Exploring the Efficacy of Intonation Instruction While on a Study Abroad Program

The present study focuses on three main themes: study abroad, phonetics instruction, and the acquisition of prosody. While there is no current research being produced on the intersection of those three topics, there has been work published related to those topics separately. Díaz-Campos (2004) studied the effects of study abroad versus an at-home context of learning, but found mixed results for significant gains. Lord (2005) found significant change towards native-like segmental pronunciation for students in an at home setting participating in an upper-level Spanish phonetics class. Additionally, Ramírez-Verdugo (2006) used computer-assisted phonetic instruction of English intonation and also found significant improvement for the instruction group compared to the control group. She not only reported that the students had better pronunciation as rated by native speakers, but also that they self-reported for being more aware of the meaning of intonation and its purpose (Ramírez-Verdugo 2006). Henriksen, et al. (2010) were the first to publish on Spanish L2 intonation acquisition while on a study abroad program in León, Spain, where they did not find significant changes from the pretest to the posttest, but noted that there was some change toward a more native-like pronunciation. What makes this study unique is the aim to look at the intersection among these three topics.

Participants in this study consisted of six native bilingual speakers of Castilian Spanish and Valencian Catalan (to serve as a base from which to judge the non-native productions) and eight L1 English, L2 Spanish students on a study abroad program in Valencia, Spain. Five of the eight participants were part of the instruction group, while three were part of the control group. At the beginning of the six-week program, all L2 participants were recorded performing a reading task, which contained 20 target sentences (10 declarative and 10 absolute interrogative) and a discourse completion task via PowerPoint. At the posttest five weeks later, participants completed similar tasks as well as a language use exit surveys. In the intervening 4 weeks, the instruction group received two in person instruction sessions and two virtual instruction sessions. The utterances from the reading task were analyzed qualitatively in Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2014) following standard Sp_ToBI conventions (Beckman, et al. 2002). The current study only considers the data from the reading task.

The researcher defined intonation development as the acquisition of and approximation to the delayed peak pitch accent (L+>H*) and the rising peak pitch accent (L*+H) as used by native speakers in declarative and absolute interrogative sentences in the pre-nuclear position and the correct usage of the high and low boundary tones, as well as the avoidance of pitch contours typical of English (such as up-speak). Using this definition, neither group attained native-like pronunciation as all learners differed from the native speakers in the posttest. Both groups seemed to trend toward change from the pretest to the posttest as they began to use more bi-tonal pitch accents and improve their proficiency in this way but they were not very different from each other in the posttest for either sentence type. The main conclusion from this study is that without a way to practice or implement the grammatical knowledge acquired in the instructional sessions, the learners were not able to attach pragmatic meaning to the structures without conversations in which they could test their learning. This relates to the Interactionist Framework proposed by Gass (2003) that suggests learners need to interact with more advanced or native speakers in order to test the hypotheses of their inter-language. This study also lends support to Trimble’s (2013) hypothesis that interaction with native speakers is key in L2 intonation acquisition.
References