). For instructed learning in particular, this gap is often referred to as the “learnability problem” because of the mismatch between input experienced (poverty of the stimulus) and the language actually acquired by language learners. Exposure to naturalistic and contextualized input abroad helps trigger UG, which then bridges the “learnability problem” gap.

The goal of the present study is to take this broad UG-based conceptualization of learning and apply it to the study abroad context by examining how study abroad contributes to the acquisition of advanced L2 syntactic features with various durations of stay. Thirty-one advanced American learners of Spanish L2 who spent an academic year abroad were evaluated through grammaticality judgment tasks (GJTs) and oral narratives. The development and acquisition of the three clustered properties of the Spanish null subject parameter (within UG), as indicators of advanced L2 abilities, were measured at three specific times: one month (representing a summer abroad), four months (representing a semester abroad), and nine months (representing an academic year abroad).

## Study Abroad: Relating Length of Stay and the Development of Advanced L2 Features

The majority of language majors appear to be spending a summer or semester when they choose to study abroad. As Spencer and Hoffa (2002) stated: “The current U.S. approach to study abroad programming is dominated by two conflicting truisms. The first, ‘Longer is better than shorter’; the second, ‘Something is better than nothing’ (p. 1).” Foreign language educators would probably agree that for the purpose of learning the L2, longer is better. Thus, second language acquisition researchers have shown, among other things, the significant gains in language proficiency and in understanding other cultures when compared to stay-at-home students (Dyson 1988; Lafford 1995; Liskin-Gasparro 1984; Lussier, Turner, and Desharnais 1993; Magnan 1986; Milleret 1990). However, there are no empirical studies that directly answer the specific question whether longer stays are better than shorter stays for acquiring advanced L2 features, although the studies of Guntermann (1995), Regan (1995), and Ryan and Lafford (1992) provide useful related information because they have focused on the acquisition of syntactic features in a study abroad context over different time frames (one semester-short, to one year-long).

Guntermann (1995) studied the acquisition of three grammatical contrasts in the forms and functions of Spanish after one year of immersion by L1 English novice/high and intermediate/low L2 learners of Spanish. Data were gathered from oral interviews on the use of copulas *ser* and *estar* ‘to be’, *por* and *para* ‘for’, and preterit versus imperfect from nine Peace Corps volunteers after an initial ten-week intensive language program (260–300 hours of formal instruction) in a Central American country and then again at the end of the year in service. Since no pre-study program scores were reported, only linguistic

development from the tenth week and the end of the year can be discussed. Data showed that after one year of being immersed in the target language environment, participants arrived at a high accuracy rate (95%) for the use of *ser* and *estar*, increasing about 10% from the first data collection time. For the second form studied, data showed an average accuracy of 65% on the use of *por* and *para* after the ten-week program, which increased to 78% after one year. On the differentiation between preterit and imperfect tenses, participants improved from 71% accuracy to 90% accuracy after a year in the Peace Corps. Guntermann compared these results to the 74% accuracy score of stay-at-home language learners with 15 months of instruction (Lafford and Collentine 1989), concluding that the participants in an immersion setting achieved higher ratings on the accurate use of past tense than those who stayed at home.

Regan (1995) analyzed the acquisition of the linguistic aspect of negation by six advanced Irish L2 learners of French during an academic year in France or Brussels. The data for the study consisted of pre-program and post-program oral interviews developed by Labov (1984) that covered topics thought to elicit spontaneous speech which can be expected to show the acquisition of sociolinguistically variable speech. From these oral interviews, Regan analyzed pro-clitic negative particle *ne* deletion that is found in native French speech. The results showed a dramatic rise in the rate of deletion before and after study abroad. Regan suggested that not only was French negation acquired but so was the variable use of negation of native speech norms.

Ryan and Lafford (1992) investigated the impact of the target language environment on the morpheme acquisition order of the Spanish copula *ser* and *estar* 'to be'. Their data consisted of three oral interviews (pre-program, during-program, and post-program) collected from 16 beginning-level American students during a one-semester program to Granada, Spain. The data showed that participants passed through five stages of development. At Stage 1 no copular verb is produced (\**Juan alto* 'John tall'). At Stage 2, which lasts the longest of the five stages, *ser* is acquired and overextended into contexts where *estar* is appropriate (*Maria es simpática*. 'Mary is very nice'. \**Ella está en Chicago*. 'She is in Chicago'). At Stage 3 the structure *estar* plus the progressive is acquired, followed by Stage 4, the use of *estar* in the context of location. Finally, in Stage 5 the adjectives of condition are acquired with the use of *estar*. Results of the study strongly suggest that after a semester abroad, students seem to have acquired the differences between *ser* and *estar*. The authors also concluded that study abroad language learners acquired the copulas in ways similar to stay-at-home language learners (VanPatten 1987a).

In summary, the studies of Guntermann (1995), Regan (1995), and Ryan and Lafford (1992) suggested that the longer the stay the better for language acquisition. However, three issues deserve closer attention. First, the previous studies concentrated on readily observable surface features of language (*ser/estar* 'to be', *por/para* 'for', negation, and past and conditional tense). These features develop in observable stages since they are readily available in the input and obey some type of distributional frequency. That is, the studies focused on grammatical features that do not represent underlying syntactic competence as UG targets it but constitute observable morphosyntactic features that are specific to a language that simply have to be learned. In any case, they are not considered advanced structures. Second, although the data provide evidence on how beginning and intermediate language learners are developing abroad, nothing is said about aspects of underlying syntactic competence that are not readily observable in the input but that are part of advanced competence. Third, there is a need for research that systematically compares linguistic development of advanced language learners after a summer, a semester, and a year abroad to determine an optimal length of time for a study abroad sojourn. Accordingly, in order to answer the question, "Is longer better than shorter?",

the acquisition process of 31 advanced American learners of Spanish L2, who spent an academic year abroad, was evaluated on the development and acquisition of the three clustered properties of the Spanish null subject parameter (within UG) at three specific times: one month, four months, and nine months.

## The Study

Linguistic universals fall within the generative grammar framework of UG theory. Chomsky (1981) proposed UG to be an innate knowledge source characterized as consisting of two types of constraints, principles and parameters. This framework postulates a small number of universal principles that limit the types of human grammars found in the world's languages. Because individual languages differ in specific ways, UG leaves room for variation by parameterizing these principles according to a finite set of variations of the principles. A parameter may be responsible for a set of seemingly unrelated surface constructions in a particular language. Dependent on the chosen value of the parameter, these diverse surface features actually create a cluster of properties that is related to that parameter. An example of a parameter with clustered properties is the null subject parameter (NSP) in which languages like English, French, and German must have subjects: 'He speaks' not '\*Speaks'. However, subjects are not obligatory in Italian, *Parla*, and Spanish, *Habla*. These null subject languages have a cluster of related syntactic properties that distinguish them from non-null subject languages. According to Chomsky (1981), Jaeggli (1982), and Rizzi (1982), the three clustering properties are a) subject pronouns can be omitted in tensed clauses *Hablo con mis amigos*, 'I speak with my friends'; b) subjects may be postponed after the verb *Han llegado mis estudiantes*, 'My students have arrived'; and c) there are no *that*-trace effect restrictions *¿Quién has dicho que va a venir?* 'Who did you say is coming?'

Like L1 learners, L2 learners receive input that is fed into this blueprint of language (UG). UG interacts with this language and yields an L2 grammar. In the 1980's the NSP was proposed as a way to test whether or not UG is still accessible in second language acquisition because it was not exemplified in the L1 of English and French, yet was present in Spanish and Italian. The aim was to test those subtle effects, precisely because such parametric differences would not be immediately obvious to learners unless they could draw on the operation of UG. Only input data from the linguistic environment can trigger the resetting/restructuring of a parameter. Language learners receive input from the target language, which tells them what is possible in the L2. In turn they internalize this input and ultimately restructure the parameter setting for L2.

### The Null Subject Parameter and its Relation to Length of Study Abroad

The NSP has two settings: either a language can drop the subject or not. English is considered to be a morphologically impoverished language because its verbal inflections do not carry sufficient information to indicate person and number of the verb; therefore English, like French, holds the non-NSP ([-NSP]) setting. Both Spanish and Italian, however, have a rich inflectional system that allows the subject to be identified from the verbal inflection and therefore are null subject languages ([+NSP]). For Spanish the three clustered properties of the [+NSP] are thus realized like this:

1. missing overt subject pronouns;
  - a. *Hablo español.*
  - b. \*Speak Spanish.
  - c. I speak Spanish.

2. verb-subject inversion in declaratives;
  - a. *Durmió el bebé tres horas.*
  - b. \*Slept the baby three hours.
  - c. The baby slept three hours.
3. apparent *that*-trace violations in subordinate clauses.
  - a. *¿Quién dice el FBI que asesinó al presidente?*
  - b. \*Who does the FBI say that assassinated the president?
  - c. Who does the FBI say assassinated the president?

If the above first property is the least abstract and most salient, then the last is the most abstract and least salient in the input.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Isabelli (to appear) revealed that the three properties of the [+NSP] were not acquired simultaneously, but that the most salient was acquired first, followed by the least salient and most abstract.

With that background it is possible to ask: Is there a significant difference on GJT scores and oral narrative tallies on the three structures from students with different durations for study abroad (one to four months and from four to nine months)? Hypothetically, an incremental development from the most salient and least abstract property (null subject) should be seen first, followed by acquisition of the second property (verb-subject inversion), and finally acquisition of the most abstract and least salient in the input (*that*-trace).

## Participants

Participants in this study came from a group of 64 native English speakers who were Spanish language learners in the 1997-1998 year-long exchange program to Barcelona, Spain. They were sophomore, junior, and senior undergraduate students from a consortium of two American universities (the University of Illinois and University of California schools), all of whom had taken two years of beginning and intermediate Spanish at the university level (first and second year) before studying abroad. Also, because of the high degree of independence required of students going on the Barcelona program, all potential students were interviewed by a committee of three university faculty to determine their suitability for the program.

Study participants were selected from the pool if (1) their L1 was English; (2) Spanish was not spoken in their home; (3) they had no prior experience of living abroad (more than 6 weeks) in a Spanish-speaking country; and (4) they completed all data collection tests over the nine months. The final participant group consisted of 31 students, 7 male and 24 female, with a mean age of 21 years. Twenty-nine had begun studying Spanish in high school at age 14, and two began studying Spanish in college. Fourteen of the 31 participants had an additional semester of Spanish beyond the required two years before their sojourn abroad: three took Spanish grammar, two took Spanish composition, four took conversation, and five took introductory literature courses.

During the first month of the program all students were enrolled in an Intensive Language Program provided by the *Centro de California/Illinois* at the University of Barcelona (equivalent to four semester units), with classes on Spanish language and culture, Spanish for communication, Spanish conversation and composition, and Catalan language and culture. During the academic year the students enrolled in CORE courses (Art, Advanced Spanish Grammar/Syntax, Business Spanish, Composition, Phonetics, Catalan, Golden Age, Quixote, Literature, and Translation) that were offered only to the American students. The advanced grammar courses presented an in-depth study of aspects of Spanish grammar that non-native speakers find more difficult to master: uses of the indicative and subjunctive moods and tenses; personal pronouns ("loísmo" and "leísmo"); direct and indirect style; accentuation; demonstratives, possessives, and comparatives; *ser* vs.

*estar*; prepositions and prepositional groups. No aspect of the NSP was explicitly taught; however, the participants were implicitly exposed to the NSP in speech in the natural environment (television, native speakers, radio) and written materials (novels, newspapers). The participants also had the option to enroll in University of Barcelona courses, an opportunity taken by 23 participants.

The participants reported communicating in Spanish when dealing with Spaniards and socializing with non-Americans. For example, through the *Centro de California/Illinois*, six held internships with Spanish businesses, schools, law firms, or hospitals. Two were members of the University of Barcelona's Women's Track and Field team, of which they were the only non-Spaniards. One was a member of a religious organization in Barcelona, which consisted of all Spaniards. Two played musical instruments with Spanish groups, another painted in a studio with Spanish artists, and another was the assistant to a Spanish independent film producer. In addition to immersing themselves in the Spanish community, the participants reported that reading Spanish newspapers, magazines, and novels improved their reading skills. Furthermore, listening to Spanish music, attending religious ceremonies, and watching Spanish television and movies improved listening skills.

### Materials

To ascertain the development and acquisition of the three properties of the [+NSP], participants in the study were administered grammaticality judgment tasks (GJT) and an oral interview during the first, fourth, and ninth month of their stay in Spain, where each was given in three versions.

*Grammaticality Judgment Tasks.* The three versions of the GJT at each data collection were parallel in structure and content. In random order, each version contained 25 target sentences and 25 distractor sentences. The target sentences represented the three properties of the [+NSP]:

1. ten simple sentences in the present tense pertaining to null subjects;
2. five grammatical sentences representing verb-subject inversion; and
3. *that*-trace violations with five grammatical sentences with *wh*-subject extraction from an embedded clause and a filled complementizer position (*que* 'that' present), and five ungrammatical sentences with *wh*-subject extraction with an empty complementizer position.

The 25 target sentences from the first GJT are presented in Appendix 1 (the distractor items are not presented).

Because interlanguage development of the three Spanish [+NSP] properties was being studied, the target items involved grammatical Spanish sentences where comparable English sentences would violate the Spanish [+NSP]. For example, (1) and (2):

1. Soy una chica.
2. \**Am a girl.*

As seen in (1), the overt subject referential pronoun in Spanish is optional, whereas in English the lack of subject pronoun is ungrammatical, as seen in (2). Also included in the test items were ungrammatical Spanish sentences that violated the Spanish [+NSP], where in comparable grammatical English sentences the English [-NSP] would not be violated, as seen in (3) and (4).

3. \*Lo está lloviendo.
4. *It is raining.*



In English, the expletive pronoun 'it', as seen in (4) is obligatory with weather verbs, whereas in Spanish, (3) their presence creates an ungrammatical sentence.

The Spanish [+NSP] value corresponds to the knowledge that pronominal subjects and verb-subject inversion are optional and that there are apparent violations of the *that*-trace filter when the *wh*-subject is extracted from the subordinate clause. The Spanish [+NSP] value also corresponds to the knowledge that expletive pronouns are ungrammatical.

According to Lightbown and Spada (1999, p. 36), in order to explain the learners' knowledge of syntax, the underlying competence in the learners' performance is analyzed in terms of the competence underlying native-speaker performance. Specifically, a grammaticality judgment test is used as a tool to elicit the L2 learners' metalinguistic inferences on L2 syntactic structures and the L2 linguistic system as a whole. However, the reliability of grammaticality judgment tasks in SLA research has been questioned (Cowan and Hatasa 1994; Gass 1994; Mandell 1999) and also its validity (Cowan and Hatasa 1994; Davies and Kaplan 1998; Ellis 1991; Liceras 1994). Researchers usually conclude that traditional scalar GJT are a poor reflection of the learners' competence, particularly when they are used alone. However, when they are combined with other methods of elicitation, such as oral interviews, and when the naturalistic oral data are included in the final linguistic analysis, they are the most practical and the best measurements for tapping into learners' underlying L2 competence (besides perhaps on-line reaction time tests). This is so because they involve sentences that are generated by the grammar and because learners' responses on GJT are used to determine the stage of their L2 knowledge. Thus, although Birdsong (1989, p. 60) states the danger of drawing conclusions from metalinguistic performance to describe the L2 learners' abstract linguistic competence, researchers find GJT useful as a way of gaining insights into L2 competence.

*Oral Interviews.* Complementing the GJT data, oral interviews provided naturalistic data for observing the development of the three Spanish [+NSP] properties.

Based on the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPID)<sup>3</sup>, these interviews can be tailored for a desired level of proficiency and for specific needs (Stansfield and Kenyon 1996). The interview questions did not specifically elicit the three properties of the [+NSP]; instead, they were broad enough to increase the probability that participants produce sentences with null subjects, verb-subject inversion, and *that*-trace violations. At all three collection times, the participants were asked to: (1) discuss personal activities; (2) explain a process; (3) state advantages and disadvantages; (4) support an opinion; and (5) hypothesize on an impersonal topic. In using pictures as stimuli, participants were instructed to (1) ask questions; (2) describe a place or activities; (3) give directions from one place to another using a map; (4) narrate a sequence of scenes in the present tense; and (5) narrate a sequence of scenes in the past tense. Appendix 2 presents the interview questions.

## Procedures and Scoring

*Grammaticality Judgment Tasks.* Immediately preceding the grammaticality judgment tasks, a detailed explanation of the test and an example in English were presented to the participants. They were instructed to read each Spanish sentence and judge whether it was "Possible" or "Impossible" by circling the corresponding word that best fit the initial impression to the right of the sentence. If participants marked "Impossible", they were instructed

to fix the sentence by inserting or deleting a letter or word to ensure that (1) they were rejecting sentences for the appropriate reasons, and (2) they were focusing on and correcting the target syntactic structures of the Spanish [+NSP]. Participants were instructed to read, judge, and correct each sentence as quickly as possible, not to change any answers or refer back to a sentence once they had advanced to another one, and to complete the tests as quickly as possible. Participants took an average of 15 minutes to complete this task.

Scoring of the GJT followed this protocol: Participants received one point per correct answer, that is, one point for each correctly accepted sentence (possible sentence accepted as "possible") and one point for each correctly rejected sentence (impossible sentence rejected as "impossible"). One GJT score each was generated for (1) the null subject items; (2) the grammatical expletive items; (3) the ungrammatical expletive items; (4) the grammatical verb-subject inversion items; (5) the grammatical *that*-trace sequences; and (6) the ungrammatical *that*-trace sequences.

*Oral Interview.* In a separate interview with the researcher in her office and following SOPI guidelines, the participants were asked ten questions. The interviews were tape-recorded with the participants' knowledge, and this same process was repeated at four and nine months. Participants took no more than 30 minutes to complete the interview.

Each occurrence of the Spanish parameter properties in the oral interviews was tallied. Four oral interview scores were generated from the following frequency scores: (1) for each null subject; (2) for each overt subject pronoun; (3) for grammatical use of expletive pronouns; and (4) for verbs produced with post-verbal subjects. No scores were tallied for *that*-trace items since none were produced. For each participant, percentage-use scores were obtained for each of the parameter properties by dividing the total number of each parameter property by 100.

## Data Analysis and Results

*Grammaticality Judgment Tasks.* Statistical analyses were performed on the grammaticality judgment data. The GJT mean scores at one month, four months, and nine months are summarized in Table 1. As indicated in Figure 1, all scores improved with time, though differentially.

**Table 1**  
Grammaticality Judgment Task Mean Scores at 1 Month, 4 Months, and 9 Months.

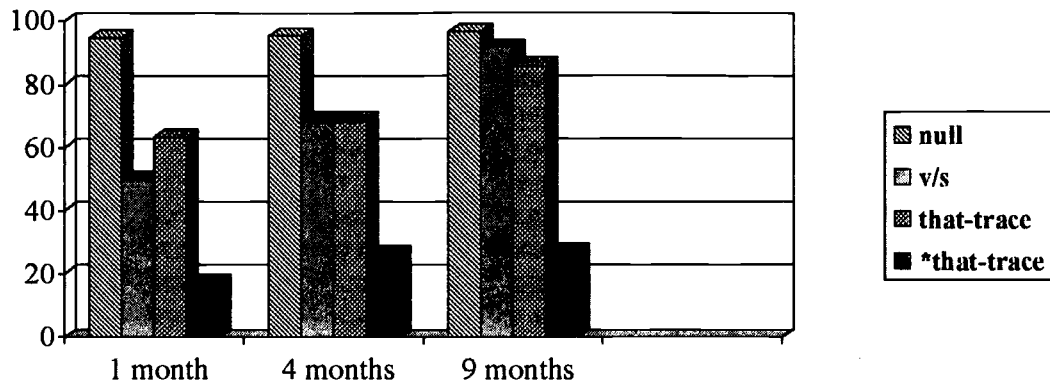
Syntactic Property	Range of Scores	Mean (Standard Deviation)		
		1 Month	4 Months	9 Months
Null Subject	0-10	9.48 (.72)	9.52 (.96)	9.65 (.71)
Verb/Subject Inversion	0-5	2.48(1.69)	3.42 (1.57)	4.58 (.62)
<i>That</i> -trace present	0-5	3.16 (1.59)	3.42 (1.80)	4.30 (1.52)
* <i>That</i> -trace absent	0-5	.87 (1.43)	1.32 (1.60)	1.35 (1.89)

*n* = 31

\* Represents ungrammaticality

**Figure 1**

Mean Percentage GJT Scores at 1 Month, 4 Months, and 9 Months.



The means were then submitted to Independent-Samples T-Tests to ascertain whether the improvements were significant (Table 2). For the first property, null subjects, the data yielded a non-significant increase in mean scores from month one to month four ( $p = .869$ ,  $df = 30$ ) and from month four to month nine ( $p = .380$ ) at the  $p < .05$  level. These means and non-significant results suggest that the L2 language learners were already performing at ceiling on the test at the onset of the study abroad program.

On the second property, verb-subject inversion, the data yielded a significant increase from month one to month four ( $p = .033$ ) and from month four to month nine ( $p = .000$ ).

On the third property, *that*-trace effects, the data show a non-significant increase for the grammatical *that*-trace items from month 1 to month 4 ( $p = .492$ ). However, there was a significant increase from month four to month nine ( $p = .05$ ). For the ungrammatical *that*-trace items the increase was not significant ( $p = .210$ ) from month one to month four, nor from month four to month nine ( $p = .943$ ). The participants were able to identify grammatical sentences but did not significantly improve at identifying ungrammatical sentences.

**Table 2**

Independent-Samples T-Tests for Grammaticality Judgment Scores.<sup>4</sup>

Pair	Item	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
1-4 months	Null	-.166	30	.869
	V-S	-2.229	30	.033**
	<i>That</i> -trace	-.696	30	.492
	* <i>That</i>	-1.259	30	.210
4-9 months	Null	-.891	30	.380
	V-S	-4.005	30	.000**
	<i>That</i> -trace	-1.871	30	.071
	* <i>That</i>	-.072	30	.943

**Table 2**  
Independent-Samples T-Tests for Grammaticality Judgment Scores. (continued)

Pair	Item	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
1-9 months	Null	-.578	30	.879
	V/S	-7.031	30	.000**
	<i>that</i> -trace	-2.602	30	.013**
	* <i>that</i> -trace	-1.316	30	.198

\*\*  $p < .05$  (denotes a significant difference in mean scores)

*Oral Interview.* Statistical analyses were performed on the oral narrative data. The mean-percentage scores at one month, four months, and nine months are summarized in Table 3. Similar to the GJT data, all scores improved with time. The means were then submitted to Independent-Samples T-Tests to test for significance. The mean percentage of null subject pronouns increased but not significantly at the  $p < .05$  level ( $p = .571$ ) from month one to month four. Similarly, there was no significant increase ( $p = .517$ ) from the fourth month to the ninth month. Most probably, this non-significant increase occurred because the L2 language learners were already performing at the ceiling on the test at the onset of the study abroad program. For the second [+NSP] property, verb-subject inversion, the mean percentage of the number of verbs produced before subjects did not increase significantly ( $p = .122$ ) from month one to month four; however, the scores did increase significantly from month four to month nine ( $p = .008$ ). No mean scores or statistics were calculated for the third property since the participants produced none.

**Table 3**  
Oral Mean Percentage Frequencies at 1 Month, 4 Months, and 9 Months.

Syntactic Property	Range of Tallies	Mean Percentage (Standard Deviation)		
		1 Month	4 Months	9 Months
Null	3-40	60.02(15.35)	61.36(13.01)	64.81(12.02)
V/S	0-2	4.01(5.37)	4.67(5.35)	6.24(5.38)
<i>that</i> -trace	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

n = 31

n/a = No data available.

In summary, the GJT and oral narrative data reveal that the most salient and least abstract syntactic feature (null subject) was acquired by the end of the first month of the program, at times even before the onset of a study abroad program. Between the fourth and ninth months, language learners acquired the most abstract and least salient syntactic features of the language (verb/subject inversion and *that*-trace). The second property, verb-subject inversion, which is somewhat salient in the target language input and not so abstract as to escape notice, was acquired by the fourth month of the study abroad

program. However, acquisition of the least salient and most abstract property of the NSP (*that*-trace) occurs only between four and nine months of exposure to input.

### Discussion and Limitations

Although results from this study suggest that spending the equivalent of a semester in a study abroad environment is beneficial linguistically, acquisition of underlying abstract syntactic features that are infrequent in the input occur only within the second semester abroad. Therefore, the academic year abroad seems to be the most beneficial for the acquisition of more complex aspects of a language.

A methodological limitation of this study concerns the assessment instruments. Although the oral interviews elicited a broad range of naturalistic narratives from the participants, they yielded no data on *that*-trace effects. Perhaps, in addition to the naturalistic spontaneous production data from the SOPI interviews, data could have been elicited from connected discourse. As Wang et al. (1992) explain: "connected discourse is more conducive to null subject use in general, because the referent of a null or pronominal subject can be more easily determined from the context" (p. 249). Questions pertaining to a book or a topic could have been used to elicit those structures of the null subject parameter. For example, to elicit *that*-trace sequences the participants could have been presented with photographs from children's books and then asked how they would ask a child about what is happening, e.g., who *they* thought ate Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother. This would probably elicit the following question in Spanish: *¿Quién piensas tú que comió la abuelita de la Caperucita Roja?* 'Who do you think ate Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother?' where the language learner would be tested on the production of a filled complementizer position.

Another methodological objection concerns the target items that test the third property of the null subject parameter, *that*-trace sequence violations. In Spanish, certain verbs allow for omission of the complementizer in tensed dependent clauses, most specifically verbs of opinion. These include *dudar* 'doubt', *suponer* 'suppose', and *parecer* 'seem' (Brovetto 2002). For this reason these verbs were not utilized. With the three verbs that were used in the target items the complementizer with *decir* is obligatory as long as it does not trigger the subjunctive mood in the independent clause. The use of *creer* and *pensar* could also hypothetically belong to the verbs of opinion.

These limitations aside, L2 learners of Spanish in the study abroad context improved in the development of the three NSP properties from month one to month four to month nine, especially by the ninth month. On some level, this is no surprise because the more one uses and is exposed to a language, the more proficient one becomes. Therefore, other studies need to demonstrate in greater detail and with comparative studies measuring summer programs to semester programs to academic year programs the validity of the dictum "the longer the better." Specifically, empirical evidence gained from generative studies (UG) focusing on the development of underlying syntactic competence by advanced L2 learners will contribute to a better understanding of the full potential of the study abroad experience under different conditions (e.g., one year versus a semester or a summer) and the linguistic gains the advanced language learner will make.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Educators agree that a study abroad experience is an important key to solidifying a learner's foreign language competence. In 1989 The National Task Force on Undergraduate Education Abroad was established with representatives from the National Association for Foreign Student Advisors (NAFSA), the Council on International Educational Exchange

(CIEE) and the Institute of International Education (IIE). The task force focused primarily on the internationalization of the undergraduate experience. In 1990, the work of the committee resulted in five major recommendations: (1) by the year 2000, 10% of U.S. college students should study abroad; (2) there should be greater diversity in participating students, locations, and program types; (3) the study abroad experience should be integrated into regular degree programs in many different fields; (4) factors that inhibit expansion of study abroad need to be addressed; (5) funding from private and public sources needs to increase. The task force made this recommendation based on the study of Carlson et al. (1990) who, not surprisingly, found that not only did the U.S. students increase their foreign language proficiency, but that the knowledge of their host country also increased dramatically.

Among important conditions language majors will need for success are a good theoretical background (literature and grammar) but also practical experience (i.e., linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, cultural knowledge, international experience) with using the language. The optimal place to gain practical knowledge is to live in the target community. Not only will the study abroad experience probably make foreign language majors better prepared for the work force, but it will most likely help open the doors to a global community. Chieffo and Zipser (2001) state "a sojourn abroad not only can do wonders for students' foreign language acquisition but also can foster the understanding of other cultures necessary for success in today's global society" (p. 79).

A related question is to ask how the university language department at home can work with study abroad programs to facilitate advanced L2 learning. First, not all programs abroad are beneficial to all students. Therefore, the study abroad advisor should categorize potential study abroad students in two ways: level of proficiency in the L2 and degree of independence. The lower L2 proficiency students who will be taking language courses abroad at the first or second year level should be placed in programs that offer basic language classes and that will provide the students with a greater degree of guidance and assistance in the study abroad country. On the other hand, the advanced language learners should be placed in programs that offer advanced foreign language and literature courses beyond the basic language courses and that give students more independence when dealing with everyday situations (finding an apartment, opening a bank account, ordering phone service, etc.) so that they will be forced to use the L2 in more contextualized situations. In addition, programs should offer more motivated advanced students the freedom to take courses for credit through the university they are attending as long as they can work independently and deal with the university's heavy emphasis on end-of-course examination (Cholakian 1992, p. 20) and different pedagogical ideologies around the world. That does not mean that we only send independent students. Not all advanced students feel comfortable with the expectations in a foreign country and would prefer to receive guidance and assistance just like lower proficiency students. At the same time, advanced language learners who are interested in solidifying their L2 proficiency can achieve this only by being placed in situations where they have to negotiate for meaning in contextualized situations (and not rely on a resident director to do it for them). As mentioned previously, before sending the advanced language learners to the highly independent University of Barcelona program, three faculty members at the University of Illinois conduct a lengthy interview to determine whether they would succeed personally in such an environment. Advanced learners judged to be independent were then encouraged to enroll in University of Barcelona courses (besides the CORE courses), where they faced the European education system in addition to the added linguistic benefits of not relying on English when communication breaks down.

A second factor to keep in mind when coordinating a study abroad program is that the advanced-level courses at the home university should be closely integrated with the abroad program; that is, the home university needs to invest time in developing study abroad programs that reflect what is done at home. For example, the program director of the University Studies Abroad Consortium (USAC) at the University of Nevada at Reno (UNR), Dr. Carmelo Urza, coordinated a conference in Spain during May of 2003, where all USAC program teachers in Spain met with him and other foreign language professors of American universities to articulate and redevelop courses abroad so that they are similar in structure, evaluation, and content to those offered in the U.S. The University of Illinois program abroad to the University of Barcelona successfully offered courses through the CORE program where the classes were parallel in content and evaluation to classes offered at the home university. In addition, only native Spanish speakers who had direct experience with or were familiar with the American education system taught the CORE classes to the American students. To meet that requirement, the USAC program director at UNR has provided Spanish USAC instructors the opportunity to teach Spanish at the University of Reno for a semester or two in order to become more familiar with the U.S. educational system. A combination of integrated classes and preparation of the instructors allowed students to complete their degrees without interruption upon their return to their home universities.

A third factor to consider is how to prepare advanced language learners for what they will encounter at the foreign university. Teichler and Steube (1991) reported that some U.S. study abroad programs are not successful because students have problems in academic communication in the foreign language (p. 346). Initially, most students will have difficulty becoming accustomed to their new academic environment. Generally after a year, advanced language learners will have the opportunity to become acclimated and acculturated to their new university environment. In addition, if students need additional guidance, a resident director, preferably an American university faculty member, will assist the student. The resident director at the *Centro de California/Illinois* in the University of Barcelona was an American professor who met with students during the middle and at end of both semesters to assist with academic planning and counseling. In addition, before the University of Illinois students could go abroad, they were required to enroll in a course that familiarized them with how universities function abroad.

Many factors come into play in the creation of a study-abroad program that is most effective linguistically for advanced L2 learners. Not only should these learners be involved in programs abroad that allow them to be exposed to as much contextualized input as possible and to use the target language in as many everyday contexts as possible, but their courses must be integrated into the home university's curriculum. Finally, the data from this study contributed empirical evidence suggesting that one-year abroad is the optimal duration for developing complex structures for advanced foreign language learners.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

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1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the AAUSC session *The Advanced Learner: Curricular and Programmatic Issues* at ACTFL in Salt Lake City, November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2002. A different study using some of the data in this present paper is to appear in *Hispania* (entitled: *The Acquisition of NSP Properties in SLA: Some Effects of Positive Evidence in a Natural Learning Setting*.)
2. Syntactic explanations are outside the scope of the paper. For literature on how the three properties are part of the NSP, see Chomsky (1981).

3. SOPI is a standardized performance-based speaking test that was developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics; it assesses general speaking proficiency in a second language (Liskin-Gasparro 1987).
4.  $p$  is the observed significance level. It provides the basis for deciding whether or not to reject the null hypothesis. It is the probability that a statistical result as extreme as the one observed would occur if the null hypothesis were true. If the observed significance level is small enough, usually less than 0.05 or 0.01, the null hypothesis is rejected.
5. I would like to thank the 31 participants of this study and the Spanish and Portuguese Department at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign for awarding me the one-year teaching position at the University of Barcelona during the academic year 1997-1998; this allowed me to study the longitudinal effects of study abroad on second language acquisition.

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## Appendix 1

### Target Sentences for Grammaticality Judgment Test—1 Month

Property	Sentences
Null subjects (null subject pronouns)	Salieron de la casa a las ocho. Estudio mucho por la mañana. ***
(expletives)	Hay un perro grande en el jardín. Hay que comer bien cada día. Está nevando en las montañas. *Ahora lo está lloviendo afuera. *En octubre lo nieva poco en los EE.UU. *En Alaska lo hace mucho frío. *Lo es bueno comer fruta. *Lo es malo ver mucha televisión.
Verb-subject inversion	<i>Creo yo</i> que Luis es culpable. <i>Piensa él</i> que la paella es buena. <i>Opinamos nosotros</i> que Castro es bueno. <i>Durmió el bebé</i> 3 horas. <i>Ya comieron mis hermanos</i> la cena. ***
That-trace effects	¿Quién cree la policía que mató al joyero? ¿Quién piensan los padres que raptó a su hija? ¿Quién dicen Uds. que se hizo daño? ¿Quién dices tú que habla japonés aquí? ¿Quién cree el FBI que asesinó al presidente? *¿Quién pensamos nosotros robó el dinero? *¿Quién piensan Uds. regaló las flores a Tina? *¿Quién creen Uds. pegó al hombre? *¿Quién crees tú va a ganar mañana? *¿Quién dices tú viene a la fiesta contigo?

\*Ungrammatical sentence.

\*\*\*Ungrammatical sentences for these properties do not exist in Spanish.

## Appendix 2

### Oral Interview Questions

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Time	Questions
One month,	Picture 1                      Ask questions
Four months,	Picture 2                      Describe a place/activities
& Nine months	Picture 3                      Give directions
	Picture 4                      Narrate in present time
	Picture 5                      Narrate in past time
 One month	 1. Ahora en el año que vas a estar aquí, ¿Qué lugares te gustaría visitar? 2. ¿Cuál fue el proceso que tú seguiste / hiciste para encontrar tu piso? 3. ¿Cuál sería una ventaja y una desventaja de estar aquí un año? 4. ¿Qué opinas tú sobre cómo se visten los españoles? 5. ¿Qué pasaría si todas las universidades establecieran como requisito que los estudiantes necesitan estudiar en el extranjero por un año antes de graduarse?
 Four months	 1. ¿Cómo fueron tus vacaciones en diciembre? 2. Describe el proceso para escribir un trabajo escrito para una de tus clases en la UB. 3. Menciona una ventaja/desventaja de regresar a los EEUU después de solo UN semestre en Barcelona en vez de UN año. 4. Muchos dicen que los catalanes prefieren hablar catalán en vez del castellano, y también que los catalanes se enojan cuando no les hablan en catalán. ¿Qué opinas tú? 5. ¿Qué pasaría si descubrieran que la reina Elizabeth de Inglaterra y su hijo, el príncipe Carlos, tuvieron algo que ver en la muerte de la princesa Diana y Dodi?
 Nine months	 1. ¿Qué vas a hacer este verano? 2. ¿Me podrías explicar el proceso para prepararte para ir de viaje? 3. Menciona una ventaja o una desventaja sobre el hecho de que aquí en Barcelona se habla castellano y catalán. 4. ¿Crees que la vida en España es similar a la vida en EE.UU.? ¿Por qué? 5. ¿Qué harían los americanos si Bill Clinton fuera culpable de todas sus acusaciones sexuales?