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Analyzing the effect of context of second language learning: Domestic intensive and semi-intensive courses vs. study abroad in Europe

This study examines the second language (L2) written and oral performance of three groups of Spanish-speaking university students after being exposed to English in different contexts. One group of learners was spending some time abroad (Erasmus students in the UK), and two groups were following classroom instruction in two different types of intensive courses in Spain: "intensive" and "semi-intensive". The learners' L2 written and oral production was analyzed at different time points through different measures of fluency, syntactic and lexical complexity, and accuracy. The main objective of this study was to compare the performance of the students abroad with each of the two intensive programmes. According to the results of the statistical analyses, after an equivalent period of exposure to the L2 in the two contexts, the students abroad outperformed the learners in the "at home semi-intensive" programme in the post-test in some of the variables under study, namely fluency and lexical complexity. Nevertheless, the students' written and oral performance after an intensive course at home and after the equivalent time abroad was similar.

Keywords: context of learning; time distribution; second language learning; study abroad; intensive language courses

1. Introduction

Context of learning is undoubtedly a factor that needs to be considered when examining second language acquisition. As Collentine (2009) suggests, "one of the most important variables that affects the nature and the extent to which learners acquire a second language (L2) is the context of learning, that is, whether the learning takes place within the society in which the L2 is productive or where the first language (L1) is productive" (p. 218). L2 learning contexts vary in terms of the quantity and quality of L2 input they provide, and the opportunities they offer for learners' output and interaction with native speakers. Moreover, contexts also determine the degree of explicitness/implicitness of the L2 knowledge that tends to be attained and whether automatization is fostered (DeKeyser, 2007). According to DeKeyser (2007), learning the L2 abroad provides more opportunities for practice in real-life situations and thus automatization of L2 skills. On the other hand, L2 classroom learning in the students' country usually promotes the development of declarative knowledge to a larger extent (DeKeyser and Juffs, 2005; DeKeyser, 2009).

The objective of this particular study is to analyze the effects on L2 proficiency of two types of contexts which provide different input for the L2 learners, as well as different types of practice: a study abroad (SA) context and two types of "at home" (AH) programmes (intensive and semi-intensive). In the former, L2 learners—who have previously been exposed to classroom teaching in their home country—have the opportunity of regularly using the L2 for everyday interaction as well as of being exposed to an extensive amount of input in the L2. In the second context, however, students only

interact with their teacher and their classroom peers, and the input these learners obtain is greatly limited to the classroom hours and is, in many instances, not native-like. Even if, technically, we are considering two contexts (at home vs. abroad), our main interest is in the comparison of three different types of exposure to the L2, and that is why semi-intensive and intensive courses will be analyzed separately.

Although research on contexts of learning or SA is becoming more popular within the second language acquisition (SLA) literature, there are few studies that examine L2 learning abroad in Europe (Byram and Feng, 2009; Coleman, 1998; Dyson, 1988; Llanes and Muñoz, 2009; Papatsiba, 2005; Regan, 1995, 1998; Teichler, 2004), and even fewer studies that consider intensive courses when analysing L2 learning in a foreign language context (Serrano and Muñoz, 2007; Serrano, 2011). Nevertheless, intensive courses are noticeably quite comparable to the SA context, considering the concentration of exposure to the L2 at the learners' disposal. Our study aims to fill the gap in these areas by including the European SA context and two types of AH programmes that offer more intensive L2 practice than those traditionally considered as control groups in previous research on SA. The AH intensive courses under examination here offer 10 hours/week (semi-intensive) and 25 hours/week (intensive) of instruction, as opposed to the typical AH courses (2-4 hours/week). Freed et al. (2004) considered AH courses that offered approximately 17.5 hours of instruction a week. However, such courses were rightly classified as "immersion" courses, since the learners had the opportunity of practicing the L2 after finishing their classes. The students in the intensive programmes included in the present research went home after the instructional time—and not to a dormitory or residence area with other L2 learners—therefore, the exposure they received was

restricted to the classroom. In this sense, the contexts included in the present study (European SA and two types of AH intensive programmes) have not been previously compared. Additionally, whereas most studies examining context of learning have only concentrated on one skill or a specific area within one skill, this particular study examines different areas of both written and oral production.

1.1. Literature Review

Even though there is a general belief that learning/practicing the L2 in the country where it is spoken leads to quicker and more remarkable language progress than L2 classroom learning, most empirical studies investigating the issue have failed to find such clear superiority for the SA context with respect to the AH context except for a few areas, most notably oral fluency. Students abroad have been claimed to be significantly more fluent after the experience than their peers who stayed at home learning the L2 in the classroom (Freed, 1995; DeKeyser, 1991; Lafford, 2004; Möhle, 1984; Segalowitz and Freed, 2004). Similarly, students in the SA context have often been reported to significantly increase their vocabulary after their experience in the foreign country (DeKeyser, 1991; Dewey, 2008; Ife et al., 2000; Lennon, 1990; Llanes and Muñoz, 2009; Milton and Meara, 1995). The progress SA students make in other language areas has not been generally reported to be superior to AH students (Collentine, 2004; DeKeyser, 1991; Dewey, 2004; Díaz-Campos, 2004; Freed et al., 2003; Lennon, 1990; Mora, 2008).

What many studies analyzing the effects of the SA experience on learners' L2 skills have claimed, however, is that most educators and researchers perceive that the majority of the students after staying abroad demonstrate a qualitative change in their L2 skills.

Nevertheless, the measures that have traditionally been used to analyze learners' progress tend to focus on features which are highly related to formal instruction: that may be the reason why many studies have found advantages for the AH context, according to Collentine (2004). He also thinks that it is important that measures that examine other types of language gains are developed in order to quantify the impression that "the SA learner can 'tell a story' a little better and can 'get their point across' more effectively" (Collentine, 2004, p. 245).

It is true that there might be some L2 gains in the SA context that are hard to quantify, yet most—if not all—of the students staying abroad whose performance has been examined also received formal instruction, even in higher amounts than the students in the AH context. It is thus surprising that the SA students' results are not superior—or are in fact lower in many cases—with respect to their peers at home (Collentine, 2004). One explanation can be that the gains in fluency which are unarguably attributed to students in the SA context are made at the expense of growth in other areas, such as grammar complexity or accuracy.

The majority of the studies investigating L2 acquisition in a SA context have used comparison data from AH classroom learners. Although most comparison studies with learners in the SA context have been made with regular AH programmes, some research has been done comparing the students' gains in SA, AH, and domestic intensive (or "immersion") courses. Freed et al. (2004) found that the students in the immersion context (seven weeks of French instruction during the summer, approximately 17.5 hours a week) improved their fluency more than their peers abroad. The learners in the AH programme did not make any significant gains according to the fluency measures used in

this study. When examining the data obtained from the out-of-class contact questionnaire, it was evident that, thanks to the large number of extracurricular activities organized for the students in the immersion programme, those learners reported to have used the L2 more than their peers in the other two contexts.

Another study comparing learners in SA and domestic immersion (Dewey, 2004) found no significant differences in reading comprehension in Japanese between the two contexts, except for self-assessment: the students in the SA context felt more confident of their reading abilities than those in the AH intensive programme. From these results Dewey (2004) concluded that a 9-week intensive summer course can produce gains in reading abilities as determined by objective reading measures comparable to an 11-12 week stay in Japan.

The language gains made by learners receiving intensive instruction at home have been demonstrated to be superior not only to the gains experienced by some students abroad, but also to those attained by students in domestic programmes that do not offer concentrated hours of instruction (or “regular” L2 courses offering a maximum of 4 hours of instruction a week). Most studies comparing intensive and regular L2 programmes have included Canadian primary school learners of English with French as their native language. These studies clearly demonstrate that intensive L2 instruction promotes L2 acquisition more than regular instruction (Collins et al., 1999; Netten and Germain, 2004; Spada and Lightbown, 1989; White and Turner, 2005). These findings have also been replicated in the case of Spanish-speaking adult learners of English at an intermediate proficiency level (Serrano, 2007; Serrano and Muñoz, 2007; Serrano, 2011).

In general, it can be said that certain advantages have been attributed to contexts other than the typical L2 classroom programmes that offer long periods of instruction (usually from primary school until the end of high school) with minimum time concentration (2-4 hours every week). In the present study some of these "less typical" contexts of L2 learning are analyzed in order to shed some light on how context of learning affects L2 acquisition. Research on intensive instruction for adult learners is indeed necessary: many students learn the L2 in this context all over the world and little research has been done examining this type of programme. Likewise, the number of students in Europe who participate in stay abroad programmes under the Erasmus scheme is also noteworthy (e.g., according to the European Commission for Education and Training, during the academic years between 2004 and 2008, a total of 466,000 students—more than 150,000 per year—engaged in a SA experience thanks to the Erasmus scholarships).

1.2. Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to analyze the effect of context of acquisition on the written and oral performance of L2 learners. The study abroad context will be compared to two types of "at home" programmes with different degrees of concentration of L2 hours of instruction (intensive and semi-intensive programmes), always keeping the days of L2 exposure constant. More specifically, our research questions are the following:

1. Is the SA context more or less beneficial than an intensive course "at home" for the development of L2 written and oral production in terms of fluency, syntactic complexity, lexical complexity and accuracy?

2. Is the SA context more or less beneficial than a semi-intensive course “at home” for the development of L2 written and oral production in terms of fluency, syntactic complexity, lexical complexity and accuracy?

2. Method

2.1. Learning Contexts and Participants

A total of 131 participants from two different contexts were considered: at home EFL classroom learners receiving intensive instruction in Spain (N=106), and study abroad students from Spain learning English in the UK (N=25). Within the former group, two programmes offered at the language school of a university in Barcelona, Spain, were examined: intensive (N=69) and semi-intensive (N=37). These programmes will always be considered separately for the analysis, as the focus of this study is to examine how each of these programme types compares to the SA context.

The intensive programme offers 110 hours of instruction in 5-hour sessions, which meet Monday through Friday, over four and a half weeks in the summer. Students from two different proficiency levels were examined: intermediate (N=38) and advanced (N=31). The intermediate level corresponds to level B1 and the advanced level corresponds to level B2/C1 of the Common European Reference Levels (Council of Europe, 2001). Two different proficiency levels were chosen for intensive courses, first of all, because there was the possibility to do so (as the language school offered intensive courses for both intermediate and advanced learners). Moreover, the proficiency level of most students in the SA context is supposed to be within the range intermediate-advanced.

Students in semi-intensive courses also receive the same number of hours of instruction (110) distributed from the beginning of October until the third week of December. Students enrolled in these courses receive 10 hours of instruction a week in 2.5-hour sessions, which meet Monday through Thursday over a total of approximately eleven weeks. The students in the semi-intensive programme are all at the intermediate proficiency level, because this type of course is not offered for advanced learners.

The methodology used in the semi-intensive and intensive programmes is highly similar: both programmes follow the same syllabus, books, and the students take the same exam at the end of the course. The intensive programme, however, can be considered more similar to an "immersion course", since the learners are in contact with English for a long period of time each day (5 hours).

Most of the AH participants included in this research were university students falling within the 18-23 year-old range, who were taking English classes in order to obtain elective credits. The percentage of males (43.6%) and females (54.4%) is similar. All the students are comparable in terms of motivation and previous experience with English. With respect to the instructors, each of the groups considered for this study had a different teacher.

The participants in the SA context include 25 Spanish-speaking learners (7 males and 18 females) who were studying at the same university in the UK, thanks to the Erasmus European exchange programme. The Erasmus programme is the most popular mobility programme to study abroad within the European framework. Scholarships are awarded to European undergraduate students and they offer the possibility to study in a European country for one semester or for a whole year, so that participants can improve their

second language skills and get to know another culture. All these learners had received explicit instruction on the L2 in their home country. While in the UK, the majority of the students (76%) had a total of 8-12 hours a week of classes in English (including English language classes). Most of the SA participants stayed in houses with other students (60%), although 20% stayed in halls of residence, and another 20% with families.

We do not have an independent indicator of these students' proficiency level before their stay abroad. Nevertheless, the pre-test scores of all the students (both in the AH and SA contexts) will be considered as covariates in the statistical tests, and the analyses of the students' performance in the post-test will thus control for initial L2 knowledge (see section 2.3 for a clearer description of the statistical procedures).

2.2. Procedure and Instruments

In case of the AH context, the same data collection procedure was followed for the two different types of programmes. One researcher was in charge of the data collection, although she received occasional help from three research assistants for approximately 25% of all the data that were collected. All the researchers followed the same instructions when implementing the tests. The students' written and oral production was elicited by means of a composition and an oral narrative. The students' performance was measured twice, once towards the beginning of the course and the second time towards the end of the course. The students took both the pre- and the post-test during class time. In the case of the intensive course, the number of days of class between pre- and post-test was 15, whereas for the semi-intensive course the corresponding period between pre- and post-

test was two months. The number of hours between the two test-times was the same (80 hours) for both programmes.

The topic of the composition was “My best friend” in the pre-test, and “Someone I admire” in the post-test. The students were given 15 minutes to write the composition and were asked to use approximately 150 words. Because of practical reasons, the oral task was performed by a subgroup of students chosen randomly (N=12 in the semi-intensive course; N= 43 in the intensive programme). The students were recorded while they told a narrative on the basis of a series of pictures that presented two children and their mother preparing a picnic (Heaton, 1966). This test has been extensively used in a variety of projects including learners with different languages and in different age groups (Muñoz, 2006; Tavakoli and Foster, 2008).

The SA students performed the same tasks as the AH students. In this case one researcher collected all the data. The pre-test was administered right before classes at the university started. The researcher met with the students individually or in pairs at the university premises where they completed the oral task first, which was recorded in a quiet room with the only presence of the researcher. Then, the students performed the written task in the same conditions as the AH students. In order to compare the SA students with the AH intensive learners, the former performed the post-test 15 days after the pre-test, which was the same lapse of time between the administration of pre-test and post-test for the AH intensive group. To facilitate comparison with the AH semi-intensive programme, the SA learners wrote another composition on a similar topic (“My best friend in Southampton”) and told the oral narrative again approximately two months after

the pre-test, which is the time between both tests for the AH semi-intensive group (see Figure 1).

[FIGURE 1]

We are aware that we are only controlling for "days" of exposure and not "hours" when we compare the SA group with the two AH groups—which is what most studies on SA vs. AH have done. We can only be sure about the hours of exposure between pre- and post-test for the AH groups (around 80), since those hours were mostly restricted to the classroom hours, but we do not have a detailed account of the number of hours of contact with English for the SA participants. Nevertheless, even if we had asked students to keep a record of the hours they were in contact with the English language every day/week, it would have been highly difficult to find a group of learners with the same number of hours of L2 practice per week in the same SA context during the same period of time, and that such number of hours coincided with the number of classroom hours for learners AH. Given the difficulty of a design that controls for hours of practice per week across contexts, we decided to control for days of exposure between pre- and post-test among groups.

2.3. Data Analysis

The students' written and oral production was analyzed in terms of fluency, complexity (both syntactic and lexical) and accuracy. The same measures were adopted for both modes, except for the case of fluency. All these measures have been considered

as some of the most reliable measures to analyze students' written and also oral production (Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998).

Written fluency was examined in terms of words per T-unit (W/T). Fluency in oral production was examined by means of syllables per minute (Syll/min), since this measure is generally considered more appropriate for oral fluency than W/T (Griffiths, 1991). For this particular study, the syllable count did not include false starts, repetitions, self-corrections, or words in the students' first language. Syntactic complexity was examined using the T-unit complexity ratio, clauses per T-unit (C/T). Lexical complexity was examined using Guiraud's Index of Lexical Richness: word types divided by the square root of the word tokens (Types/√Tokens). Finally, accuracy was examined by counting the errors per T-unit (Err/T).

The data were transcribed and coded using CLAN (MacWhinney, 2000). Three different researchers were in charge of coding the data for the more objective measures (W/T, C/T, Syll/min). Inter-rater reliability was calculated by means of percentage agreement for these measures, reaching 98%. For accuracy, which is usually more problematic, two researchers were in charge of the coding; one of them coded 60% the data and the other 40%. Inter-rater reliability was calculated on 14% of the data reaching 96.5% agreement. After all the samples were coded, analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

In order to compare the performance of the students in the contexts under analysis, different Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) tests were performed. Separate MANCOVAs were executed for written and oral production because doing two separate tests ensures a higher number of students in the written production task. This

task was performed by all the students in the AH context (N=69 in the intensive; N=37 in the semi-intensive programme), but only a percentage of those learners did the oral production task (N=43 in the former; N=12 in the latter). Consequently, if a single analysis had been done, only the students that did both tasks could have been included, and thus a considerable amount of data would not have been examined.

In the written production task four variables were considered: fluency, as measured by words per T-unit (W/T); syntactic complexity, as measured by clauses per T-unit (C/T); lexical complexity, as measured by Guiraud's Index; and accuracy, as measured by errors per T-unit (Err/T). The scores in the post-test for those variables were entered as dependent variables in the MANCOVA, and those of the pre-test acted as covariates, in order to control for initial skill in the L2. Context of learning (SA and AH intensive in the first analysis, and SA and AH semi-intensive in the second) was the independent variable. Regarding the oral production task, the dependent variables and measures considered were the same, except for the oral fluency measure (syllables per minute [Syll/min] and not W/T). As for the written production task, the scores in the pre-test in the measures of fluency, syntactic complexity, lexical complexity and accuracy were entered as covariates. The independent variable was also context of learning.

3. Results

The results of the analyses will be presented in two different sections. Section 3.1. includes the SA context and the AH intensive programme, and section 3.2. compares the SA context and the AH semi-intensive programme.

3.1. AH Intensive and SA

Table 1 presents the mean scores and the standard deviations for the written pre-test and post-test for the learners in the AH intensive programme and for the learners abroad after staying in the L2 country for 15 days. It must be noted that the number of students in the SA context is lower because one student could not do the post-test.

[TABLE 1]

The descriptive statistics show that the scores obtained by the learners in the SA context in the post-test were slightly higher than those obtained by the learners in the AH intensive program. Nevertheless, the results of the MANCOVA, after controlling for pre-test performance, indicate that no differences existed between the learners in AH intensive programme (N=69) and in the SA context (N=24) on the combined dependent variables: $F(4, 84)=1.05$, $p=.388$, Wilks' Lambda=.952, partial eta squared=.048. According to this result, the performance of the learners in the two groups in each dependent variable was comparable in the post-test.

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for the scores in the oral production task for the learners in the intensive programme (N=43) and abroad (N=24). As was the case for the written production task, the performance of the learners in the SA context was slightly superior to that of their peers in the AH intensive programme in the post-test in all the measures under analysis.

[TABLE 2]

The results of the MANCOVA were also similar to those of the written production task, in that no significant differences existed between the two contexts on the combined dependent variables: $F(4, 58)=.196$, $p=.940$, Wilks' Lambda=.987, partial eta squared=.013.

3.2. AH Semi-Intensive and SA

There were 37 students in the AH semi-intensive group and 25 in the SA group who performed the written production task. The descriptive statistics for the pre-test (beginning of the semi-intensive course for the AH context and beginning of the stay for the SA context) and the post-test (two months later for both groups) are presented in Table 3.

[TABLE 3]

The results of the MANCOVA indicate that there was a statistically significant difference between the students abroad and those in the semi-intensive course on the combined dependent variables: $F(4, 53)=7.64$, $p<.001$, Wilks' Lambda=.634, partial eta squared=.366. Considering the results of the dependent variables separately, the variables in which significantly higher scores were obtained in the SA context were W/T [$F(1, 60)=4.12$, $p=.047$, partial eta squared=.069] and Guiraud's Index [$F(1, 60)=19.62$,

p<.001, partial eta squared=.260]. The students' performance in terms of syntactic complexity and accuracy was not significantly different for the two contexts.

Concerning the oral production task, 12 students were included in the AH semi-intensive programme, and 25 in the SA context. See Table 4 for the means and standard deviations.

[TABLE 4]

According to the outcome of the MANCOVA analysis, there was also a statistically significant difference favouring the students abroad on the combined dependent variables: $F(4, 28)=3.28$, $p=.025$, Wilks' Lambda=.682, partial eta squared=.318. Examining the variables separately, there were significant differences in terms of fluency (Syll/min): $F(1, 35)=4.92$, $p=.034$, partial eta squared=.138; and lexical complexity (Guiraud's Index): $F(1, 35)=4.32$, $p=.046$, partial eta squared=.122. As was the case for the written production task, learners' oral syntactic complexity and accuracy after two months abroad or after receiving two months of instruction at home were comparable.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

According to the results presented in the previous section, it can indeed be claimed that context of learning has certain effects on L2 development of written and oral production. These differences, however, are restricted to the comparisons between the AH semi-intensive context on the one hand, and the SA context on the other. After two

months abroad, the learners in the present study demonstrated a more advanced performance in terms of some variables of written and oral production than their peers spending the same period of time in a semi-intensive course AH. In contrast, the students' L2 written and oral production after spending 15 days abroad or the same period in an intensive course at home was similar.

With respect to the comparison between the SA students and those in the AH semi-intensive programme, it can be said that the SA context seems to be more advantageous for the development of both written and oral production in terms of fluency and lexical complexity. These results are consistent with other studies that have attributed advantages to SA learners as opposed to AH "regular" (i.e. "non-intensive") learners in terms of oral fluency (Freed, 1995; DeKeyser, 1991; Lafford, 2004; Möhle, 1984; Segalowitz and Freed, 2004), and vocabulary (DeKeyser, 1991; Dewey, 2008; Foster, 2009; Freed, 1995; Ife et al., 2000; Milton and Meara, 1995; Segalowitz and Freed, 2004).

In contrast with the learners in the AH semi-intensive context, the learners in the AH intensive programme do not appear to be at a disadvantageous position with respect to their peers abroad. After controlling for pre-test scores, there were no differences in the measures of written and oral production under study between the learners following an intensive course AH and the learners abroad. The study by Freed et al. (2004), which also analyzed an intensive programme at home (or rather "domestic immersion") and a SA context concerning oral fluency, also found that the SA context did not necessarily lead to greater fluency gains, contrary to findings of studies comparing SA and typical AH courses (Dewey, 2008; Foster, 2009; Freed, 1995; Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau, 2009; Segalowitz and Freed, 2004). Students in the domestic immersion courses analyzed by

Freed and associates in fact made more gains in oral fluency than those abroad. As was mentioned before, however, this immersion context provided learners with opportunities to practice the L2 outside the class and the learners took advantage of those opportunities even more so than the SA learners. In the present study, though, the learners in the AH intensive context lacked opportunities for L2 practice outside the class, and this could be the reason why the AH intensive context did not lead to more significant advantages than the SA context.

The comparison between learners attending semi-intensive and intensive courses has not been performed in this particular study because we are analysing the effect of days of instruction or days of SA, and the days between pre- and post-test for the students in the two programmes are quite different. Nevertheless, other studies that have compared the performance of adult learners in programmes with different degrees of time concentration have reported benefits for the most concentrated programme type (Serrano, 2007; Serrano and Muñoz, 2007). Other research analysing time distribution in the case of children L2 learners, provide further evidence for the positive effect of concentrating the time of L2 instruction (Collins et al., 1999; Lapkin, et al., 1998; Netten and Germain, 2004; Spada and Lightbown, 1989; White and Turner, 2005). Although the two AH programmes under study here were classified as “intensive” (indeed the semi-intensive offers more concentrated instruction than the typical L2 courses: 10 hours/week vs. 2-4 hours/week), probably 2.5 hours per session or 10 hours a week was not concentrated enough to be regarded as “intensive”. More research should be done on intensive instruction in order to find out how long the sessions should be or how many hours of exposure the students

should have per session (or every week) for a specific L2 programme to be considered intensive.

Taking into account the findings from this study and previous studies on SA and on the time factor, it can be claimed that, probably, both intensive classroom practice (as promoted in an AH intensive course) and real communicative practice outside the class (as encouraged in the SA context) generally provide a more suitable environment for L2 learning than regular, "drip-feed" (or not concentrated) L2 instruction. DeKeyser (2007; 2010) suggests that mere communicative practice in real-life situations without appropriate previous command of the L2 is not a guarantee for successful L2 learning abroad, which could be one of the reasons why the SA context has not been found to be systematically more beneficial than the AH context. On the other hand, L2 classroom practice that is not concentrated does not generally facilitate remembering or, even less so, "proceduralising" previously acquired declarative knowledge (using DeKeyser's terms: DeKeyser, 1997; 2007), as suggested by Serrano (2011). The fact that this study did not find statistically significant differences between SA and intensive classroom learning suggests that both are equally potentially beneficial contexts to encourage L2 development.

The findings from this particular study provide further empirical evidence for the effect of context on L2 learning. In the present case, the least advantageous context seems to be the AH semi-intensive, considering the results of the statistical analyses. Nevertheless, there is an issue that should be taken into account. At the time of the post-test, the AH learners had performed the written and the oral production tasks only once for this study (in the pre-test), whereas the SA students had already performed similar

tasks twice (in the pre-test and in the post-test they performed 15 days later, which was compared to the performance of the intensive learners). There could have been a task repetition effect that favoured the SA participants. Nevertheless, the students in the AH semi-intensive course probably practiced with similar types of writings throughout their L2 course more often than the SA participants who were practicing the language in more meaningful and naturalistic contexts. Another limitation of the present study is that it only controlled for days and not hours of practice when comparing SA and AH; nevertheless, most studies comparing the two contexts cannot control for hours of exposure for reasons that have already been mentioned in section 2.2.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that context of L2 learning has some effects on the development of the L2, with some advantages for contexts which provide opportunities for intensive language practice. This finding, together with previous findings in the SLA literature, emphasizes the role of the context of learning in L2 acquisition. More research should be done in order to examine which specific feature/s related to a given context is/are key to success in L2 learning, whether it is communicative interaction in real-life situations, classroom instruction, intensity of L2 exposure and practice or a combination of different factors.

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Tables

Table 1

Written production Intensive and SA

	Pre-test			
	AH Intensive (N=69)		SA (N=24)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Fluency (W/T)	10.63	3.55	10.50	2.37
Syntactic Complexity (C/T)	1.84	.592	1.95	.419
Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's Index)	7.40	.789	7.56	.815
Accuracy (Err/T)	.756	.431	.901	.659
	Post-test			
	AH Intensive (N=69)		SA (N=24)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Fluency (W/T)	12.51	3.51	12.61	2.49
Syntactic Complexity (C/T)	2.19	.607	2.21	.492
Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's Index)	7.58	.788	7.55	.915
Accuracy (Err/T)	.812	.472	.687	.594

Table 2

Oral production Intensive and SA

	Pre-test			
	AH Intensive (N=43)		SA (N=24)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Fluency (Syll/min)	97.12	31.31	119.9	24.68
Syntactic Complexity (C/T)	1.75	.366	1.71	.201
Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's Index)	5.37	.761	5.60	.794
Accuracy (Err/T)	1.03	.566	1.25	.919
	Post-test			
	AH Intensive (N=43)		SA (N=24)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Fluency (Syll/min)	108.57	33.77	130.54	22.27
Syntactic Complexity (C/T)	1.78	.446	1.83	.262
Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's Index)	5.55	.681	5.80	.588
Accuracy (Err/T)	.819	.503	.749	.362

Table 3

Written production Semi-Intensive and SA

	Pre-test			
	AH Semi-Intensive (N=37)		SA (N=25)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Fluency (W/T)	9.16	2.2	10.40	2.32
Syntactic Complexity (C/T)	1.56	.338	1.95	.413
Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's Index)	7.50	.794	7.56	.798
Accuracy (Err/T)	.651	.360	.881	.653
	Post-test			
	AH Semi-Intensive (N=37)		SA (N=25)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Fluency (W/T)	10.02	3.04	**12.15***	3.95
Syntactic Complexity (C/T)	1.73	.487	1.93	.602
Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's Index)	6.86	.844	**7.76***	.722
Accuracy (Err/T)	.702	.494	.896	.749

Table 4

Oral production Semi-Intensive and SA

	Pre-test			
	AH Semi-Intensive (N=12)		SA (N=25)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Fluency (Syll/min)	86.10	21.50	123.4	29.90
Syntactic Complexity (C/T)	1.36	.211	1.71	.198
Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's Index)	5.11	.486	5.65	.783
Accuracy (Err/T)	.869	.472	1.22	.918
	Post-test			
	AH Semi-Intensive (N=12)		SA (N=25)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Fluency (Syll/min)	90.55	27.07	**148.27***	34.83
Syntactic Complexity (C/T)	1.54	.217	1.87	.342
Lexical Complexity (Guiraud's Index)	5.07	.495	**5.92***	.733
Accuracy (Err/T)	1.00	.394	1.04	.759