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Does a short period of going abroad in an English speaking country have an impact on primary students' writing skill?

Article in *Epos Revista de filología* · December 2024

DOI: 10.5944/epos.40.2024.42088

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**DOES A SHORT PERIOD OF GOING ABROAD IN AN ENGLISH
SPEAKING COUNTRY HAVE AN IMPACT ON PRIMARY
STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS?**

**¿UN PERÍODO CORTO DE ESTUDIO EN UN PAÍS DE HABLA INGLESA
TIENE UN IMPACTO EN LAS HABILIDADES ESCRITAS DE LOS
ESTUDIANTES DE PRIMARIA?**

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Fecha de recepción: 30-08-2024
Fecha de aceptación: 04-11-24

ABSTRACT

The present study explores the impact of a short period of stay abroad on primary students' communicative appropriateness in writing in English as a second language. It also investigates the perspectives of parents, teachers, and students on the importance of such experience for language learning. The study was conducted in the Valencian Community, in Spain, and involved 392 primary school students. Data were collected by means of a written task, a questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews. Findings from the study show that students who have been abroad for a short period of time achieved higher scores in communicative appropriateness in writing than those who were not exposed to the second language outside the classroom. Additionally, while students' perceptions varied across schools, teachers and

parents positively viewed studying abroad as an opportunity to engage with the English language. However, teachers noted that, due to the economic difficulties reported by some families, combining classroom activities with online resources is an alternative to ensure that all students benefit from exposure to English beyond the school, regardless of their economic background.

KEYWORDS: study abroad; communicative appropriateness; primary education; second-language acquisition; writing

RESUMEN

El presente estudio explora el impacto de una breve estancia en el extranjero en la adecuación comunicativa escrita de los estudiantes de primaria, y analiza las perspectivas de padres, maestros y estudiantes sobre la importancia de dicha experiencia para el aprendizaje de idiomas. El estudio se realizó en la Comunidad Valenciana, España, e involucró a 392 estudiantes de primaria. Los datos se recopilaron mediante una tarea escrita, un cuestionario y entrevistas semiestructuradas. Los resultados del estudio muestran que los estudiantes que han estado en el extranjero obtuvieron mejores puntuaciones en la adecuación comunicativa escrita. Además, aunque las percepciones de los estudiantes variaron entre escuelas, tanto maestros como padres manifestaron que realizar una estancia corta en un país de habla inglesa era una buena oportunidad para interactuar con el inglés. Sin embargo, los maestros señalaron que, debido a las dificultades económicas de algunas familias, combinar actividades en el aula con recursos en línea es una alternativa para asegurar que todos los estudiantes se beneficien de la exposición al inglés fuera del entorno escolar, independientemente de su situación económica.

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PALABRAS CLAVE: estudio en el extranjero; adecuación comunicativa; educación primaria; adquisición de segundas lenguas; escritura

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language in environments where it is not commonly spoken outside of educational settings presents significant challenges. In Spain, the use of English is primarily confined to formal education, offering limited opportunities for students to engage with the language in their daily lives. This lack of consistent exposure can hinder language acquisition,

particularly in the development of writing skills, which rely on diverse and frequent practice (Muñoz, 2011; Pattemore & Muñoz, 2020). It is also well-known that while formal education provides structured opportunities for input and output, language learning extends beyond the classroom. In fact, exposure to the language outside the classroom is recognised as a key contributor to language development (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). However, despite its potential importance, the impact of such exposure on language proficiency, including communicative appropriateness in writing, remains underexplored in primary education contexts.

In addition, the roles of parents and teachers are also crucial (Nightingale, 2016). Parents and teachers often shape the opportunities that support language learning outside the classroom (Nightingale, 2016). Their attitudes and efforts can either enhance or limit students' exposure to English, making their perspectives invaluable in understanding the full impact of language contact beyond formal educational settings. This study seeks to incorporate these perspectives by examining parents' and teachers' opinions regarding the value of a short period abroad.

To explore the impact of a short period of going abroad, the present study will first address whether going abroad affects primary students' communicative appropriateness in writing. Secondly, it will explore the views of parents and teachers on the importance of going abroad and its roles in facilitating language learning opportunities. By doing so, the study contributes to our understanding of the role of out-of-school factors in language learning. It also provides practical insights that could inform educational practice and policy to ensure that all students have equal access to valuable language learning experiences.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Considering the two essential conditions for language learning -input and output-, it is acknowledged that they are available not only within the classroom but also beyond it. In fact, it is well-established that learning extends beyond the confines of the classroom, with external factors playing a significant role (Muñoz & Cadierno, 2021; Martí & Portolés, 2022). Moreover, there is a clear distinction between explicit learning, which commonly occurs in classroom settings, and implicit learning, which is often associated with more naturalistic environments (Ellis, 2009). Explicit learning involves a conscious awareness of language, such as memorising facts and rules. In contrast, implicit learning refers to the spontaneous acquisition of knowledge, typically triggered by unexpected input from the environment,

leading to implicit knowledge. As Ellis (2009) noted, even though learners in implicit learning scenarios may not be able to articulate what they have learned, the evidence of their learning is apparent in their behavioural choices.

Research has increasingly focused on the influence of input beyond the classroom (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). It appears that exposure to the target language beyond the classroom is crucial for language learning, as classroom instruction alone may not be sufficient (Benson, 2003; Olsson & Sylvén, 2015; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016; Vallejos & Sanz, 2021). Previous research on the effect of input beyond the classroom has primarily examined general written performance, vocabulary, and grammar (Llanes & Muñoz, 2009; Llanes & Serrano, 2014; Llanes et al., 2017; Borràs & Llanes, 2020). However, as far as we know, no previous studies have examined the impact of language exposure outside the classroom on students' communicative appropriateness in writing. Additionally, most attention has been paid to the impact of going abroad on university students (Llanes & Muñoz, 2009; Llanes & Serrano, 2014; Strobl & Baten, 2021) and secondary school students (Muñoz & Cadierno, 2021), with less emphasis on the primary school level (Evans & Fisher, 2005; Llanes et al., 2015).

For example, Llanes and Muñoz (2009) investigated whether students' written language significantly improved during a 3-to 4-week summer stay. A total of 139 participants, aged 13 to 22, took part in the study. Learners' errors were categorised into four types: morphological, syntactic, lexical, and covered errors. The study found that students exposed to the language outside of school significantly improved written proficiency. Similarly, Llanes and Serrano (2014) examined 197 university students who completed several tests before and after their respective study abroad programmes, focusing on the development of oral and written skills in terms of fluency, lexical and syntactic complexity, and accuracy. The study concluded that even a short stay in the target language community allowed students to outperform their peers across all dimensions of writing skills.

Additionally, Strobl and Baten (2021) studied the writing performance of 30 Belgian students who participated in a semester abroad. Using a pre-and post-test design, they analysed writing samples with linguistic and task-related assessment criteria. The findings indicated a correlation between writing gains, language contact, and social networks. Although this study was conducted at the university level, its findings are relevant to the present research since we consider the impact of a short stay on primary students' writing.

At the secondary school level, Muñoz and Cadierno (2021) analysed the potential differences in the impact of out-of-school and in-school learning environments on the acquisition of L2 English by teenagers in Denmark and Spain. The participants were two

groups of 14-15-year-olds and the language measures included a listening comprehension test, a metalinguistic knowledge test, and a grammaticality judgement test. Data on out-of-classroom exposure were collected via a questionnaire and included language tests and a metalinguistic test. The study found that the out-of-school group scored significantly higher in all language tests except for the metalinguistic knowledge test. This group also engaged more in out-of-school activities, though the preferences for specific activities were similar between the two groups. Moreover, the associations between out-of-school activities and language measures varied between the groups.

At the primary school level, Evans and Fisher (2005) examined the impact of a short exposure period (6-11 days) on students' writing skills. Participants were in their final year of primary education and were learning French as a target language. A total of 150 students participated, with 82 exposed to the language for a short period and 68 did not. Data were collected through pre- and post-test written assessments, where students wrote about their home background (before the trip) and host family experiences (after the trip). The data were coded based on accuracy, fluency, and content. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with all participants. The study found that the students' writing improved more in fluency and accuracy than in content, with the most notable difference between pre-test and post-test being the length of students' compositions. The study concluded that even a short period could lead to significant gains in writing skills. In contrast, Llanes (2012) found that participants showed significant gains in oral skills after three months abroad but not in writing. Similarly, Llanes *et al.* (2015) explored the effect of a short period in the target language on primary students' writing. A total of 64 English learners aged 12-13 participated in the study, spending three weeks in the target language community. Data were collected via a written task and a questionnaire administered twice (pre-test and post-test), with written texts analysed for fluency, lexical, grammatical complexity, and accuracy. The findings indicated that participants made significant improvements after a short period in the target language.

Given the studies mentioned above on the effects of a short stay in the target language community, it is clear that most investigations have analysed writing in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity, without considering the communicative appropriateness of students' writing, that involves analysing the linguistic, textual, and pragmatic aspects of the text, which is the focus of attention of the present study. Additionally, the studies mentioned above have overlooked the perspectives of teachers and parents on this matter.

Thus, the present study aims to cover these research gap by answering the following research questions.

1. Does going abroad have an impact on students' communicative appropriateness in L2 writing?
2. Do students, parents, and teachers perceive going abroad as an opportunity for second language learning?

3. THE STUDY

3.1 Participants and Data Sources

The investigation included 392 primary school students from three public schools in the Valencian Community, a bilingual region where Spanish and Catalan are official languages, and English is taught as an additional language. The participant distribution comprised 137 individuals in School 1, 123 in School 2, and 132 in School 3. Regarding student characteristics, 52.8% ($n = 209$) were male, and 47.2% were female ($n = 183$), with an average age of 10.5, ranging from 10 to 11 years. Their English language proficiency was evaluated using the Cambridge Assessment English test, with participants found to be at the A2 level. Individuals with proficiency levels above or below A2 were excluded from the study. In addition, participants were divided into two groups: the “going abroad group”, which included those students who had the experience of being abroad ($n = 200$), representing 51% of the sample, and the “non-going abroad” group, who had never had the experience of being abroad and representing 49% ($n = 192$) of the total sample.

The present study follows a mixed-methods research approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data. Two main quantitative instruments were used: a written task and a questionnaire. On the one hand, the written task consisted of writing about the causes and consequences of water pollution (150 words). The task was administered during science sessions, with the science subject chosen deliberately due to its universality across the three schools and its prior inclusion in each institution's curriculum. This ensured a common ground for participants and facilitated a comprehensive exploration of students' writings. On the other hand, the questionnaire, adapted from Lasagabaster and Huguët (2007), was used to gather information about students' exposure to languages beyond the school environment, as well as their linguistic backgrounds. The questionnaire covered the following aspects: personal and family linguistic information (including gender, nationality, age, language(s) spoken at home, and family language), and English contact beyond school, including watching TV, private tuition and being abroad. For the present study, we explore the impact of a short period of time abroad, ranging from 15 days to one month, on students' writing.

Additionally, from the 392 participants, a subset of 30 students ($n = 10$ in each school), participated in the oral interviews. After completing all the quantitative instruments designed for the present study, they were invited to participate in interviews. The semi-structured interviews lasted around 25 minutes and were conducted individually. The conversations were recorded and transcribed to extract additional information beyond what was obtained from the questionnaire. The following guiding questions were used during the semi-structured interviews with students: 1) How do you feel about English? Do you like being abroad? 2) Do you like being in contact with the English language outside of school?

In addition, 9 teachers ($n = 3$ in each school), and 30 parents ($n=10$ in each school), took part in the semi-structured interviews. The following questions guided the semi-structured interviews with both teachers and parents: How important is being abroad or being in contact with English outside the classroom for language learning?

3.2 Procedure and Data Analysis

Participants were directed to complete a written task in a standard classroom environment, with a maximum allocated time of twenty minutes. The data collection adhered to ethical standards, as all students willingly volunteered and provided informed consent. To preserve anonymity, responses were assigned unique code numbers. Consistency in the data collection procedure was maintained across all schools. Participants listened to an explanation of the topic “causes and consequences of water pollution” in English (20 minutes), and then completed a written task, on this topic, in English (20 minutes). A total of 392 written tasks were subjected to analysis.

Participants’ writings were evaluated using an adaptation of Kuiken and Vedder’s (2017) taxonomy of Functional Adequacy and Jacobs et al.’s (1981) rating scale. Our taxonomy was designed to assess content (considering the ideas expressed) and language (focusing on coherence, cohesion) and SAPG (Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar). Evaluators coded students’ writing, assigning a point value from 0 to 5 for each dimension. The principal researcher and two external evaluators (primary school teachers) assessed the written tasks. Before coding, evaluators underwent two training sessions to familiarise themselves with the rating scale and receive specific guidelines on assessment criteria. Independently, they coded 60% of the primary study data (235 written tasks). Agreement percentages were as follows: 83% for content, 89% for coherence and cohesion, and 87% for SAPG.

Statistical analysis tests were conducted using SPSS (version 27). Data was not normally distributed, so we relied on non-parametric tests. Specifically, the Mann-Whitney U test was

used to compare two independent samples. Following Kuckartz (2016), a qualitative analysis was conducted to analyse students', teachers' and parents' opinions thematically. We first carefully read through the data and noted any thoughts and comments. Next, main topics were chosen, considering whether they relied on the pre-established topics during the semi-structured interviews, or whether other topics emerged from the interview data.

4. RESULTS

In order to address research question 1, which explored whether going abroad had an impact on students' communicative appropriateness in writing, participants were divided into two groups: the going abroad group ($n = 200$), and the non-going abroad group ($n = 192$). The results of the Mann-Whitney tests showed that the distribution of scores between both groups was not similar. Scores for the going abroad group (mean rank = 290.51) were significantly higher than those from the non-going abroad group (mean rank = 98.57, $U = 38002$, $z = 16.927$, $p = .000$). These findings seem to indicate that going abroad is one of the factors that may play a role in students' communicative appropriateness in writing.

As observed in Figure 1, non-identical distributions are observed between both groups. It can be observed that higher written scores were obtained by those who have had the experience of being abroad (see chart on the left). However, in the chart on the right, those who have not had the experience of being abroad obtained lower scores in communicative appropriateness.

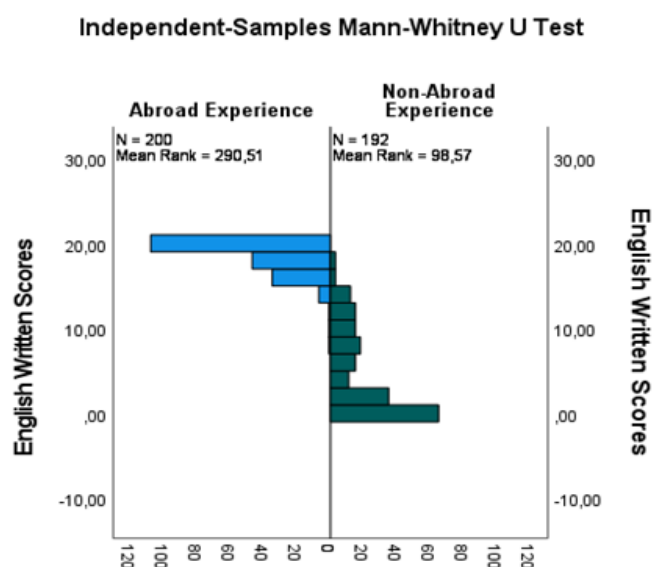


Figure 1. Graph displaying mean ranks scores according to having had the experience abroad or not

Our findings show that being abroad, even for a short period of time, seems to have an impact on students' writing. This suggests that immersion, or even limited exposure may motivate students' to seek opportunities for language learning once they move from real language use to formal instruction or vice-versa. Of course, this is a tentative hypothesis that should be further explored, considering also the length of stay in the English-speaking environment, which was not taken into account in the present study.

Moving to research question 2, which aimed to explore teachers', parents', and students' perceptions of the importance of being abroad. Students were asked whether they liked being abroad or whether they liked to be in contact with the English language outside of school. The following themes emerged from students' responses:

Enjoyment during the experience of being abroad and being in contact with English in School 1 and School 2

S13: "I enjoy being in contact with English outside of school because I do it with my friends, and I think it's easier to learn that way."

S45: "I like being in contact with English outside of school because it helps us ..."

S49: "I've spent two summers with a family abroad, and I enjoyed it very much. I hope to continue going for more summers because you learn a lot and meet new people."

S53: "Honestly, I've been abroad, and I've had a great time every time I've been there."

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Dislike and preference for other activities in School 3

S98: "I don't like being in contact with English outside of school because I prefer to play football, which I enjoy more."

S170: "My parents push me to be in these English environments, but I don't like it."

S198: "I've never participated in exchange, and I prefer doing other things that aren't related to English."

S209: "I've been abroad, but I didn't enjoy it; I'd rather stay on the beach with my friends than learn English."

As illustrated in the examples above (S13-S209), participants from School 1 and 2 reported that they liked the experience of being abroad and understood it as a social activity, while participants from School 3 reported that they preferred other activities rather than going abroad.

Regarding parents' semi-structured interviews, they considered that being abroad is important, regardless of whether their children have had the experience, or if the family has the economic resources to offer them opportunity. See examples P3-P9 below.

P3: "Going abroad makes them improve their English. My daughter goes abroad during the summer and it is an economic effort but I think she can learn more this way".

P4: "I would love him to go abroad, but we can't, so I always encourage him to do things online in English."

P5: "It's important but I couldn't afford to..., but I would love the school to organise something cheaper."

P9: "Yes, my two children go to England every summer, and the truth is that what they learn in one month is more than what they can learn all year at school..."

In the same line, teachers reinforced the same idea that emerged from parents' semi-structured interviews, but they mentioned other out-of-school activities. According to teachers, being abroad is an opportunity that not every family can afford and they suggest the importance of combining learning in the classroom with contact outside the classroom. See examples T4-T9 below.

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T4: "The truth is that going abroad is very important ... I think it helps the children a lot, but not all parents can afford it and nowadays there are a lot of resources."

T5: "The school organises a summer trip to England and I think it is essential, but not all students can afford it."

T7: "If they can go abroad it's the best, but, the combination of language learning in the classroom and the use of social media like watching TV in English is something that will help them a lot."

T9: "The school organises a trip, but maybe they should lower the price or make it free because not everyone can go. It is also important to encourage watching TV in English."

Our findings show, on the one hand, different perceptions about the experience of being abroad. As illustrated above (see examples S13-S209), participants from School 1 and School 2 report that they enjoyed the experience of being abroad and viewed it as a social activity, while participants in School 3 reported that they prefer participating in other activities rather than being abroad. One possible explanation is that the family's socioeconomic may have an impact. In fact, it is worth mentioning that the family socioeconomic status in Schools 1 and 2

is higher than those families in School 3. On the other hand, both parents and teachers have a positive perception of being abroad as an opportunity to be in contact with the English language, and report that the experience has an impact on students' language learning. However, in contrast to parents, who consider that being abroad is the best alternative to learning a language, teachers reported that due to the potential economic difficulties of some families to send their children abroad, combining language learning in the classroom with other online resource is an alternative to be in contact with English outside the classroom, which, in turn, may facilitate language learning.

5. DISCUSSION

The present study provides further evidence on the benefits of exposure to the English language outside school (Muñoz & Cadierno, 2021, Llanes *et al.*, 2015; Strobl & Baten, 2021; Vallejos & Sanz, 2021). Our findings show that students who had participated in a short stay obtained better scores in communicative appropriateness in writing than those who did not have the experience. Thus, our results align with earlier studies by Evans and Fisher (2005) and Llanes *et al.* (2015). However, while Evans and Fisher (2005) focused on the length of students' compositions, and Llanes and Muñoz (2013), along with Llanes *et al.* (2015), examined written fluency and lexical and syntactic complexity, we analysed students' communicative appropriateness in writing, an issue that, as far as we know, had not been examined yet.

In addition, our findings corroborate those of Strobl and Baten (2021), who found a positive correlation between writing gains and a short period of time in the target language community. Strobl and Baten (2021) examined university students, and focused on oral proficiency and vocabulary, while our study explores communicative appropriateness at the primary school level, pointing out that being abroad is one factor that may contribute to improving young learners' writing skills. We acknowledge that other factors such as private tuition or access to other language learning resources may go together with the variable being abroad. Thus, further research on the interaction of all these factors need to be conducted. In spite of that, given the limited research with primary school populations, our study provides valuable insights into the intersection of contact with the language outside school and writing skills in this population. Additionally, in line with Vallejos and Sanz (2021), calling for further research on study abroad and writing, we also call for further research considering students' types of study abroad. The present study focuses on short periods of stay abroad, ranging from 15 days to a month, but we have not examined whether formal education is received during the

short period in the target language community, and future studies should address this issue. Future experimental studies also need to corroborate findings from the present exploratory investigation on the impact of a short period of time abroad on students' writing skill in L2.

Additionally, differences in students' perceptions of the importance of studying abroad may be explained by their families' socioeconomic status. Thus, while participants from Schools 1 and 2, with a higher economic status, viewed going abroad as an enjoyable social activity, participants from School 3, with lower economic status, expressed less enthusiasm and a preference for other activities. However, this is a tentative hypothesis to be further explored. Besides, in line with Nightingale (2016), our study shows that both parents and teachers acknowledged the importance of going abroad, as an opportunity to be exposed to English in real-world situations. They also recognised the impact of socio-economic status on the opportunities for participating in going abroad experiences, but, in contrast to parents, teachers highlighted the importance of combining exposure to English in the classroom, and beyond school, using other input sources such as watching TV or playing games in English.

Finally, while this study offers further insights into the role of stays abroad on writing in primary students, it also identifies areas for further research. Future studies should consider durations and types of stay abroad, such as formal education versus informal immersion, to better understand how the experience of being abroad influences different aspects of language proficiency. Additionally, further research could explore the effects of contact with the language outside school on other language skills, such as reading, speaking, and listening, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of language development through immersion. Experimental investigations are needed to generalize the preliminary findings of the present study. Besides, longitudinal studies tracking students' progress over several years would also be valuable in assessing the long-term impact of short-term exposure on writing proficiency and other language competencies. Finally, given the differing trends observed between Schools 1, 2, and 3, it would be beneficial for future research to examine how educational contexts, including school culture, resources, and community involvement, shape students' attitudes and outcomes related to contact with the language outside school.

6. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study explores the impact of a short stay abroad on primary school students' communicative appropriateness in writing skill in English as a second language. The findings demonstrate that even a brief immersion in an English-speaking community results in better

scores in communicative appropriateness in writing. These results align with previous research, emphasising the benefits of immersion and informal contact with the target language beyond formal education.

Furthermore, the study reports students', parents', and teachers' perceptions on the importance of being abroad, as well as contact with the language outside school. Considering their perceptions, we can claim that in spite of the positive perception of the experience of being abroad, socioeconomic barriers to accessing these experiences are a recurring concern among parents and teachers, suggesting the need for more equitable solutions. Among them, we suggest that schools may actively promote and facilitate students' engagement with English outside the classroom to address these disparities. This could be done through funded organised trips, exchange programmes, or partnerships with local English-speaking communities. Additionally, integrating informal language-learning opportunities into the curriculum, such as language clubs or online exchanges, could make these experiences accessible to all students, facilitating an inclusive approach to language learning. Finally, teacher training needs to provide teachers with the tools to ensure that all students, independent of their economic status, benefit from the rich experiences available outside the school environment.

ACKNOWLEDEMENTS

This study is part of the research project PID2023-150279OB-I00 funded by MICIU/ AEI /10.13039/501100011033 and FEDER, UE. Additional funding has been granted by Projectes d'Innovació Educativa de la Unitat de Suport Educatiu from Universitat Jaume I (51020/24).

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