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L2 performance and context of language learning: A comparative study of learners in Tehran and London

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Abstract

The importance of learning context has stirred debates in the field of second language acquisition over the past two decades since studying a second language (L2) abroad is believed to provide authentic opportunities that facilitate L2 acquisition and development. The present paper examines whether language performance of learners studying English in a formal language classroom context at home (AH) is different from performance of learners who study English abroad (SA) where they would have to use English for a range of communicative purposes. The data for this comparative study is part of a larger corpus of L2 performance of 100 learners of English, 60 in Tehran and 40 in London, on four oral narrative tasks. The two groups' performances are compared on a range of different measures of fluency, accuracy, syntactic complexity and lexical diversity. The results of the analyses indicate that learners in the two contexts are very similar with respect to the grammatical accuracy and aspects of the oral fluency of their performance. However, the SA group appears to have benefited from living and studying abroad in producing language of higher syntactic complexity and lexical diversity. These

results have significant implications for language teaching in AH contexts.

Key Words: Context of Learning, Study Abroad, Study At Home, L2 performance

1. Introduction

For long, teachers, students and other stakeholders in L2 pedagogy have subscribed to the belief that L2 learning in a context in which L2 is the means of communication is preferable to one that is limited to formal classroom language learning at a home context. This supposed superiority has been assumed by many because of the role context of L2 learning is potentially believed to play in the acquisition of linguistics and communicative skills (Collentine and Freed, 2004; Diaz-Campos, 2004). Given that there are numerous authentic opportunities to learn and practice L2 in SA context, it is presumed that living and studying in an abroad context would help learners develop L2 skills more conveniently. In effect, availability of and exposure to L2 in a range of domains and for different social and communicative purposes is considered to help learners develop a wider vocabulary, higher accuracy and more native like fluency (Cohen & Shively, 2007; Wilkinson, 1998).

Research in this area has predominantly focused on questions such as whether students who study L2 abroad achieve greater L2 language skills than those who do not, and what specific differences there are between the language skills of students who have studied abroad as compared to those whose L2 learning has been limited to classroom contexts at home. In the next section a summary of the research on possible effects of the context of language learning on learners' output will be presented.

2. Background

A number of earlier studies have provided evidence to support the assumption that SA context contributes to the development of different language skills. One of the earliest research projects investigating gains in the students speaking and listening abilities was a series of studies on British students studying L2 in Germany or France (Willis, Doble, Sankarayya & Smith, 1977). These scholars reported test score gains in students' exams which were interpreted as the linguistic advantage of residence abroad. Similarly, Freed (1995b) found that L2 learners who studied L2 abroad seemed to attain an overall enhanced fluency in terms of the number of gaps and pauses in their speech. Lafford (1995) found that SA learners had greater communicative skills, i.e. a broader repertoire of communicative strategies for initiating, maintaining, expanding and terminating communication. Investigating development of vocabulary in SA students, Milton and Meara (1995) reported that these learners' acquisition of vocabulary was facilitated as a result of studying abroad. More recently, Segalowitz and Freed, (2004) conducted a study in which L2 learners of Spanish in two contexts of home and abroad were compared on a range of measures of fluency. The results indicated that learners in the SA context made greater gains, in terms of temporal aspects of their performance and hesitation phenomena and in their oral proficiency as measured by the OPI. Diaz-Campos (2004) reports studies that suggest L2 learners studying Spanish in Mexico have shown a better overall performance and a more positive attitude towards the culture and language as a result of their context of learning.

The work and contributions introduced and discussed above provide a well-documented perspective on the specific gains in learner performance that are associated with the SA context.

However, there are other studies that have compared the SA and AH contexts and offered controversial and occasionally contradictory findings about the differences between the learners' skills in the two contexts (Freed, 1995a; Freed et al., 2004; Coleman, 1998). DeKeyser (1991), for instance, compared the language skills of a group of American students who studied Spanish in Spain with an AH group who were studying Spanish in America. He found that despite gains in fluency and vocabulary for the SA students, there were no significant differences with respect to improvements in grammar and oral fluency. Similarly, Regan's (1995) study failed to show any advantage for gains in syntactic control for students in SA context. Collentine (2004) has compared morphosyntactic and lexical development of English language learners at two contexts of SA and AH. The results of his study imply that the AH context has facilitated development of some lexical and grammatical features. However, he contends that those who studied English in an English speaking context had better narrative abilities and were able to produce language that was more semantically dense. Taguchi (2008) found that SA learners, as a result of studying abroad and having contact with native speakers, made improvement on their comprehension speed but not on the accuracy of comprehension of L2 pragmatics.

These results suggest that the initial assumptions made by many about the superiority of the SA context may not be categorically acceptable and are therefore invariably open to challenge. Although current research acknowledges that there are differences between the language skills of learners in the two different contexts, there is not sufficient evidence to provide a clear picture of what aspects of language ability can be better developed and enhanced in each context. Given that the majority of research in this field has been

conducted in America and Europe, SLA researchers (Dewey, 2004; Freed, 2008) have called for similar research in other contexts so that such contributions shed light to the unknowns of the field. As such, this has been the point of departure for the current study.

3. Current Study

There has not been, to my knowledge, any comparative research investigating the differences between the L2 performance of learners studying English in Iran (AH) and those studying English in an English-speaking community (SA). For pedagogic purposes, it seems necessary to know whether and how language learners who have been studying English through formal classroom instruction in Iran are different from those who have been studying English both in classroom context and in their everyday communication with an English-speaking community. Hence, the present study seeks to compare two groups of learners studying English as a second/foreign language in the two different contexts, i.e. Tehran and London. It attempts, in deed, to investigate whether there are any differences in the two groups' language performance and whether any of the differences can be interpreted in light of the influence of living in either context. It is hoped that the results of this study can show whether the learners' language profiles are comparable and whether there are aspects of learners' performance in the AH context that entail tailor-made instructions and pedagogic interventions.

4. Research Questions

This study addresses the following questions:

1. Are there salient differences between the accuracy of performance by students who study English in Tehran, when compared to those who study English in London?

2. Are there salient differences between the oral fluency of performance by students who study English in Tehran, when compared to those who study English in London?
3. Are there salient differences between the syntactic complexity of performance by students who study English in Tehran, when compared to those who study English in London?
4. Are there salient differences between the lexical diversity of performance by students who study English in Tehran, when compared to those who study English in London?

5. Method

This is a comparative study in which L2 performance of two groups of learners of English is compared in terms of fluency, accuracy, syntactic complexity and lexical diversity of the language they produced on oral narrative tasks. The four research questions above are raised to address the recent need (Freed, 2008) to investigate whether the language profile of learners who study English at AH context is different from those who study English at SA context. As there has not been any previous research to suggest any differences between the learners' performance in these two particular contexts, the four research questions are taken as null hypotheses. It is worth mentioning that the data discussed here is part of a larger corpus of L1 and L2 performance collected for investigating the effects of task design and context of learning on language output (for more details see Author and Collaborator, 2008).

5.1 Participants & Learning Contexts

A total of 100 language learners volunteered to take part in this study at two contexts: Tehran and London. Both groups were studying English at their local colleges at an intermediate level of proficiency working towards an FCE Exam by the end of the semester/year. At

both colleges, the learners were placed at their levels on the basis of the results of their institutional tests that included a written test and an oral interview. In order to make sure that the learners belonged to a similar language proficiency level, an Oxford Placement Test was further administered to both groups. On this test, all the participants were scored "intermediate", i.e. band 4 on a scale of 0-9. Interestingly, a significant correlation coefficient (r= .56, p < .01) was found between the locally developed institutional test and the Oxford Placement Test.

5.1.1 Tehran Context

The Tehran participants were 60 adult female Iranian language learners who attended an "FCE" course of 3 hours of curricular activities and 1 hour of optional supplementary activities per week. They all had Persian as their first language, were aged between 19 and 45 and had similar language learning background. The main textbook used on the course was O'Conner's (1989) First Certificate in English. However, the teachers often provided some extra materials and communicative activities during lessons. In the optional supplementary hour they could choose movie sessions and discussions and/or interactive language lab sessions. Although the curriculum emphasized a communicative approach to language teaching and learning and many of the teachers were supporters of such an approach, intensive classroom observation to fully document this statement was not possible. The participants in this context came from a range of social and professional backgrounds and differed in light of the reasons why they attended this course and the amount of contact and practice they had outside classroom to improve their English. Obviously, as English was not the medium of communication in this context, their contact with English outside classroom was rather limited and the range of authentic situations, if

any, in which they could use English to communicate with native speakers was considerably restricted.

5.1.2 London Context

For practicality reasons, it was not possible to have access to a sufficiently large and coherent cohort of Persian speakers studying English in London. Instead, a multilingual cohort of L2 learners formed the SA group. The London participants were 40 adult, mostly female, learners of English who attended a similar "FCE" course of 4 hours per week at a college in London. They were aged between 19 and 47 and from a range of different cultural, linguistics and educational backgrounds. A range of FCE materials including O'Conner (1989) First Certificate in English were used on the course. In addition, the teachers usually employed supplementary materials and communicative tasks as part of their curricular activities. Using IT and Internet and practicing English in language labs were recommended but due to the limited number of contact hours they were not frequently exercised in class. The participants had all lived in London between 6 months and 5 years and had to use English in a range of situations to communicate with both native and non-native speakers of English. Outside classroom, based on their work and life requirements the amount of exposure they had to English and the range of domains in which they used English varied.

5.2 Tasks and Procedures

Four oral narrative tasks were used in elicitation and collection of the data. Oral narratives, which are very popular in SLA research, refer to short stories based on a sequenced set of picture prompts that are given to the participants as a single type of stimulus to elicit their performance. Each of the four narratives contained an interesting short story demonstrated through 6 picture prompts. The picture

stories were adopted from EFL/ESL resource books (Heaton, 1975; Jones, 1979; Swan and Walter, 1990) which are typically used in language classrooms. The type of task was familiar to all participants as performing narratives was a common practice at both colleges. The participants were all briefed on the purpose of the research before consent was obtained. They met with the researcher in a quiet room and were given the picture stories one at a time. After looking at each picture story for three minutes and planning for what they wanted to say, each participant was asked to narrate the story to the researcher. They were told that they had up to 5 minutes to narrate the story but most performances did not last as long. Once performance on the first narrative was completed, the second narrative was presented to the learner and the same procedures were followed. All the performances were recorded, transcribed and coded on a number of detailed analytic measures.

5.3 Detailed Analytic Measures

A large number of researchers investigating task-based performance data use detailed analytic measures because they allow for a considerable amount of consistency in the processing and analysis of the data (Bygate, 2001; Ellis, 2002, Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005; Ortega, 2005; Robinson, 2000; Skehan, 2001). There is also ample evidence that analyzing language data with respect to its accuracy, fluency and complexity can provide researchers with an in-depth insight not only into the quality of L2 performance but to its development[1]. As such, each participant's performance was analysed

[1] Over the past few years, some international conferences and colloquia have been devoted to analyzing learner language in terms of accuracy, complexity and fluency measures.

for a range of different measures of language proficiency, i.e. fluency, accuracy, complexity and lexical diversity.

Since fluency is a multifaceted construct (Koponen and Riggenbach, 2000; Oppenheim, 2000), SLA researchers contend that it should be studied more thoroughly (Skehan, 2003). By the same token, two different aspects of fluency were investigated in this study: repair fluency and breakdown fluency. Measures of false start and replacement were used to investigate the repair fluency of the learners' performance. False starts, in this sense, refer to all utterances that are abandoned before completion and replacements are lexical items that a speaker uses to substitute something s/he has said earlier with something new. Breakdown fluency measures are those which represent instances of speech being interrupted by pauses and silences (Skehan, 2003). In SLA studies, pauses are considered important because they can denote the information processing load of task performance (Yuan and Ellis, 2003) or can refer to a competition in the attentional resources available to L2 learners (Skehan and Foster, 1997). The two measures adopted in this study are total amount of silence occurring in the middle of clauses and at the end of clauses. Silence, in this sense, refers to unfilled pauses or gaps of larger than .4 a second in the learner's performance[2].

Accuracy of L2 performance was measured by calculating the percentage of error-free clauses in each performance (Ellis and Yuan, 2003, Author and Collaborator, 2005). Syntactic complexity was determined through an index of subordination by calculating the

[2] To have reliable measures of breakdown fluency, all the pauses were measured digitally using GoldWave Digital Editor.

ratio of clauses to AS-units (for further details see Foster, Tonkyn and Wigglesworth, 2000). AS units are believed to be a more reliable unit of syntactic analysis for spoken data as they take into account the importance of intonation patterns and pause features of speech (Foster et al., 2000). An index of subordination is recommended by many researchers as a more appropriate and precise measure of complexity for analysing learners' language (Foster and Skehan, 1999; Ortega, 2003).

The lexical diversity of the L2 performance was calculated by using VocD in the CLAN software. The corrected measure of D was used to represent the lexical diversity of each performance (Malvern and Richards, 2002). This measure of lexical diversity is based on a mathematical formula that corrects for sample size and unlike traditional type/token measures is suitable for data with transcripts of relatively short length. A sample of 10% of the transcripts was checked by a second researcher and an interrater reliability score of greater than 95% was obtained on each measure. A number of t-tests were used to compare the different measures of learner performance in the two contexts of Tehran and London.

6. Results

The problem addressed in Question 1 was whether there were salient differences between the accuracy of performance of the students studying English in Tehran, when compared to those studying English in London. Accuracy was the percentage of error-free clauses in each performance. Table 1 shows the results of the comparison of the accuracy of learners' performance across the four tasks in the two contexts.

Table 1: T-test results for accuracy: Learners in Tehran and London *(figures are for mean % error-free clauses)*

	Tehran	London	*p*
Task 1	42	43	*.68ns*
Task 2	31	38	*.13ns*
Task 3	41	47	*.22ns*
Task 4	30	36	*.136ns*

Table 1 shows that there is not a statistically significance difference between the accuracy of the L2 learners' performance in the two contexts (all *p* values are non-significant). Although the London-based learners have produced slightly more accurate language on all tasks, this has no statistical value. These results indicate that the two groups of the L2 learners are able to produce comparably accurate language on different narrative tasks.

The second research question attempted to explore whether there were salient differences between the oral fluency of the learners' performance in the two different contexts. As discussed earlier, two aspects of oral fluency were closely looked into: repair fluency and breakdown fluency. Tables 2 and 3 show the results of the t-tests comparing the repair fluency measures of the L2 learners' performance in Tehran and London.

Table 2: T-test results for repair fluency: Learners in Tehran and London
(figures are for mean false starts)

	Tehran	London	*p*
Task 1	2.67	3.60	*.183ns*
Task 2	3.57	4.40	*.373ns*
Task 3	3.63	5.00	*.07ns*
Task 4	6.23	5.25	*.473ns*

Table 3: T-test results for repair fluency: Learners in Tehran and London
(figures are for mean replacements)

	Tehran	London	*p*
Task 1	1.27	1.30	*.923ns*
Task 2	1.13	1.55	*.359ns*
Task 3	1.90	1.85	*.914ns*
Task 4	2.87	1.55	*.04**

Tables 2 and 3 clearly show that for the two measures of repair fluency the learners in Tehran have consistently produced as fluent performances as the learners in London. Across all tasks, there is no statistically significant difference between London-based learners' performance and that of Tehran-based learners. With regard to replacement, except for Task 4 ($p < .04$*), the learners in the two contexts have produced comparable performances. These results suggest that, except in one case, there were no salient differences between the performances of the two groups in terms of the repair fluency of their performances when performing narrative tasks in English.

A second aspect of fluency investigated in this study was breakdown fluency. Tables 4 and 5 show the results of the

comparisons of the breakdown fluency measures of the learners' performance in Tehran and London contexts.

Table 4: T-test results for breakdown fluency: Learners in Tehran and London
(figures are for total silence mid-clause pauses per minute)

	Tehran	London	*p*
Task 1	7.62	9.67	*.141ns*
Task 2	9.48	10.55	*.485ns*
Task 3	7.83	8.13	*.855ns*
Task 4	8.06	9.89	*.192ns*

Table 5: T-test results for breakdown fluency: Learners in Tehran and London
(figures are for total silence end-clause pauses per minute)

	Tehran	London	*p*
Task 1	2.80	7.16	*.001**
Task 2	3.42	8.13	*.001**
Task 3	3.65	7.53	*.001**
Task 4	3.83	6.99	*.001**

The results from table 4 clearly indicate that there are no significant differences in the amount of silence the learners in the two contexts produced in the middle of clauses. This suggests that both groups of L2 learners are equally fluent in light of the pauses they make in the middle of clauses when they perform oral narratives. This finding is in line with the previous comparisons of repair fluency measures in this study. Surprisingly, the results of the comparison of the end-clause silence in the two groups' performance

look very different. Table 5 shows that learners in London produced statistically less amount of silence at the end of clauses, i.e. clause boundaries. The significant values ($p < .001$ across all tasks) strongly suggest that the London-based learners paused more at the end of clauses. Although an initial interpretation of such results may imply that London-based learners were less fluent as they paused more, the tenable interpretation is that they were not. In other words, the L2 earners in London paused more regularly at the end of clauses and did not interrupt their speech by mid-clause pauses and silence. Recent research, in effect, suggests that mid-clause pausing is one characteristic of non-native and dysfluent performance [3].

Research Question 3 aimed at exploring whether there were salient differences between the syntactic complexity of performance of the two groups of learners in Tehran and London. Table 6 shows the results of this comparison.

Table 6: T-test results for complexity: Learners in Tehran and London
(figures are for mean clauses per AS-Unit)

	Tehran	London	*p*
Task 1	1.28	1.41	.007*
Task 2	1.24	1.34	*.04**
Task 3	1.59	1.71	*.24 ns*
Task 4	1.36	1.51	*.04**

Table 6 shows that there are statistically significant differences between the syntactic complexity of the language produced by London-based learners and that of Tehran-based learners. The L2

[3] Personal communication with Professor Peter Skehan (2008)

learners in London consistently produced language of higher syntactic complexity on all different tasks with three of them reaching a significance level[4].

Question 4 was raised to look into the differences between the two groups' lexical diversity of L2 performance. The corrected measure of D was used to represent the diversity of the vocabulary used by the L2 learners. Table 7 demonstrates the results of the comparison of the lexical diversity of the language produced by the learners in the two contexts.

Table 7: t-tests for lexical diversity: Learners in Tehran and London *(figures are mean values for D)*

	Tehran	London	*p*
Task 1	28.75	38.37	.01*
Task 2	25.82	36.11	.02*
Task 3	27.76	36.59	.003**
Task 4	33.62	43.37	.006**

These results indicate that the performance of L2 learners studying English in London was statistically different from that of learners studying English in Tehran in terms of its lexical diversity (significance levels of $p < 01$ were reached). As shown in Table 7, the language performance of London-based learners was consistently more lexically diverse across all different tasks. In other words, the learners in the SA context used a wider ranger of words and expressions in their output, when compared to learners in the AH context.

[4] A second measure of syntactic complexity, mean length of utterance (MLU), was further used. The comparisons produced very similar results to those of syntactic complexity. However, for reasons of space these are not presented here.

A qualitative analysis of the data was further performed through which the data set was checked against the British National Corpus (BNC). The results categorically supported the findings of the statistical analysis suggesting that Tehran-based learners used a rather limited range of vocabulary items and expressions (Collaborator and Author, forthcoming).

7. Discussion

The findings yielded both positive and negative responses to the four questions that guided this study. The results of the comparisons between the learners' performances in the two contexts suggest that there are not salient differences between the accuracy and certain aspects of fluency of the performance of the English language learners in Tehran and London. The L2 learners in SA and AH contexts continually produced language of comparably similar accuracy on oral narrative task performance.

With regard to repair fluency, these findings suggest that the two groups of learners were very similar to one another in terms of the number of false starts and replacements they produce while repairing their utterances. As regards breakdown fluency, i.e. the amount of silence they make when performing tasks, there is some differences between the SA and AH groups. While the two groups were quite similar in the amount of silence they made in the middle of clauses, the AH group made substantially less silence at the end of clauses. This may initially seem to imply that the AH group has been more fluent than the SA group. However, bearing in mind that the native speakers and highly fluent L2 speakers pause more frequently at clause boundaries, it should be concluded that the SA group was in effect considerably more fluent in their speech. SLA is aware that in the process of speech production pauses are generally necessary both for physiological reasons (Freed, 2000; Kopenon and Riggenbach,

2000) and for online information processing (Ellis and Yuan, 2003; Skehan, 1998). Native speakers of a language pause regularly and systematically at clause boundaries; they normally do not pause frequently in the middle (see Collaborator and Author, in press). That is to say, one prime characteristic of disfluent performance is the frequent pauses which occur not at but within clause boundaries.

In summary, these results confirm the findings of similar research in other contexts (Freed et al., 2004) and suggest that contextual differences can, at least to some extent, promote the pausing patterns of the learners' speech. One way of interpreting these results is that the learners in SA context have learned to regulate the pausing pattern of their performance to address the communicative needs of living and interacting with native speakers and perhaps to meet the requirements of the time-bound real-life urgencies. Similarly, this finding seems consistent with the nature of classroom instruction, i.e. learners may not be particularly concerned with where or how long they pause in their speech as there might be no urgency of getting the message across or real-time constraints in much of the classroom-generated communication.

Although the learners in Tehran proved to have performance of comparable accuracy to the learners in London, the syntactic complexity of their performance was significantly less diverse. To put it another way, the learners in SA context were more prepared to take risks of producing longer sentences and to use subordination to complexify their utterances (Ortega, 2003; Skehan, 1998). This may refer to the fact that the learners in SA context were exposed to a variety of situations in which they had to use a range of different grammatical patterns and multitude of highly complex structures. In absence of any other research with similar results, interpreting such findings may be difficult.

The interesting results of the comparison of lexical diversity further suggest that studying abroad is certainly an advantage in establishing a larger vocabulary and/or expediting L2 lexical development. The learners in London consistently produced not only a broader scope of different vocabulary items but a larger number of multi-word units such as collocations and formulaic chunks. Findings of previous research (Foster, 2001) clearly indicate that since multi-word units are retrieved holistically from memory, they are reproduced as a continuous unit in speech and would therefore remain uninterrupted by any pause phenomena. To put it another way, availability of multi-word units to learners and the breakdown fluency are strictly correlated.

As discussed earlier, the qualitative analysis of the two groups' performances suggested that the SA learners' use of words and expressions was by and large more similar to that of native speakers, whereas the AH learners' choice of words and expressions was different from the native speakers. These findings are partly supported by similar research on learning of Spanish as an L2. For instance Collentine (2004) maintained that in his study, the SA group was able to produce language which was more semantically dense.
Interestingly, the results of the comparisons of the learners' performance revealed that syntactic complexity and lexical diversity were also associated in the learners' language profiles. Although principally syntax and lexis represent two interconnected but distinct constructs, the results of this study suggest that those who have language of higher syntactic complexity would have a richer vocabulary[5]. In general, having a more diverse vocabulary repertoire

[5] It is now known that the scope and diversity of the lexis is, at least to a great extent, determined by the requirements of the

is different from using a larger number of subordinations or producing some longer utterances but it is quite possible to have what is known as a "spiky language profile" with one aspect of the L2 performance being at a higher level than the others.

As this study has employed four different oral narrative tasks to elicit language performance, the impact of task design needs to be taken into consideration. There is ample research evidence to suggest that language performance is influenced by task design, task characteristics and task conditions (Ellis and Yuan, 2005, Samuda, 2001, Author and collaborator, 2005; Author and Collaborator, 2008). For this reason, in all the comparisons the effects of between-task influence has carefully been excluded by comparing the performances on the same tasks. Yet, part of the differences obtained across the four tasks could be attributed to the effects of task design. For instance, the only significant result obtained on the comparison of replacements between the two contexts across the four tasks was on Task 4; this significant value can be attributed to the effect of task design (for a full discussion see Author and Collaborator, 2008).

The findings of this study have significant implications for English language teaching in Iran. First of all, such results clearly indicate that the learners studying English in AH context in Tehran, who are only exposed to a few hours of formal classroom teaching are as accurate and almost as fluent as those learners in SA context who have more exposure to authentic language in use and can benefit from the wide-ranging opportunities of acquiring the language in its naturally occurring setting. This should certainly be counted as strength of both teachers and learners in this AH context. Given that the differences between the two groups of learners are

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narrative (Personal communication with Treffers-Dellar, 2005).

owing to the impact of their context of study, language teachers in the AH context can consciously employ communicative activities that foster syntactic complexity and lexical diversity in learners' performance. Activities that require learners to use a wide range of syntactic structures and vocabulary items and tasks that provide authentic opportunities of communication would best serve the purpose. For instance, oral narratives of two storyline are now known to encourage learners to produce more syntactically complex language (Author & Collaborator, 2008).

To enhance the fluency of Tehran-based learners, these results suggest that the pausing pattern of their speech needs to be regulated. Time-constrained speaking tasks and activities which direct the learners' attention towards the temporal aspects of their speech will undoubtedly be useful. Recording and transcribing one's own performance and comparing it to native speaker or expert models would unquestionably enhance learners' awareness of their pausing patterns.

8. Concluding Remarks

It is necessary to acknowledge that the statistical interpretation of research findings of this type remains a complex and contentious issue in SLA research. Comparative studies that identify differences between two contexts of learning are particularly sensitive to assumptions that are made about the impact of contextual differences. Hence, due to the inherent sensitivity of the design of the study, these findings are to be interpreted with care and caution.

Not long ago, the challenge was to find evidence that could support the power of SA experiences to transform learners into highly proficient speakers of an L2. Today, SLA research is aware of some of the limitations of SA context and conscious of the myth of living in the L2 speech community as the key to successful language

learning. Unpredicted findings of Wilkinson (1998) and Pellegrino's (1998) work informed the field that the linguistic nature of some SA contexts is unexpectedly limited and that learners' interactions with native speakers may be less frequent and less intense than was once believed. My argument in this regard is that whereas context-based variations in language learning opportunities can promote significant differences in L2 performance, students who study L2 abroad are not necessarily more proficient in all different aspects of their language skills.

Teachers and learners in AH contexts, in this case those teaching/learning L2 in Tehran, should be proud of what they do in their practices. However, this study clearly indicates that there are certain aspects of AH learners' performance that needs to be enhanced. In addition, the findings of this study reinforce the importance of having further research to investigate and characterize what it is that teachers need to do in their classrooms to improve different aspects of language performance and what is it that the students do in one context compared to another that can promote certain elements of language proficiency. Inarguably, an ethnographic approach to researching the differences between the learners' learning contexts would provide an insider perspective to the learners' experiences and beliefs and may open up new horizons.

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