

Chapter 5

The affective benefits of a pre-sessional course at the start of study abroad

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The study reported in this chapter focuses on the effect that a 2 to 4 week pre-sessional course at Aix-Marseille University had on Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in the French as a foreign language of 93 learners of European and Asian origin, who ranged from beginners to intermediate learners. They were tested at the start and at the end of the course. Results showed a significant decrease in levels of FLA and a significant increase in WTC. Length of stay had no effect on FLA, but was positively linked to difference in WTC. Level of proficiency had no effect on difference in FLA but had a positive effect on difference in WTC, with lower-intermediate learners showing the biggest increase in WTC. Students' cultural background had a significant effect on FLA and WTC at Time 1, with the Asian group reporting more FLA and less WTC.

1. Introduction

Study abroad programmes provide an opportunity for foreign language (FL) learners to live in the community of the language they are learning for a fixed period of time. Learning a language through study abroad (SA) programmes is thus different from FL classroom learning, as well as from learning the language in the community where one resides, as in the case of immigrants or refugees. The decision to go abroad to learn a FL is the learner's personal choice, possibly influenced by parents or teachers, although many language degree programmes have a mandatory SA component (Coleman, 1996, 1998). Allen (2010) found that among her six American students of French, the choice to study abroad was seen as "a critical step to achieving fluency or a means of travel and cultural learning" (p. 27). Thus, SA students are often motivated not only to learn the language and the culture of the FL community, but also to discover a new country and to engage with members of that community on a personal level, presumably in the FL. Other reasons for the

pursuit of FL can include instrumental ones, such as acquiring skills to enhance the job prospects or to become more competitive on the labour market. However, many factors can influence the success of a SA experience (Kinginger, 2008; Regan, Howard, & Lemée, 2009).

Many universities nowadays offer pre-sessional language courses which aim to prepare students' language skills for the SA programme, either at an undergraduate or postgraduate level. Turner (2004) defines a pre-sessional course as "one occurring before the student begins academic study" (p. 98). Apart from language skills, students are also socialised into that particular university environment, i.e. the structure of the courses, tutors' expectations and style of teaching, among other factors. The goal of pre-sessional courses abroad is to prepare international students undertaking a SA programme for the requirements of the university they enrol in. Thus, the pre-sessional course abroad is the students' first contact with the university system in the host country, and potentially with the host culture (Copland & Garton, 2011).

There are different types of SA and pre-sessional courses. The minimal duration of SA is typically 3 months, which is the minimum period in the European Erasmus exchange programme, but it can also be much shorter (a few weeks) and extend up to a year. Pre-sessional courses vary usually from 2 to 8 weeks prior to the beginning of the academic year, but can in some instances last as long as one year.

Relatively few studies have considered the changes induced by a short SA in two key affective variables: Foreign language anxiety (FLA) and willingness to communicate (WTC), and most of the research on the effects of pre-sessional courses abroad has been carried out with regard to English programmes. The present study thus aims at filling this gap by investigating the effects of pre-sessional courses on these variables, as well as looking at a different context, i.e., French-speaking universities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Foreign language anxiety (FLA)

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been long recognized as a determining factor in the successful acquisition, perceived communicative competence and use of a FL. There is a variety of reasons that can influence successful FL acquisition. Some are contextual reasons (the status of that particular language within the community where it is being learned, the availability of resources for FL learning, formal or informal language learning mode and many more), some are situational (the level of formality required in an interaction, the degree of acquaintance with the inter-

locutor and so on), and some are individual (personality, motivation for learning a FL, age of onset of acquisition, knowledge of other FLs, anxiety and willingness to communicate in a FL, among others). These factors have been found to have a profound effect on FL learning outcomes and have been discussed extensively in applied linguistic research (Dörnyei, 2009).

FLA is, nonetheless, one of the most intricate and influential variables in FL learning (Oxford, 1999). It is a significant predictor of successful oral FL communication (Woodrow, 2006). Many individuals have a positive self-image, which encompasses moderate self-esteem, and good ability to manoeuvre social situations and to present themselves to others in a positive light. But when these learners attempt to communicate in a language which they do not master to a high degree, this self-image might be threatened by the reduced ability to express themselves easily (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Thus, “second language communication entails risk taking and is necessarily problematic” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128), and therefore a communicative act in FL will probably be somewhat intimidating to many language learners. As Horwitz and her colleagues (1986) rightfully point out, FL learning is the field of study that involves the learner’s self more than any other field, as s/he is required to use the limited resources available in the FL to express him/herself in a way consistent with the first language (L1) self.

MacIntyre (2007, p. 565) defines FLA as “the worry and usually negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using an L2” in an L2 situation, be it a FL classroom or an L2 context. Researchers have pointed out that anxiety is a complex concept, with many facets. It can be operationalized at three levels: trait, situation-specific and state anxiety, each one of these levels tapping into a slightly different concept of FLA (Dewaele, 2002, 2007; Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008; MacIntyre, 2007). Trait anxiety refers to a type of behavior characteristic to an individual over long periods of time; situation anxiety emerges as a response in a recurrent situation; and state anxiety occurs in specific situations and ignores whether that response has emerged previously or whether it is a recurrent reaction.

Some studies have indicated the importance of the context where the communicative act takes place for the perceived levels of anxiety. Learners who enjoy their learning experience in a classroom context report lower levels of FLA (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Dewaele et al. (2008), in their study on *communicative anxiety* (CA) in the L1 and FLA in adult multilinguals, found that levels of CA/FLA were higher in languages acquired later in life. CA/FLA levels were also linked to the interlocutor and the type of interaction (speaking on the phone or in public is more anxiety-provoking than talking to a friend or a colleague). They report that participants who had learnt their FL only through formal instruction suffered more from FLA than participants who, in addition to formal instruction, had also made

extracurricular use of the FL. Other factors found to decrease the levels of CA/FLA were knowledge of multiple languages, self-perceived competence in the FL, increased use of the FL, a wider network of interlocutors, increased socialization in that language group, lower age of onset of acquisition, and most notably, higher levels of the trait Emotional Intelligence. Other psychological factors have been linked to FLA such as second language tolerance of ambiguity (Dewaele & Shan Ip, 2012), psychoticism, extraversion and neuroticism (Dewaele, 2013a). Foreign language anxiety together with other individual difference variables has also been found to be predictive of FL study abandonment (Dewaele & Thirtle, 2009).

Research on the effect of short and intensive language courses is well established. An early study carried out by Gardner, Smythe and Brunet (1977) investigated the effect of a five-week intensive French programme on attitudes, motivation and achievement in French among Anglo-Canadians. This research was not conducted in a SA environment but the programme aimed at immersing the students in the language by offering residence throughout the course and encouraging French as the only medium of communication. One of the findings of this study was that the level of FLA was related to the level of proficiency of the students. Gardner and his colleagues report that “the beginners were considerably more anxious than the intermediate students who in turn were more anxious than the advanced students, indicating that anxiety about speaking French decreases as proficiency and training increase” (Gardner, Smythe & Brunet, 1977, p. 251). The authors concluded that the five-week intensive programme was beneficial in decreasing the students’ anxiety levels in learning and using French, while at the same time providing support for an increased motivation for achieving higher levels of proficiency.

Another influential study in this area is that by Allen and Herron (2003) who found that 25 American students who participated in 15-week summer SA programmes in France reported lower levels of FLA both in classroom and outside of the classroom situations at the end of the programmes. Based on interviews with their participants, they also noted that their FLA prior to studying abroad was twofold, involving both lack of confidence in linguistic abilities and apprehension regarding cultural differences. They conclude by suggesting that contact with native speakers in ordinary FL classrooms would probably be beneficial not only for linguistic purposes, but also for supporting positive attitudes towards the target language group. Similar results were also reported by Matsuda and Gobel (2004), who studied *foreign language classroom anxiety* (FLCA) in Japanese students learning English. They report that an overseas experience influenced self-confidence in speaking English, which in turn, together with gender and proficiency, became predictors of performance for first-year students.

The studies presented here suggest that one way of expanding the foreign language learning (FLL) context to include the use of the FL outside of the classroom

is studying abroad or having some sort of overseas experience, which can reduce the levels of FLA and encourage FL learners to become more confident, authentic FL users.

2.2. *Willingness to communicate (WTC)*

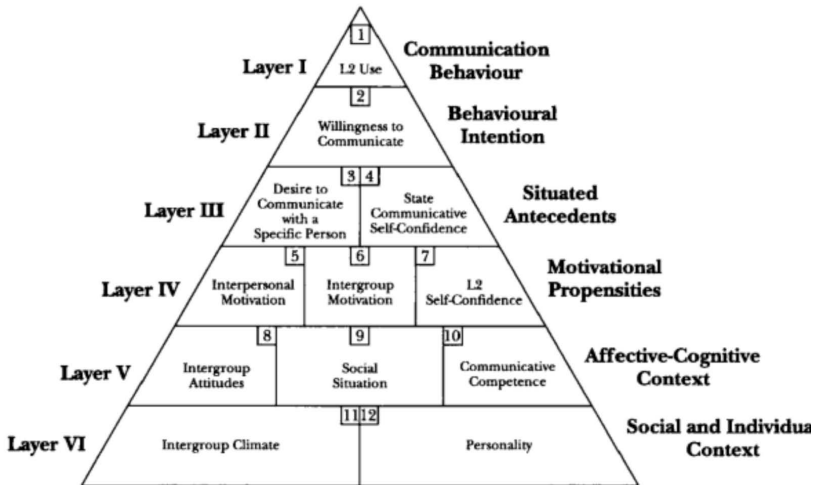
Willingness to communicate (WTC) originated in the field of L1 linguistics. It was first introduced by McCroskey and his colleagues in the 1980s (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). It referred specifically to a personality trait that would explain the variation among people's desire to engage in communication in various contexts and with various interlocutors. The authors did not deny the influence of the particular situation and interlocutor, but nonetheless, McCroskey and his colleagues placed WTC in L1 at the centre of a person's communicative strategies.

Later, MacIntyre (1994) re-examined the WTC theory and proposed a path model in which WTC was directly related to communication apprehension and perceived communicative competence. He suggested that the WTC model could be employed when examining the variability of communication across situations and that a number of other variables could influence a person's WTC. Among these variables were: The familiarity between the interlocutors, the size of the group where the communicative act is taking place, the degree of formality of the situation, the topic discussed, and not least, the language of the discourse.

MacIntyre went on to test this model in the context of L2 communication and found that anxiety to communicate in L2 and perceived L2 communicative competence also predicted WTC in L2. He later combined this model with Gardner's socio-educational model in order to examine the vital variables for WTC in L2 (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre & Clément, 1996) and found that WTC greatly influenced the frequency of communication in L2, and was in turn influenced by perceived competence in L2, motivation to engage in an exchange in L2, and to a lesser extent, anxiety to communicate in L2.

In another study, MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels (1998) proposed a more complex theoretical model for L2 WTC. This pyramidal model puts forward six different layers influencing WTC (see Figure 1). The main factor to influence the first layer (use of L2) was WTC. Here, WTC is defined as the propensity to engage in a communicative act with a particular interlocutor at a specific time. The first three layers are described as being "situation-specific influences on WTC at a given moment in time" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547), while the next three layers "represent stable, enduring influences on the process" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). Although a very complex model, the authors present it as a way of explaining the situational and personality influences that might determine the frequency with which a person uses their L2.

Figure 1. The pyramid model of WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998)



In other L2 studies, further influences on WTC were identified. MacIntyre and Blackie (2012) found that WTC, as well as FLA, were related to hesitation, but were not related to test anxiety. Clément, Baker and MacIntyre (2003) found that confidence in L2 was related not only to WTC, but also to identity, and both these variables had a predictive role in the frequency of use of L2. Studies conducted mainly in the Japanese context suggest that WTC had other antecedents as well: Yashima (2002) proposed *international posture*, a variable defined as the attitudes some learners have towards English as an international language independent of any national group. A study looking at Japanese high-school students who studied English for 3 weeks before enrolling in an American high school for a one-year exchange programme showed that higher levels of WTC before departure were related to longer and more frequent communication with Americans (Yashima, Zenuk-Nishida, & Shimizu, 2004). It also posits that “L2 anxiety is somewhat related to the sense of adjustment to the new environment” (Yashima et al., 2004, p. 140). This study, however, did not assess the change in the levels of WTC or FLA before and after the language courses. MacIntyre and Doucette (2010) argue that WTC can be hypothesised to be a stable characteristic to reflect an individual’s level of propensity towards engaging in communication in L2, but also a concept that might vary depending on the situation or even the moment.

The aim of studies on WTC in L2 is to identify the variables linked to the decision to engage in L2 interactions. As evidenced by the complexity of the mod-

els presented here, there are many person- or situation-related variables that can influence one's WTC.

2.3. Study abroad (SA) and pre-sessional courses

The premise of SA programmes is that learning the FL in a naturalistic setting will have a positive influence on the learners' proficiency. The informality of learning in the context of SA can provide options for contact with the L2 outside of the classroom setting (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003), which can be beneficial for the language learners. Pre-sessional courses abroad can be considered short SA programmes, with the only difference that at the end students do not usually return home, but continue their studies at that university, which can potentially have an effect on their motivation and attitudes towards the learning process. On completion of a pre-sessional course, students are often required to take a language test to certify a sufficient level of FL proficiency that allows them to attend university level courses.

Results from previous studies typically show that SA of one semester is linked to a foreign language gain (Magnan & Back, 2007), but that there is a large amount of inter-individual variation (Coleman, 1997; Kinginger, 2008). Some students maximize the possibilities to engage in interactions with native speakers of the target language, while others remain huddled inside their own linguistic community (Regan, Howard, & Lemée, 2009). SA has been found to have immediate and short-term outcomes, such as gains in target language proficiency (Kinging, 2011), although these are not necessarily permanent (Regan, 2005). Generally, it appears that SA has a significant effect on communicative outcomes, while grammar and writing are less easily influenced (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). SA has also long-term impact on global engagement and on subsequent educational and career choices (Paige, Fry, Stallman, Jon, & Josic, 2009).

While less research has been carried out on short SA (typically around one month), the results have pointed in the same direction (Anderson, Lawton & Hubbard 2006). Even a short period abroad can have profound positive effects on language learners' skills and attitudes (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Evans & Fisher, 2005). Nonetheless, SA students might differ from pre-sessional students. Recent studies (Copland & Garton, 2011; Jarvis & Stakounis, 2010) point to this difference and open the field to new research questions. Pre-sessional courses usually take place in the summer; thus the students enrolled tend to have less contact with local students. The programmes are seldom designed to provide opportunities for contact with the host culture; rather, they focus more on acquiring the required language level for the students to be able to enroll in university courses in autumn. However, these circumstances allow the

pre-sessional students to learn some cultural norms, as well as complete the negotiation of services, prior to the beginning of the academic year.

Studies to date have focused on the opportunities that pre-sessional students have to engage in interactions in the language of study in the host community (Copland & Garton, 2011; Jarvis & Stakounis, 2010) but few investigated the effect of short-term pre-sessional courses on affective dimensions. The purpose of the present study is to investigate the effect of a pre-sessional programme on levels of FLA and WTC within the French context, recognising the fact that successful communication between the students and members of the local community can be dramatically influenced by these variables.

3. Research Questions

- 1) Do FLA levels decrease between the start and end of the course?
- 2) Do WTC levels increase between the start and end of the course?
- 3) Are students at lower proficiency levels suffering more from FLA?
- 4) Do students at lower proficiency levels have lower levels of WTC?
- 5) Is length of the course linked to variation in FLA and WTC between Times 1 and 2?
- 6) Is students' cultural background linked to variation in FLA and WTC at Times 1 and 2?

4. Method

4.1. *Pre-sessional courses at Aix-Marseille University*

The pre-sessional courses at Aix-Marseille University are specifically addressed to the foreign students entering the university, who participate on a voluntary basis, as in the case of the studies described above. Many students are part of the Erasmus exchange programme. Participants represent a rather homogeneous group, at least in terms of objectives. They are generally highly motivated, as linguistic competence in French is the key to their academic success.

The content of these intensive pre-sessional courses touches upon four skills (oral and written comprehension and production), as well as the exploration of various types of academic work (summaries, reading reports, note taking, commentaries, essays, dissertations). Materials for the courses are press articles, extracts of literary works, and grammar exercises from various textbooks. For oral comprehension, materials revolve around recorded interviews from radio programmes, current events and songs. Oral interaction classes are based on the communicative

approach: these include sessions with French native speakers that allow the foreign students to use their new linguistic skills. Students have 20 course hours a week (5 days). In the past, the pre-sessional course lasted up to four weeks, with some students opting for three weeks, but it has recently been limited to two weeks. Data for the present study were collected in 2010, 2011 and 2012.

Students are assigned to the pre-sessional classes based on a short written performance (20 lines on the topic “Tell your personal experience of learning French”). Language levels are determined following the guidelines of *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), a framework to describe achievements of learners of FLs across Europe (Council of Europe, 2001). At Aix-Marseille university students should have at least a B-level in French to enter a bachelor’s programme, in other words, they have to be “independent users” ranging from CEFR B1 “threshold or intermediate”, to B2 “vantage or upper intermediate”. B1 typically corresponds to a minimum of 300 hours of classroom exposure. Students live in student halls of residence where they will remain for one or two semesters. They are encouraged, during this period, to seek contacts with the local community. Interactions with native speakers of French are facilitated through the school during the pre-sessional period as well.

4.2. Instruments

Participants filled out a short biographical section, followed by Likert scales for 6 items reflecting FLA and the 8 item WTC test from Taguchi, Magid and Papi (2009). The latter part was filled out twice, at the start of the course and at the end. Participants received a small box of *calissons* (a local speciality) to thank them for participating. Scale analysis revealed that the FLA scale had a high level of internal consistency at Time 1 (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.83$), and at Time 2 (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.82$). Scale analysis showed that the WTC scale at Time 1 had sufficient internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.77$). However this dropped slightly at Time 2 (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.68$).

The totals were calculated for FLA and WTC at Times 1 and 2. A one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the total scores were normally distributed at Times 1 and 2. A Pearson correlation analysis showed that the values on the two scales were negatively related ($r(92) = -.39, p < 0.001$ at Time 1, and $r(92) = -.25, p < 0.014$ at Time 2). In other words, participants with higher levels of FLA typically displayed lower levels of WTC.

4.3. Participants

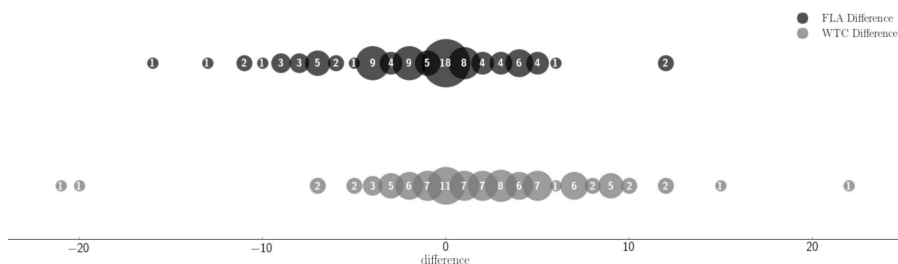
Of the 93 students (84 females, 9 males), a quarter had Russian as an L1 ($n = 24$), 17 were native speakers of English, followed by German ($n = 12$), Chinese,

Italian, Japanese and Korean (all $n = 7$), Spanish ($n = 3$); other L1s included Catalan, Greek, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Czech and Turkish. A quarter of students ($n = 25$) followed the 2-week course, over half did the 3-week course ($n = 52$), and less than a fifth ($n = 16$) did the 4-week course. There was a wide range of proficiency levels in French among the students at the beginning of the course; about a fifth ($n = 18$) were at an A1/A2 level (beginners), a similar proportion were placed at an A2 level ($n = 21$) (elementary users), a B1 level ($n = 20$) and a B2 level ($n = 23$). A smaller proportion had the level C1 ($n = 10$) (proficient users).

4. Results

The first research question focused on differences in FLA between Time 1 and Time 2. An analysis of the raw difference values shows that half of the participants reported lower levels of FLA at Time 2, with 20% reporting no change in FLA and 30% reporting (slightly) higher levels of FLA at Time 2 (see Figure 2).

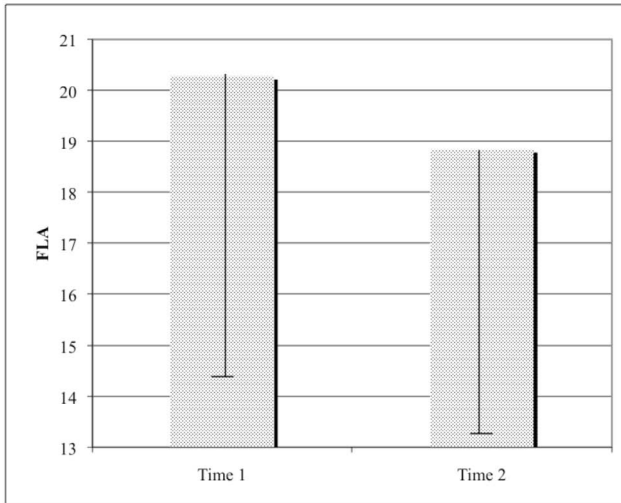
Figure 2. Differences in FLA and WTC from Time 1 to Time 2



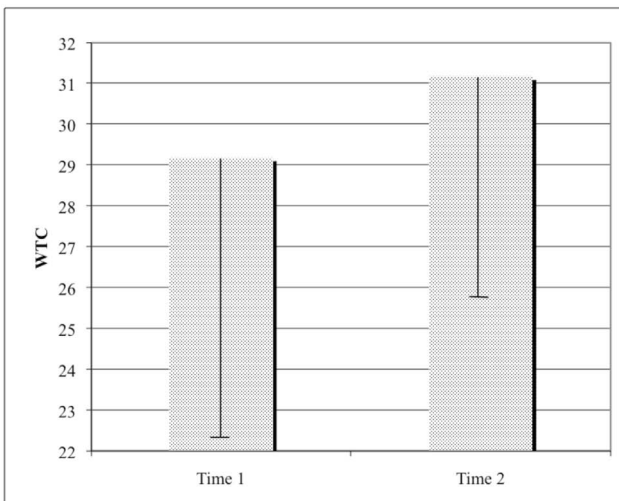
The frequency of each difference is expressed by the area of the bubbles. The numeric values represent number of participants and are displayed inside the bubbles¹.

A paired t test showed that FLA dropped significantly between Time 1 and Time 2 ($t(92) = 2.85, p < 0.005$) (see Figure 3).

1 We are aware that only interview data would have allowed us to find out why some students went against the general trend.

Figure 3. FLA at Times 1 and 2

The second research question focused on differences in WTC between Time 1 and Time 2. A closer analysis shows that the WTC values increased by Time 2 for half of the participants (52%) while one third of participants went against the general trend and reported lower levels of WTC at Time 2, with 10% reporting no change in WTC (see Figure 2). A paired t test showed that overall WTC increased significantly between Time 1 and Time 2 ($t(91) = 3.22, p < 0.002$) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. WTC at Times 1 and 2

The third and fourth research questions dealt with the effect of proficiency level on FLA and WTC. A one-way ANOVA showed no effect of proficiency on FLA at T1 and T2 ($F(4, 87) = 1.55, p = ns$; and $F(4, 87) = 1.55, p = ns$ respectively). A similar lack of effect emerged for WTC at T1 and T2 ($F(4, 87) = 0.91, p = ns$; and $F(4, 87) = 1.37, p = ns$ respectively).

It thus seems that the beginners were not more anxious than the more advanced learners, and that their WTC in French was not significantly different from the other groups.

The fifth research question we address is that of the variation in the amount of difference in FLA and WTC scores between Times 1 and 2. The average drop in FLA between Times 1 and 2 was -1.43 ($SD = 4.8$); the average increase in WTC was 1.98 ($SD = 5.9$).

A one-way ANOVA showed a non-significant effect of length of study on difference in FLA at Times 1 and 2 ($F(2, 90) = 1.34, p = ns$). A look at the means does suggest a slight trend of lower FLA values for those who stayed longer (see Table 1).

Table 1. Difference in FLA according to length of stay (mean and standard deviation)

Duration	Mean	SD	N
2 weeks	-0.28	4.71	25
3 weeks	-1.58	4.70	52
4 weeks	-2.75	5.36	16

However, a one-way ANOVA suggested that length of study had a significant impact on difference in WTC ($F(2, 90) = 6.71, p < 0.002, \eta^2 = 0.13$). In other words, students who had stayed longer had become significantly more willing to communicate in French. A look at the means (Table 2) shows that the WTC value for those who stayed for two weeks actually dropped, while those who stayed for three weeks had the strongest increase, followed by those who stayed for four weeks. Another interesting observation is the fact that the dispersion around the mean is largest for those who had stayed for two weeks, and becomes gradually smaller for those who stayed longer. This suggests that as the course wore on, fewer students reported silence as their preferred option in various situations.

Table 2. Difference in WTC according to length of stay (mean and standard deviation)

Duration	Mean	SD	N
2 weeks	-1.28	7.39	25
3 weeks	3.65	4.99	52
4 weeks	1.56	3.63	16

A one-way ANOVA showed a non-significant effect of level of proficiency on difference in FLA at Times 1 and 2 ($F(4, 87) = 0.38, p = ns$). A look at the means shows a non-linear relation, with the low intermediate learners (B1) showing the biggest drop in FLA and the advanced learners (C1) presenting the smallest decrease (see Table 3).

Table 3. Difference in FLA according to level of proficiency (mean and standard deviation)

Proficiency	Mean	SD	N
A1/A2	-1.39	3.55	18
A2	-1.29	5.29	21
B1	-1.70	5.00	20
B2	-1.43	5.34	23
C1	-1.00	5.46	10

A one-way ANOVA indicated that level of proficiency had a significant impact on difference in WTC ($F(4, 87) = 2.81, p < 0.03, \eta^2 = 0.11$). Surprisingly, the group of beginners shows an actual drop in WTC between Times 1 and 2. There is also a large dispersion around the mean ($SD = 8.57$). The other groups show an increase in WTC and the low intermediate learners (B1) are the ones with the largest increase, followed by the intermediate learners (B2). The progress of the 10 advanced learners (C1) is the smallest (see Table 4).

Table 4. Difference in WTC according to level of proficiency (mean and standard deviation)

Proficiency	Mean	SD	N
A1/A2	-1.72	8.57	18
A2	2.00	3.91	21
B1	3.90	5.96	20
B2	3.35	4.82	23
C1	1.70	3.02	10

To answer the question whether students' background might be linked to FLA, WTC and differences between Time 1 and Time 2, we distinguished between two groups of students: Asian ($n = 21$), and European ($n = 72$). An independent t test showed a significant difference in FLA between both groups at Time 1 ($df = 47.7, t = 2.5, p < 0.017$) and Time 2 ($df = 91, t = 2.4, p < 0.021$). The Asian group had the highest FLA scores both at Time 1 and Time 2 (see Table 5).

The Asian group was found to score significantly lower on WTC than the Europeans at Time 1 ($df = 90$, $t = 2.1$, $p < 0.043$); however, this difference was no longer significant at Time 2 ($df = 90$, $t = -1.2$, $p = ns$) (see Table 5).

Table 5. FLA, WTC and difference scores of Asian and European participants at Times 1 and 2 (mean and standard deviation)

Variable	Background	Mean	SD
FLA Time 1	Asian	22.6	4.3
	European	19.6	6.3
FLA Time 2	Asian	21.3	4.3
	European	18.1	5.8
WTC Time 1	Asian	26.5	5.5
	European	29.9	7.1
WTC Time 2	Asian	30.0	5.1
	European	31.5	5.4

6. Discussion

The finding of a drop in FLA among our participants reflects earlier findings for students in longer SA programs (Allen & Herron, 2003), and confirms early findings for short immersion programs (Gardner et al., 1977). Cubillos, Chieffo and Fan (2008) found that a five-week SA Spanish course led to significantly higher levels of confidence (typically a mirror image of FLA) and self-perceived ability after the SA. Our finding of a drop in FLA and a boost in WTC echoes results in Dewaele et al. (2008) and Dewaele (2010) about the effect of context of acquisition of the FL. A mixed context, like pre-sessional courses, seems ideal affectively, combining classroom instruction and simultaneous extracurricular use of the FL.

Our study suggests that even a short period abroad has psychological consequences. We can therefore only speculate that the gradual lowering of FLA and increase in WTC among our participants during their first few weeks in Aix-en-Provence would continue until the end of their studies. It is also possible that those who moved in the opposite direction between Times 1 and 2, or displayed no change, might eventually move in the expected direction after a longer time in France. Engle and Engle (2004) found that short-term SA did not have a significant effect on measures of intercultural sensitivity and that students needed to spend at least one year abroad for the gains to become significant.

One important characteristic of our sample is that the students were tested at the end of what constitutes the prelude to their studies at the university. In other words, they were motivated to learn as much as possible in order to be able to follow classes in various departments with native speakers of French after the end of this pre-sessional course. This required a true ‘investment’, in other words, a strong desire and commitment to learn French within the classroom and the wider social context (Norton, 2001). One could imagine that short SA followed by a return to the home institution might not produce the same urgent need to progress in the target language. Few studies to date have focused on pre-sessional language courses, and the main goal of these existing studies was to investigate the effect of these pre-sessional courses on test scores (Green, 2007) or the students’ interactions with native speakers outside of the classroom (Copland & Garton, 2011; Jarvis & Stakounis, 2010). The present study offers a different perspective on this matter, suggesting that the pre-sessional courses have a beneficial effect on the affective aspect of language learning, by decreasing FLA levels and increasing WTC.

Our finding that proficiency levels are unrelated to levels of FLA is not surprising, but can be explained by the fact that although the students’ levels were somewhat different they all had at least some knowledge of French. Some studies have reported a decrease of FLA at higher levels of proficiency (Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012; Liu, 2006; Gardner et al., 1977), while others have reported an increase of FLCA at higher levels of proficiency (Marcos-Llinás & Juan-Garau, 2009), for no obvious reason. It seems that once FL learners become authentic FL users a negative correlation appears between self-reported levels of proficiency and FLA (Dewaele, 2010, 2013b).

The finding that the size of difference in FLA between Times 1 and 2 was unrelated to both length of stay and proficiency level was surprising, as one could have expected that a slightly longer stay (an extra week or two) might have led to a slightly bigger reduction in FLA, since this is the general pattern between Times 1 and 2. The lack of a significant effect of proficiency level on FLA is linked to the non-linear amount of difference between groups, with the biggest decrease in the intermediate group and a smaller decrease among the other groups.

The same pattern emerged for WTC, but students who had stayed longer and were more proficient made bigger gains in WTC. One possible explanation is that the effect of the interaction between these two independent variables is different for FLA and WTC. While the low intermediate learners managed to reduce their FLA by the end of the course, they seem not yet to have picked up the confidence to engage easily in French interactions. In contrast, the intermediate learners had increased their WTC sharply, and the more advanced learners, especially after a longer course, felt both more able, and more willing, to communicate in French.

The significant effect of background on FLA at Times 1 and 2 and the significant effect on WTC at Time 1 (but not Time 2) shows that Asian learners were more anxious when using French and were less likely to use it at Time 1, though the difference in WTC had disappeared by Time 2. No information was available concerning the time the Asian students had already spent in Western academic environments but we can speculate that differences in classroom culture may have pushed anxiety levels up and may have limited the desire to use French in various interactions. Xiao (2006) looked at the perceptions and expectations of Chinese students in Irish English institutions and found that the Chinese students were not accustomed to the communicative approach, “which was deemed incompatible with their own conceptualization of what constitutes good learning and good teaching” (p. 5). They thought carefully before speaking English in class, and “were more concerned about their own linguistic accuracy or fearful of losing face” (p. 7). It is likely that our Asian students had similar perceptions at the start of the course, but these seem to have weakened by the end of the course, possibly because of the cultural heterogeneity of the student population. This suggests that the course was successful in preparing the students to participate in French academic and social life. Although the Asian students might still have been more anxious about the use of French, at least they were more willing to jump in.

7. Conclusion

Short and even very short (two weeks) pre-sessional courses at the beginning of a SA programme bring about significant changes in two crucial affective variables in target-language use: A drop in FLA and an increase in WTC. The pre-sessional course seems to boost learners’ self-confidence in using French as a tool for communication in a variety of modes and situations.

Individual differences in the absolute values of FLA were not linked to proficiency levels. The size of the drop in FLA between Times 1 and 2 was not linked to length of stay nor to proficiency level. However, both length of stay and proficiency level were found to have a significant positive effect on the amount of difference in WTC. Students’ background had a significant effect on FLA at Times 1 and 2 and on WTC at Time 1, with Asian students reporting higher levels of FLA and being less willing to use French at Time 1.

We thus conclude that the pre-sessional course at the start of the SA had a clear affective benefit for our participants: it had prepared them to participate in French social and academic life with more confidence.

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