Syllabus Matters: The Impact of Course Type on Speaking Gains Abroad

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Abstract

This investigation explores oral proficiency outcomes in short-term study abroad programs, as well as the interaction of those outcomes with the type of second language (L2) courses involved. For three years, speaking ability gains were measured in a study abroad setting among intermediate learners of Spanish under two different course conditions: (1) structural (courses focused on the explicit exploration of the grammar of the target language), and (2) functional (courses focused on practical language use). The results of the investigation demonstrated that intermediate-level learners exposed to functionally-oriented L2 courses consistently reached higher speaking gains as measured by the Versant Spanish™ Test (a commercially available computerized oral assessment instrument). These research findings suggest that oral skill development is sensitive to course content and orientation and that course syllabus design considerations can make a significant difference in study abroad settings.

Do second language (L2) learning outcomes vary depending on the type of syllabus selected by the instructor? In other words, is it reasonable to assume that

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course organization and pedagogical orientation have a determining impact on L2 learning? Although most L2 teachers would instinctively respond in the affirmative to both questions, the reality is that there is limited empirical evidence in support of the notion that course syllabi actually have the ability to regulate L2 developmental patterns. Such a lack of empirical evidence applies not only to "foreign language courses" (those taught in settings in which the L2 is not spoken) but also to those offered in study abroad (SA) settings, in which course design and articulation have received minimal attention in the literature for the past three decades. This investigation seeks to contribute to a conversation on the significance of L2 course design by providing empirical information on the impact of syllabus orientation on oral proficiency development in SA settings.

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Syllabus design has traditionally been regarded as a central aspect of foreign language pedagogy (Finnemann, 1987; Newby, 2000; Rabbini, 2002; Tabari, 2013). The selection and sequencing of course goals and content, the articulation of learning tasks, and the selection of course assessments (the essence of what a course syllabus is and does) closely reflect teachers' understanding of fundamental second language acquisition processes (Richards, 2013; Yalden, 1987). In fact, current variations in approaches to L2 syllabus design provide valuable insights into the profession's developing estimation of L2 learning parameters and its divergent ideas on how L2 instruction must be structured and managed (Baleghizadeh, 2016; Bazyar, Dastpak, & Taghinezhad, 2015).

Krahnke (1987) highlighted the importance of language learning theory as the necessary foundation of any L2 syllabus design effort. Within his theoretical framework, Krahnke proposed six basic types of L2 syllabi: (1) structural (syllabi built around grammatical forms); (2) notional/functional (syllabi organized around practical uses of the L2); (3) situational (the organizing principle is related to likely contexts where the L2 will be required); (4) skill-based (courses focused on specific abilities that involve use of the L2, such as writing or reading); (5) task-based (the organizing principle is a series of complex and purposeful L2 tasks relevant to the learner); and (6) content-based (the focus is on the learning of specific subject-matter, not the L2).

As our understanding of language acquisition processes has grown due to the research boom at the turn of the century, additional conceptual frameworks have emerged for the analysis of L2 course design (Bazyar, Dastpak, & Taghinezhad, 2015; Martin de Lama, 2015; Rahimpour, 2010). These conceptual frameworks have made it possible for us to differentiate between "wide-" and "narrow-angle" L2 courses (Widdowson, 1983); between Type A (product-oriented) and Type B (process-oriented) syllabi (White, 1988); between "focus-on-form" and "focus-on-meaning" L2 pedagogies (Long & Crookes, 1992); between "specialist-" (top-down) and "learner-centered" (bottom-up) approaches to L2 syllabus design (Tudor, 1996); and also between "synthetic" and "analytic" L2 course syllabi (Nunan, 1998).

Of particular interest to our discussion is the distinction between synthetic and analytic L2 syllabi (Nunan, 1998). The difference between these two types of course

design frameworks resides in the role assigned to language learners in the L2 learning process. In synthetic courses, L2 syllabi are supposed to guide the presentation of discrete components of the L2 linguistic system to the learners. L2 learners, on their part, are supposed to collect and integrate those discrete language elements, such as grammar rules, spelling principles, and pronunciation guidelines into a coherent linguistic system. It would be fair to say that synthetic syllabi support a pedagogy in which L2 learning is conceived as a form-driven, linear, systematic, and cumulative process (Wilkins, 1976). On the other hand, analytic syllabi present the L2 in the form of larger textual units with meaning-based tasks aimed at directing learners' attention to specific features of the L2. Analytic syllabi are designed to support a pedagogy in which L2 learning is viewed as a meaning-driven, non-linear, and recurrent process (Nunan, 1998; Widdowson, 1990).

The curriculum for students seeking to specialize in languages at the post-secondary level in the US also provides evidence of the aforementioned course-design debates (Byrnes, 2002; Hasegawa & Kambara, 2008; Jurasek, 1982; Rios-Font, 2017). In this country, L2 majors and minors are often required to complete a series of specialized linguistic courses that often fall toward one of the design extremes: either synthetic courses that focus on the development of declarative knowledge of the L2 through the systematic exploration of its linguistic system (usually following structural syllabi), or analytic courses that focus on the development of procedural knowledge or "language in use" (often following functional or skills-based syllabi). Although there are multiple examples of these theoretical extremes in our L2 curricula, we must also recognize there are many courses with a "mixed" or "layered" syllabus, i.e., courses in which faculty combine, to a greater or lesser degree, elements from both pedagogical perspectives (Brown, 1995).

Even though it is well documented that L2 curricula in the US adhere to a greater or lesser degree to either an analytic or synthetic course design option, it is not clear how these curricular choices are made (Scida & Jones, 2017). It often seems to be a matter of preference based on the approach the teacher is most familiar with, the approach used in the course textbook, or the approach recommended by the institution (Herschensohn, 1990). The evidence-based teaching practices that are quite common in the natural sciences (i.e., pedagogical paradigms grounded on the objective analysis of learning outcomes) have yet to permeate the L2 teaching profession (Ragland, 2016).

Albeit limited, a few empirical studies have sought to measure the actual benefits of specific curricular choices in L2 programs. These studies have been conducted mostly outside the US in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. In Turkey, Demirezen and Bakla (2007) investigated the difference between a structural and a functional EFL reading course (one designed with the practical, linguistic survival parameters established by the Common European Framework/CEF for Languages). Results of their investigation showed that functional CEF syllabi were more successful in preparing students to perform survival tasks. In Iran, Mahmoudi and Amirkhiz (2011) investigated the impact of structural versus task-based syllabi on listening comprehension among EFL college students. The fifty students who participated in this investigation were assigned at

random to either instructional approach, and they were tested for gain using a pre- and post-assessment. Unlike students in the structural group, task-based students showed significant improvement in their listening skills by the end of the course, as measured by their post-test performance. Also, in Iran, Salimi (2015) measured the impact of task-based courses on the oral-skill development of EFL students at the college level. Sixty Iranian male EFL students participated in Salimi's experiment, which involved assigning students to one of two learning conditions: a task-based group (30 students) and a traditional structural group (30 students). At the end of the course, students in both groups were given a decision-making task to resolve, and their oral output was recorded and analyzed by the researcher. Findings of this investigation revealed that the output of learners who received task-based instruction in complex tasks was significantly more accurate than that of students who received traditional presentation/practice/production (PPP) instruction. In a subsequent study, Rabab'ah (2016) explored the difference in oral performance among Jordanian students exposed to regular output-oriented courses and those exposed to a process-oriented curriculum (courses focused on explicit oral-strategy training). The results of his investigation showed students in the strategy-training course significantly outperformed their output-oriented counterparts. Finally, in Japan, Roy (2017) documented the outcomes of an analytic syllabus through task-based instruction for the teaching of technical writing skills. Forty-seven EFL Japanese college students participated in a problem-based English writing course organized around authentic problems and tasks. These tasks required extensive student-to-student interaction, processing of authentic texts, and development of multimedia products in the target language. The researcher tracked performance on all course tasks using standardized rubrics and documented favorable outcomes for process-oriented courses in most language skills.

The emerging picture from these empirical studies on L2 course outcomes is one that favors analytic syllabi, particularly those with a task orientation (procedural or problem-based). Analytic syllabi consistently succeed at enabling L2 learners to carry out communicative tasks in open-ended assessments. Nevertheless, L2 classroom evidence is still limited, and the information available is restricted to non-immersion settings. At this point, we simply do not have enough information about the impact of broad curricular choices in SA settings.

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To better understand the impact of course content and pedagogical orientation on oral proficiency gains in SA settings, this investigation posed the following questions:

1. What is the impact of L2 course type on the speaking ability of students in short-term SA programs?
2. What is the impact of L2 course type on grammatical competence abroad?
3. To what extent are overall speaking gains abroad related to the pedagogical approach implemented in the L2 course?
4. To what extent are speaking gains abroad related to learners' initial speaking ability?

THE PRESENT STUDY

The University of Delaware is recognized as a pioneer in study abroad in the United States (Bowman, 1987). This university launched the first officially-credited US study abroad program in 1923 (Lee, 2012), and today, it offers more than 90 short-term programs abroad every year, about 20% of which are programs focused on language learning. One of these language programs is based in Panama City, Panama, and it is geared toward intermediate and advanced language learners interested in improving their oral communication skills while taking selected courses from the Spanish major or minor curriculum in an immersion setting.

The Panama program was developed by faculty from the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures in 2006, and over the past decade, it has developed a focus on oral communication. This program features a language pledge (i.e., mandatory use of the target language throughout the program), a service learning component (conducting educational and recreational activities for children at a local orphanage), and abundant opportunities for interaction with the local community. The underlying assumptions behind the articulation of this program were that linguistic immersion was inherently beneficial for all L2 learners, and that the specifics of the SA curriculum were fundamentally inconsequential, as long as they were thematically linked to the immersion site, and they followed the rigorous academic parameters of courses offered at the home institution.

For quality control purposes, objective speaking ability assessments (pre and post) were introduced into this program in 2013. The goal of these assessments was to obtain an objective measure of speaking ability gain, independent from specific coursework. Results of these assessments were meant to track the overall effectiveness of the immersion program in order to identify any potential weaknesses and to guide future curricular adjustments.

From the first data collection event, a review of speaking ability scores revealed great variations in achievement across program participants. This finding was consistent with data from multiple studies on the impact of study abroad, which have suggested that individual variables play a determinant role on proficiency development in immersion settings (Grey, Cox, Serafini, & Sanz, 2015; Hassall, 2012; Klapper & Rees, 2012; Llanes, Tragant & Serrano, 2012). However, it was also detected that, on average, students in the oral communication course (SPAN306) showed higher rates of speaking ability gain at the end of the program than their advanced grammar (SPAN401) counterparts. This surprising outcome was originally interpreted as an abnormality (perhaps an artifact of random teacher and learner factors). However, when similar learner outcomes were detected the following two years, it became apparent that we were, in fact, witnessing a peculiar language learning pattern that had not been previously documented and that required closer inspection.

As noted earlier, the SA program in Panama offers a similar immersion experience to all participants, except for a choice in linguistics courses (SPAN306 versus SPAN401). All students in this program are expected to enroll in three courses: a 3-credit language course (with an option between a high-intermediate oral communication course, and an advanced grammar course), a 3-credit

literature course, and a 1-credit service learning course. Choice of a language course is based on curricular need, not personal preference (students who have already completed all their required coursework for the Spanish major or minor at the 300-level enroll in the grammar course SPAN401; otherwise, they enroll in the oral communication course SPAN306).

Although one would assume that the two L2 courses would have significantly different content, a closer inspection of their course syllabi revealed a surprising similarity: both courses covered essentially the same content but in substantially different ways. As shown in Table 1, both courses had the same number of units, those units were covered in about the same amount of time, and their grammatical content was essentially the same. The main difference between the two courses,

Table 1. Course Comparison Chart

Course number	**SPAN306**	**SPAN401**
Course name	Oral and Written Expression	Advanced Grammar II
Credits	3	3
Instructional hours	25 hours in the classroom +10 hours of individual tutoring	25 hours in the classroom + 10 hours of individual tutoring
Language of instruction	Spanish (100%)	Spanish (100%)
Number of Instructors	2 (1 professor, 1 TA)	2 (1 professor, 1 TA)
Professor profile	Native speaker, advanced degree in Spanish, 20+ years of experience	Native speaker, advanced degree in Spanish, 20+ years of experience
TA profile	Native speaker, MA candidate in Spanish (Concentration: Language Pedagogy), 1 year of experience in the classroom	Native speaker, MA candidate in Spanish (Concentration: Language Pedagogy), 1 year of experience in the classroom
Type of syllabus	Functional	Structural
Number of units	5	5
Unit focus and content	(1) Describing objects and people (present tense, *ser/estar*, prepositions, comparatives/ superlatives, reflexive constructions, verbs like *gustar*); (2) narrating (preterite, imperfect, present perfect); (3) giving instructions (formal and informal commands, impersonal *se*); (4) recommending (subjunctive in noun and adjective clauses); (5) articulating arguments (future, conditional, imperfect subjunctive)	(1) Descriptions (present tense, prepositions, adjectives); (2) Narrations (preterite, imperfect); (3) Essays (passive constructions, future and conditional); (4) Expositions (subjunctive, infinitives and participles); (5) Argumentations (uses of *se*, *si* clauses, reported speech)

Skill focus	Speaking	Writing
Standard instructional sequence	**Oral input task** (reading or video segments to model the targeted function, listening or reading comprehension tasks focused on content and structure) → **Skill-building tasks** (pair/group written and/or oral tasks aimed at parsing or rehearsing the function at hand: simulations, role-plays, interviews) → **Application task** (homework: mainly video projects where students would document their ability to use targeted linguistic functions)	**Presentation of grammar topic** (teacher would explain and give examples of a particular grammar point) → **Grammar practice tasks** (students completed contextualized grammar practice tasks, individually or in group, in writing or verbally. Typical formats: fill-in-the-blank; sentence building, text completion) → **Application task** (homework: mainly compositions aimed at incorporating targeted structures in extended written discourse)
Course assessments	Video projects (30%), audio recordings (20%), written exams (20%), online workbook activities (20%), in-class oral participation (10%)	Compositions (40%), written exams (20%), online workbook activities (20%), in-class oral participation (20%)

however, was the type of syllabus used. SPAN306 used a functional approach to the organization of its syllabus, whereas SPAN401 used a structural one.

The structural course (SPAN401: Advanced Spanish Grammar), as the title suggests, focused on the analysis and practice of selected L2 grammar topics following the PPP instructional sequence (presentation of the grammar structure on the part of the instructor, oral and written practice of relevant grammar-oriented tasks, production of the targeted structure primarily through open-ended writing tasks). The functional course (SPAN306: Practical Oral and Written Expression) focused on the application of selected L2 structures in advanced functional contexts (such as description, narration, and argumentation), mainly through oral tasks. The instructional sequence followed in the functional course featured input processing activities (reading and listening), followed by controlled output tasks (both written and oral), leading to open-ended functional tasks (primarily oral). Both courses had the same number of contact hours (35), the same number of individualized tutoring hours (15), and both required about the same amount of work outside the classroom (roughly an hour per day). Lead instructors for each course were constant; however, the TAs assigned to each course varied each year.

Because all contextual variables were the same for all participants (same host country, same host institution, same living arrangements, same extra-curricular activities, and same academic curriculum), this SA program provides a unique opportunity to analyze the effects of course design and orientation on the development of speaking skills among intermediate L2 learners abroad. The pedagogical evidence gathered here will allow us to compare the impact of two different course types on speaking skills (a synthetic course focused on the explicit

exploration of aspects of the L2 grammar, versus an analytic course focused on the oral practice of advanced linguistic functions). Furthermore, it will help us assess the validity of commonly held beliefs about language study such as the inherently beneficial effect of SA for the development of speaking skills, and the secondary nature of the academic curricula offered in such programs. In the sections that follow, we shall explore in more detail the nature of these interactions and attempt to provide some pedagogical recommendations that emerge from these findings.

METHODOLOGY

To measure the impact of course orientation on L2 speaking gains, data from the institutional oral assessment (the Versant Spanish™ Test) were used and analyzed. This assessment was administered to all program participants at the beginning and at the end of their SA experience in Panama City, Panama.

The Versant Spanish™ Test is a commercially available automated assessment of oral ability, which seeks to measure basic encoding and decoding of oral language as performed in integrated tasks in real time (Townshend, Bernstein, Barbier & Rosenfeld, 2004). This test is meant to probe the psycholinguistic elements of spoken language performance (namely, lexical access and syntactic encoding), rather than the social and rhetorical elements of communication (Balogh, Bernstein, Suzuki & Lenning, 2006). Overall scores in the Versant Spanish™ Test range from 0 to 80 points, and the publisher provides a table of estimated equivalencies to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (Pearson, 2011). In addition to overall speaking ability scores, the Versant Test reports on 4 additional sub-scores: (1) sentence mastery, (2) vocabulary, (3) fluency, and (4) pronunciation. The entire assessment takes about 25 minutes to complete, and it is available via phone or computer.

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The Versant Spanish™ Test consists of 7 tasks as follows:

1. Reading: Test-takers are presented with sentences to read out loud;
2. Repeat: Test-takers must repeat sentences they hear;
3. Opposites: Students must provide antonyms for selected vocabulary;
4. Questions: Students answer simple questions presented verbally;
5. Sentence builds: Test-takers reconstruct sentences based on components presented orally;
6. Story retelling: Test-takers retell three brief stories they hear; and
7. Open questions: Students respond freely to two open-ended questions on family life or personal choices. (Fox & Frazer, 2009)

It is worth noting here that neither the functional nor the structural course used any of these elicitation tasks as part of their daily classroom or at-home learning activities.

Results from the overall pre- and post-program Versant Spanish™ Test were statistically compared to determine the magnitude and significance of any changes in oral ability resulting from participating in the SA program. Results were also

statistically analyzed to establish the relationship between changes in oral ability and the type of language course taken abroad. All data analysis was done with the help of the statistical program JMP (an interactive statistics program created in 1989 by the SAS Institute to allow researchers to explore data visually).

SUBJECTS

To maximize the number of research subjects, data from three consecutive SA programs sponsored by the University of Delaware in Panama City, Panama were used for this analysis. Since pre- and post-program oral proficiency testing is part of the regular assessment of all language courses in this program, no further testing was required for this investigation. Over the course of a three-year period, the number of students assessed was 74.

The majority of subjects were in their late teens (the average age was 19), women outnumbered men in all groups (82% versus 18%), and the vast majority of participants (67%) were Spanish language minors. Over the course of the three years of these observations, the total number of students enrolled in the structurally-oriented course (SPAN401) was 40, and the total number of students enrolled in the functional course (SPAN306) was 34. The average number of participants in the Panama SA program per year was 25 (20 in 2016, 28 in 2017, and 26 in 2018).

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

RESEARCH QUESTION # 1. What is the impact of L2 course type on the speaking ability of students in short-term SA programs?

To answer the first question, the mean Versant test score for each group was examined. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the levels of the pre-, post-, and gain of each group for each year. A few things are worth noting. The pre-scores were slightly higher for the students in the structural class, indicating that students in the SPAN401 course tended to be more proficient in the L2 at the beginning of their SA experience. This was true for each year in which speaking ability data were collected. However, students in the functional class consistently had the higher gain. Due to this consistency, and the relatively small sample size in each period, the data were combined across all three years of the Panama program when conducting a formal test of the gain.

Table 2. Mean Scores for the Versant Spanish™ Test by Year and Syllabus Type

YEAR	Versant Pre-	Versant Post-	Gain
2016	55.45	59.60	4.15
2017	56.86	59.86	3.00
2018	48.12	50.50	2.38

Syllabus Type			
Functional	50.43	54.95	4.53
Structural	56.91	58.32	1.41

YEAR	Syllabus Type			
2016	Functional	53.00	60.00	7.00
	Structural	57.45	59.27	1.82
2017	Functional	53.75	57.63	3.88
	Structural	61.00	62.83	1.83
2018	Functional	45.33	49.07	3.73
	Structural	51.91	52.45	0.55

Since the same subjects were used in the pre- and post-tests, two statistical tests were implemented: an overall matched pairs *t* test, and an ANOVA test across the two syllabus types. The first test determines if the gain in the score is different from zero. Overall, there was a positive gain in speaking ability. On average, students across both groups gained 3.09 points during the SA experience. This was significant at $t(73)=5.245$, $p < .0001$. The second test was an ANOVA to determine if the gain for the two groups was different. The gain for functional students was indeed determined to be statistically greater $F(1,72) = 7.53$, $p < .01$, R-squared = .095. The difference in gain across the two types was 3.11 points (see Table 3 for mean and standard deviations for each group). The evidence suggests that the implementation of functional syllabi abroad was associated with higher gains in speaking ability as measured by the Versant Spanish™ Test.

Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviations of Speaking Gain Scores by Syllabus Type

Syllabus Type	Number	Mean	Std Dev
Functional	40	4.525	4.857
Structural	34	1.412	4.869

RESEARCH QUESTION # 2. What is the impact of L2 course type on grammatical competence abroad?

One of the common arguments in favor of syntactic grammar courses is their perceived superiority to promote grammatical competence through the explicit presentation and practice of L2 grammar rules (Graus & Coppen, 2012; Klapper & Rees, 2003; Salimi, 2015). To test the validity of this assumption in this SA program, the Versant Spanish™ Test "Sentence Mastery" sub-scores for the structural and functional groups were statistically compared. In Versant, "Sentence Mastery" refers to the ability to understand, recall, and produce Spanish phrases and clauses in complete sentences. According to the Versant test developers, performance in this area depends on accurate syntactic processing and appropriate usage of words, phrases, and clauses in meaningful sentence structures (Pearson, 2011).

In order to determine if there was a difference in "Sentence Mastery" between the functional and structural groups at the end of the study program, an ANOVA test was conducted. This comparison showed no significant statistical difference between the two groups $F(1,72) = 2.02$, $p = .16$, R-squared = .027. As the findings

summarized in Table 4 suggest, the structural and functional courses in this investigation were comparable in their ability to promote advanced usage of L2 words, phrases, and clauses in meaningful sentence structures, as elicited by the oral tasks in the Versant Spanish™ Test.

Table 4. Mean and Standard Deviations of Sentence Mastery Subscores by Syllabus Type

Syllabus Type	Number	Mean	Std Dev
Functional	39	58.744	12.506
Structural	35	63.086	13.787

RESEARCH QUESTION # 3. To what extent are overall speaking ability gains abroad related to the pedagogical approach implemented in the L2 course?

To better understand the impact of pedagogical approach on overall speaking gains abroad, Kessler and Greenberg's (1981) measure of change (better known as Q^2) was used. This measure examines gain scores over time, and it is used to compare the nature of change across groups by breaking it down into two component parts. The first part reflects the variance of the gain, which can be best described as "individual shifting" (with some subjects improving more or less than others). The second part reflects the changing mean of the pre- and post- group scores, which suggests a raising (or lowering) of scores across all subjects in the group. If all of Q^2 comes from the first component, it indicates that the mean level of the Versant Spanish™ Test score did not change over time, but that there was some degree of shifting among subjects. Alternatively, if all of Q^2 comes from the second component, all the subjects in the group changed an equal amount.

The Q^2 scores and the percent components for the speaking scores by group can be found in Figure 1 on the next page. The functional group had a larger part of Q^2 in the means component, while the structural group had a larger part in the variance component. This implies that students in the functional group showed greater improvement in their Versant Spanish™ Test scores and were lifted as a group by the experience, while students in the structural group mostly experienced individual shifting across the two tests.

RESEARCH QUESTION # 4. To what extent are speaking gains abroad related to learners' initial speaking ability?

The final research question focuses on whether the difference in gains is due to the fact that some students began their SA program with a higher pre-Versant Spanish™ Test score. A direct way to test for the effect of initial proficiency level is by using a regression model of the gain in Versant Spanish™ Test score on the pre-score and syllabus type. This regression model provides a way to control for the pre-score level in the analysis. Group type was represented by a dummyvariable, in which 1 = Functional group and 0 = Structural group. The focus of this analysis was on the size and significance of the regression coefficient for group type after

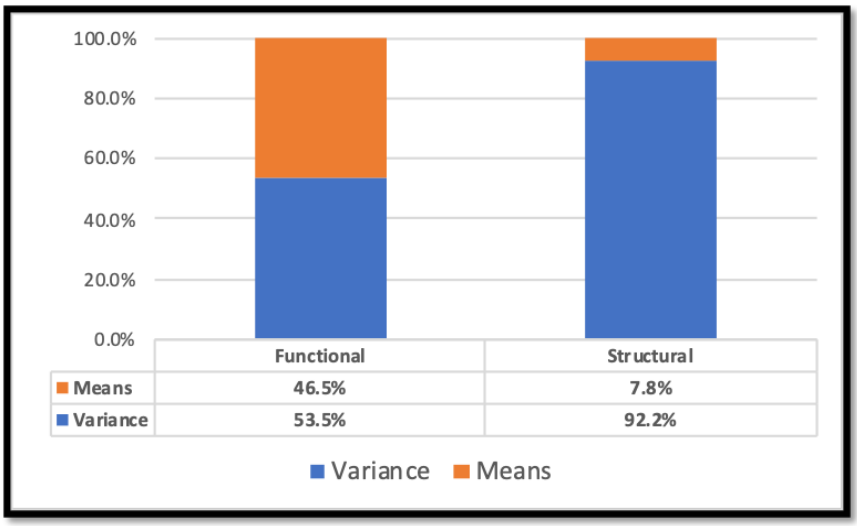

Figure 1. Breakdown of the Versant Spanish™ Test Score Gain by Syllabus Type

controlling for pre-score, which represents the difference in gain between the function and structural syllabi. The results are given in Table 5.

Table 5. Regression of Gain on Versant-Pre and Syllabus Type

Variable	Coefficient	p-Value
Intercept	7.387	.0244
Versant-Pre	-.105	.0583
Functional	2.432	.0410
R-squared	.140	

The regression model shows that the pre-score was not a strong predictor for the gain in speaking ability. The pre-score coefficient was negative and not statistically significant in the model at the α =.05 level. However, the "group" variable was statistically significant. After controlling for the pre-score, the estimate for the difference in gain was 2.43, a slight reduction from the overall difference of the gain found in Research Question #1 (which was 3.11).

Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

Since this study was articulated a posteriori (i.e., after the relevant data had already been collected), there are a number of methodological limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting its findings:

1. The investigation focused on the impact on speaking ability of two (and only two) pedagogical approaches. Information on the relative effectiveness of other types of courses (for instance, task-based or content-based) would be needed to obtain a more complete picture of the nature of the relationship between course type and speaking ability development abroad.

2. Another limitation of this study has to do with the self-selection of students into their respective courses. For a true experimental design, random subject assignment to treatment groups would be desired.
3. Although the instrument used in this investigation (the Versant Spanish™ Test) is highly practical and reliable, it focuses solely on oral output and it does so in a non-interactive manner. Replication of the study using interactive assessments (such as ACTFL's Oral Proficiency Interview or the Instituto Cervantes' SIELE), or validated tests of other L2 skills (such as reading, listening, or writing) would significantly enhance our understanding of the impact of course type on all L2 modalities.
4. Finally, the target audience (intermediate-level learners of Spanish) introduces another methodological limitation. Similar investigations with learners of other languages, and at different proficiency levels, would be required for us to fully appreciate the interplay between course design and oral proficiency development abroad.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This investigation began with the question: Do second language (L2) learning outcomes vary depending on the type of syllabus selected by the instructor? The results of this investigation suggest that speaking ability is indeed sensitive to variations in course design and structure, that pedagogical orientation can make a significant difference in speaking ability outcomes for intermediate-level students, and that specific features of the coursework offered abroad can mediate the impact of individual learner variables in SA settings.

The results of this investigation suggest that speaking ability is indeed sensitive to variations in course design and structure, that pedagogical orientation can make a significant difference in speaking ability outcomes for intermediate-level students, and that specific features of the coursework offered abroad can mediate the impact of individual learner variables in SA settings.

The differences in course design documented in this investigation (namely, differences in academic focus, handling of L2 input and output, pedagogical sequences, in-class tasks, and at-home assignments) appear to have created different learning environments that resulted in different levels of oral-proficiency development among program participants. Functional and structural frameworks for L2 course design introduce significantly different purposes and contexts for language learning, and these differences seem to have important learning implications in immersion settings. Both pedagogical approaches appear to encourage students to process L2 input and to generate L2 output in different ways and for different reasons. Structural approaches focus on linguistic analysis to gain further control of the L2 grammar, while functional approaches direct learners' attention toward the practical social applications of language. Those variations in purpose and context were shown to translate into different levels of oral skill achievement among L2 learners in this investigation and should be taken into account when designing L2 curricula abroad.

A further corollary of this investigation is that linguistic immersion, per se, is not sufficient to generate the L2 proficiency outcomes that we hope for in SA programs. Harvesting the benefits of study abroad appears to be mediated by our ability to focus the attention and interest of L2 learners onto key aspects of their linguistic immersion experience (such as engagement in meaningful exchanges of information with members of the local community, processing of relevant L2 input for both meaning and form, and in the development of cross-cultural interactional skills). Clearly, not all learners take advantage of these (and other) helpful aspects of their immersion experience, so they can benefit from a well-informed instructional intervention. As these research results show, the content and pedagogical orientation of L2 syllabi do matter. Faculty and program administrators would be well-advised to adopt an evidence-based approach to course design in to order to maximize the linguistic impact of their L2 programs abroad.

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