

Chapter 4

Promoting oral proficiency gains in study abroad homestay placements

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Although the study abroad homestay context is commonly considered the ideal environment for language learners to develop oral proficiency, host-student interactions may be limited. The goal of the present study was to assess the impact of an intervention with host families designed to increase meaningful conversational exchange with hosted learners of Spanish, Mandarin, and Russian participating in semester-long study abroad programmes. The study used a pretest and posttest Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI) to investigate the oral proficiency gains of students whose families received the training intervention ($n = 87$) and students whose families did not ($n = 65$). Surveys of student and family participants examined target language use and attitudes about the homestay experience and the training. Students as a whole significantly improved their oral proficiency over the semester abroad, and though there was no statistically significant difference between groups, qualitative findings suggest that the intervention was well received and confirm the importance of encouraging study abroad learners to increase their engagement with hosts.

1. Introduction

Study abroad is often viewed as the ideal environment for aspiring language learners to develop their capabilities, particularly in the domain of speaking. A study abroad experience is assumed to provide a depth of immersion in the target language; further, placement with a host family is considered to be the optimal living arrangement to foster language gains because it provides continuous opportunities for target language input. The conventional wisdom about the guaranteed benefits of the homestay frequently touted by study abroad programmes and satisfied sojourners has been challenged, however, by a growing body of research on language learning in study abroad contexts. A number of investigations have found that living with a host family does not always produce extensive or linguistically rich interactions (Diao, Freed, & Smith, 2011; Iino, 2006; Kinginger, this volume;

O'Donnell, 2004; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004; Wilkinson, 1998) or expected language gains in contrast with learners in other living arrangements (Magnan & Back, 2007; Rivers, 1998; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009). Recent studies examining study abroad outcomes have identified the need for in-programme interventions to support language development by encouraging students to increase the quantity and quality of their engagement with native speakers (Cadd, 2012; Du, 2013; Kinginger, 2011) including homestay hosts (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2010; Martinsen, 2010; Shively, 2010; Vande Berg et al., 2009).

The present study sought to investigate the impact of structured training of host families designed to increase meaningful interaction with students. Using a pretest and posttest design with an experimental and control group of university students in one-semester study abroad programmes, the study examined the relationships between oral proficiency gains, target language use, and student and host beliefs about the study abroad experience. This research was motivated by the relative lack of empirical studies focusing on homestay interactions and behaviours of host families. Its results are intended to contribute to the development of in-programme interventions to promote student engagement with hosts.

The following literature review discusses findings on the development of oral proficiency during study abroad and outlines studies examining the relationship between language contact and speaking gains, as well as investigations of the homestay experience. Studies cited involve U.S. university students unless otherwise noted.

2. Background

2.1. Oral proficiency gains from study abroad

Researchers investigating oral proficiency development as a result of study abroad have frequently used such measures as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI), which are rated according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, a scale commonly used in U.S. contexts. Numerous studies using the OPI and the SOPI have documented gains in ACTFL ratings by groups of students in varied study abroad programmes, for example, learners of French (Magnan & Back, 2007) and German (Lindseth, 2010) after one semester abroad, learners of Portuguese after a six-week summer programme (Milleret, 1991), and learners of Spanish after summer and semester programmes (Mendelson, 2004a). Across studies, proficien-

cy gains were more common for students who entered the programme with lower proficiency levels. One shortcoming of the OPI and similar instruments for investigation of study abroad outcomes is that the rating scale may not be sensitive enough to measure the incremental progress made by learners during their time abroad, especially for those with higher proficiency levels and in shorter-term programmes (Freed, 1998; Llanes, 2011; Magnan & Back, 2007; Milleret, 1991).

In his examination of OPI outcomes of more than 5,000 U.S. undergraduate and graduate students of Russian who participated in study abroad programmes of varying durations between 1994 and 2009, Davidson (2010) found that gains were strongly correlated with longer lengths of stay and displayed a wide range of individual variation. Numerous studies have compared oral proficiency outcomes of students studying abroad with control groups at their home universities and found that abroad groups are more likely to make gains and make greater gains than those studying at home (Freed, 1995; Hernández, 2010a; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Vande Berg et al., 2009).

2.2. Language contact and development of speaking skills

To illuminate the results of early outcomes studies showing great differences in individual achievement, subsequent study abroad research attempted to relate student language gains to target language use. This trend has been accompanied by a movement to incorporate qualitative research on the nature of student interactions and social networks while abroad through the use of ethnographies, case studies, and mixed methods (Kinginger, 2011).

Many studies have used versions of the Language Contact Profile (LCP), a questionnaire asking students to report the average number of hours spent on various language activities, to quantify contact with the target language. Findings from studies using the LCP have not been consistent, however, in supporting the common assumption that increased contact leads to greater improvement in speaking performance. Yager (1998) found a significant positive correlation between amount of interactive contact and gains in speaking sample scores by learners of Spanish after two consecutive five-week summer sessions, and Hernández (2010b) found that total contact with the target language was a significant factor in SOPI gains by learners of Spanish after a semester abroad. By contrast, Mendelson (2004b) did not find any relationship between total, interactive, or non-interactive contact hours and OPI gains of learners of Spanish in summer and semester programmes. Segalowitz and Freed (2004) also concluded that total contact was not correlated with gains in oral performance after one semester for either at-home or study abroad learners of Spanish. Finally, Martinsen (2010) found that interaction in the target language

did not predict changes in oral skills by learners of Spanish after a six-week summer programme. Regarding time spent on specific language activities, Magnan and Back (2007) found that of the types of contact reported on the LCP, only speaking the target language with American classmates was significantly and negatively correlated with OPI gains for learners of French in a semester programme.

Mixed methods studies have sought to scrutinize the student experience abroad in combination with assessment of language learning outcomes. Isabelli-García's (2006) study showed gains in SOPI ratings by three of four Spanish learners after one semester abroad and suggested a positive relationship between development of oral proficiency and engagement in the local community. Spenader (2011) documented gains in OPI ratings over a year abroad by three of four high school and gap-year learners of Swedish and observed how divergent reactions to the host environment influenced language learning. In case studies of six students of French in a semester programme, Kinginger (2008) also interpreted individual differences in language growth to be linked to contact with and attitudes towards the host community. Du (2013) found that learners of Chinese in a semester programme who observed a language pledge performed significantly better on measures of fluency than peers who mainly spoke English outside of class. Dewey, Belnap and Hilstrom (2013) investigated the relationship between social network development and perceived gains in oral proficiency by learners of Arabic in a semester programme. Predictors of gains included greater intensity of friendships, more time spent speaking with people outside of established social circles, and, most strongly, higher levels of English language proficiency of Arab friends.

2.3. The homestay experience

Research examining the relationship between study abroad housing type and language learning outcomes has shown mixed results. One of the first studies to challenge common assumptions about the benefits of the homestay setting was Rivers' (1998) analysis of proficiency scores from more than 1,000 undergraduate and graduate learners of Russian over 20 years, which found that homestay participants were less likely than those who lived in dormitories to gain in speaking proficiency. In the French context, Magnan and Back (2007) did not find a difference in OPI gains between learners living with native speakers and those living with non-natives in a semester programme. By contrast, in their large-scale study of learners of seven target languages, Vande Berg et al. (2009) found an association approaching significance between homestay living and greater oral proficiency gains for students of less commonly taught languages, and Hernández (2010b) noted that 15 of 16 Spanish learners who

made gains on the SOPI after one semester abroad lived with a host family, while three of four who did not improve lived in apartments with non-native speakers.

Findings from studies investigating contact in the home and language growth also dispute the assumption that a homestay provides a linguistic advantage. Martinsen (2010) found no relationship between Spanish learners' evaluations of relationships with their host families and gains on an oral skills test after a six-week summer programme. In Segalowitz and Freed's (2004) study of learners of Spanish in a semester programme, there was a negative correlation between time speaking with the host family and gains in length of longest turn, suggesting that homestay interactions may have been mostly short and formulaic. Dewey (2008) found that vocabulary development by learners of Japanese in a semester study abroad programme was more highly correlated with time spent speaking with friends than speaking with host families. However, Vande Berg et al. (2009) reported a significant relationship between the amount of time spent with hosts and oral proficiency gains for students of French, German, and Spanish. Evidence that the homestay is not always a source of rich and pragmatically appropriate target language input can be seen in Iino's (2006) recordings of interactions at home, which demonstrated that family members used simplified language and provided limited corrective feedback to learners of Japanese in an eight-week summer programme.

Other research has reported largely positive participant perspectives on the homestay experience and its contributions to language learning. Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2002) interviewed host families in Spain and Mexico and found that while all considered the family to be a valuable linguistic resource for learners, many mentioned individual student differences as factors limiting interaction and thought that it was the student's responsibility to join in family activities. Allen and Herron (2003) reported that in evaluations of a six-week summer programme, 18 of 20 learners of French thought that living with a family provided a linguistic or cultural advantage and nine thought that speaking with family members helped improve their speaking skills. Schmidt-Rinehart and Knight (2004) found that among 90 learners of Spanish in summer and semester programmes, 85% felt comfortable with their host families by the end of the programme, although some students expressed disappointment at their level of interaction with and integration into the family. Questionnaires indicated that over 90% of students would recommend a homestay to others, and time spent with the family was significantly correlated with learning as much language as anticipated. Allen (2010) reported that 12 of 18 learners of French in a six-week summer programme expressed satisfaction with their homestay interaction in the target language in post-programme surveys. Using weekly questionnaires of 70 learners of French in a semester programme, Diao et al. (2011) found that stu-

dents spent significantly more time interacting with host families than with any other local group. At the end of the programme, nearly two-thirds of participants gave unequivocally positive responses about the contribution of the homestay setting to their language learning; in the 26% mixed and 10% negative responses, students discussed limited interaction, a sense of exclusion from conversations, and host use of English.

Studies looking in depth at the quality of individual students' connections with their host families support the conclusion that homestay, like study abroad more broadly, is a complex context in which great differences in outcomes can emerge. Wilkinson (1998) collected ethnographic data from seven learners of French in a summer programme and reported varying attitudes toward the homestay placement including feelings of discomfort and tension. O'Donnell (2004) found in a diary study of 22 learners of Spanish in a semester programme that students reported misunderstandings in conversations with their hosts and described interactions as focused on a narrow range of everyday topics. In a diary study of six learners of Russian over an academic year, Pellegrino Aveni (2005) detailed widely divergent perceptions of homestay experiences ranging from a context of comfort and support for linguistic development to situations of intimidation and isolation. Castañeda and Zirger's (2011) ethnographic study of eight learners of Spanish in a three-week programme in a small town found that participants viewed the host family as a key point of access to language practice and social networks.

3. Method

Within the wealth of literature on language development during study abroad, gaps have been identified that limit the potential generalization of findings. Researchers have noted that many of the studies involve a small number of participants (Diao et al., 2011; Llanes, 2011) and report student viewpoints to the exclusion of perspectives from members of the host community including families (Kinginger, 2013; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002). As Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2010) found in attempting to implement task-based assignments to increase student-family interactions in programmes for Spanish, there is a discrepancy between what students say they want to accomplish in a study abroad homestay experience and the behaviours they actually engage in, in the absence of additional programme and family support. The current study was designed to address these gaps by establishing programmatic and family responsibility for a language learning intervention and collecting data from a large population of study abroad learners of Spanish, Mandarin, and Russian and their host families.

This chapter addresses the following research questions:

1. What oral proficiency gains do study abroad participants in homestays attain after one semester, and is there a difference between gains made by participants whose families receive training on ways to extend conversation with students and those whose families do not?
2. Do student characteristics and target language use affect language gains?
3. What do students and their host families believe was effective about the homestay experience and the training intervention?

3.1. Participants

Between the (U.S.) spring 2011 and fall 2012 semesters, data were collected from 161 students enrolled in semester study abroad programmes and living in homestays in Lima, Peru and Valparaíso, Chile; Nanjing, Beijing, and Shanghai, China; and Saint Petersburg, Russia, as well as hosts of 89 participating students. The programmes were operated by the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE), a U.S.-based organization that accepts students from a variety of American colleges and universities. Coursework varied by programme and initial proficiency level, though all required classes in the target language.

Although programme staff assisted in recruiting for this study, there was no requirement for either students or host families to participate. Student assignment to the experimental or control group was conditioned by their hosts' willingness to attend one training session and complete pre- and post-surveys, and invitations to participate in the family training were staggered over the multiple semesters of data collection. Upon completion of all study requirements, students in both groups and hosts of experimental group students received compensation for their time.

For this analysis, nine students were excluded from the data set: seven who were not eligible due to previous participation by their host families, one who left the study abroad programme, and one who failed to complete all measures of the study. Table 1 shows the composition of the student sample by language and group.

Table 1. Student participants

Language	Experimental Group	Control Group	<i>N</i>
Spanish	31	22	53
Mandarin	26	23	49
Russian	30	20	50
Total	87	65	152

The final population included 92 females and 60 males between the ages of 18 and 45 who were currently or recently enrolled in university study, with an average age of 20.9 years ($SD = 2.30$). The population included a majority of students in their junior year as well as six sophomores, 33 seniors, two recent graduates, and one gap-year student. Participants reported a wide variety of majors, with 64% majoring in the target language or related area studies. The average length of prior formal study of the target language for all participants was 4.3 years ($SD = 2.89$), with a range from 0 to 15 years, and the experimental and control groups were evenly matched (4.2 and 4.4 years, respectively). English was the sole language used at home for 116 students; 33 students indicated that English and one or more additional languages were used at home. Other home languages listed by students included Cantonese, French, Haitian Creole, German, Hebrew, Jamaican Patois, Japanese, Korean, Malay, Mandarin, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, Swahili, Vietnamese, and Yu'pik. The three students who did not report English as their home language were all born and educated in the United States. While some learners were studying their home language (four Russian, three Mandarin, and two Spanish), their number was insufficient to constitute a separate group for statistical analysis, and their pretest oral proficiency ratings fell within the range of the overall participant population.

3.2. Treatment

The intervention entailed attendance by one adult member of each family hosting an experimental group student at one approximately hour-long training session intended to increase student-host conversational exchange. Families of control group students did not participate in this training.

Training sessions were conducted in the local language by the study abroad programme director or host family coordinator in accordance with training protocols developed by project staff. Programmes were encouraged to consider the needs of local families in arranging the training by, for example, holding multiple sessions and incorporating refreshments. Training sessions were scheduled to occur after completion of pretest data collection in the fourth week of each semester.

Topics covered during training included the critical role of the host family in helping students improve their speaking skills, contexts in which conversations typically occur at home, and strategies to prompt students to talk more such as asking about an event in the recent past, avoiding structures that allow 'yes/no' replies, and using follow-up questions. The session provided time for participants to reflect on past hosting experiences, brainstorm possible questions and other means to draw out students, practise strategies, and ask questions. Participants were requested to share what they learned at the training with other family members but not to discuss its content with their students.

3.3. Instruments

Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview. The SOPI, a 45-minute tape-mediated test developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics (Stansfield, 1996), was administered as a pretest and posttest to measure student oral proficiency gains. Test takers follow instructions in a printed booklet while listening to an audio file that delivers 15 speaking tasks (13 for Russian). The test is designed to elicit speech samples rated according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL, 1999), with an algorithm used to calculate a global rating from individual task ratings. Possible SOPI ratings range from Below Novice High to Superior (though a slightly modified scale was applied here, see Table 2 below).

Student surveys. Surveys were completed in English by students at the beginning and end of their semester abroad. The pre-survey asked about language and travel background, prior use of the target language, and anticipated use of the target language during the semester. The post-survey asked about actual target language use, including language activities with the host family, and evaluation of the homestay experience. Questions about target language use were adapted from the LCP (Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, & Halter, 2004). In contrast to the LCP, students were asked to report target language activities in hours per week rather than days per week and hours per day, and to consider typical hours spent in the previous month instead of the whole semester. These modifications were intended to streamline the surveys and encourage greater accuracy of reporting.

Host family surveys. Surveys translated into the local language were completed by a representative from each family hosting an experimental group student at the beginning and end of the student semester. The pre-survey asked about previous experiences hosting foreign students and motivations for hosting. The post-survey asked about language activities with the hosted student and evaluation of the training.

3.4. Data collection procedures

SOPI and survey data were collected at the beginning of the study abroad programme once students had begun their homestays (approximately weeks 2-3) and again near the end of the semester (around week 15). Members of the U.S.-based project team visited each site at the start of the first semester of data collection to review instruments and procedures with programme staff to ensure fidelity of implementation.

SOPIs were administered in a language lab or in classrooms using digital recorders at sites without access to lab facilities. Surveys were completed online by the majority of participants, and printed versions were made available to those for

whom Internet access was problematic. Eight Russian hosts reported post-survey responses by phone to the local family coordinator to ensure that responses were collected on schedule.

3.5. Data analysis procedures

SOPi ratings were assigned by trained raters familiar with the test format and the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. All Mandarin and Russian SOPi and over one third of Spanish SOPi were double-rated to establish inter-rater reliability. Moderate agreement between raters was found, with a linear weighted kappa of .55. Ratings that did not agree were adjudicated by two members of the project team using close examination of individual task ratings and rater comments to determine a single final rating. To analyse SOPi gains, ACTFL level ratings were converted to the values shown in Table 2, in line with conventions used in previous research (Dandonoli & Henning, 1990; Kenyon & Tschirner, 2000; Vande Berg et al., 2009). Ratings of Below Novice High were considered equivalent to Novice Mid for the purposes of this analysis, and there were no Superior ratings in the data set.

Table 2. Numerical conversions of ratings

ACTFL Rating	Conversion
Novice Mid	0.3
Novice High	0.8
Intermediate Low	1.1
Intermediate Mid	1.3
Intermediate High	1.8
Advanced Low	2.1
Advanced Mid	2.3
Advanced High	2.8

Analysis of survey data combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. Statistical analyses for factors affecting SOPi gains are presented in detail in the next section. Responses to open-ended questions were qualitatively coded using a system of open coding evolving from the data gathered (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Responses were first translated into English as necessary. Two members of the project team subsequently reviewed and coded survey responses independently, then compared codes to create a unified list and re-coded the responses using this final coding scheme.

4. Results

4.1. Oral proficiency gains

Gains in oral proficiency were analyzed for a total of 149 participants for whom pretest and posttest SOPI ratings were available; pretest SOPI files were missing for two students and not ratable for one student. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for student SOPI ratings by group. An independent samples *t* test indicated that there was no significant difference between the experimental and control groups at the time of pretest, both in the aggregate and when categorized by language of study, suggesting that the groups were evenly matched.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for pre and post SOPI ratings by group

Group	Administration	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Experimental (<i>n</i> =86)	Pre	0.3	2.8	1.31	.47
	Post	0.8	2.8	1.60	.43
Control (<i>n</i> =63)	Pre	0.3	2.8	1.52	.51
	Post	1.1	2.8	1.78	.46

Table 4. Pre and post SOPI ratings by language

Rating	Mandarin		Russian		Spanish	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Novice Mid	8 (16.3%)	-	-	-	-	-
Novice High	1 (2.0%)	1 (2.0%)	5 (10.0%)	1 (2.0%)	-	-
Intermediate Low	16 (32.7%)	8 (16.3%)	16 (32.0%)	5 (10.0%)	11 (22.0%)	4 (8.0%)
Intermediate Mid	14 (28.6%)	13 (26.5%)	23 (46.0%)	30 (60.0%)	4 (8.0%)	5 (10.0%)
Intermediate High	6 (12.2%)	11 (22.4%)	6 (12.0%)	10 (20.0%)	17 (34.0%)	12 (24.0%)
Advanced Low	4 (8.2%)	9 (18.4%)	-	4 (8.0%)	14 (28.0%)	18 (36.0%)
Advanced Mid	-	7 (14.3%)	-	-	1 (2.0%)	8 (16.0%)
Advanced High	-	-	-	-	3 (6.0%)	3 (6.0%)
Total	49		50		50	

Table 4 shows the distribution of SOPI ratings by language. Learners of Mandarin were most likely to begin their programmes at low levels of proficiency, with the majority of student ratings at the levels of Intermediate Low and Intermediate Mid and a number of students starting at Novice Mid. The majority of Russian learners also began their programmes with ratings in the range of Intermediate Low to Intermediate Mid. The Spanish learners as a group began their programmes at a higher level, with most ratings at the Intermediate High and Advanced Low levels.

Table 5 shows student SOPI gains by group. All participants maintained or improved their oral proficiency ratings over the course of their programmes.

Table 5. SOPI gains by group

Group	No Change	Gain of 1 Sublevel	Gain of 2 Sublevels	Gain of 3 Sublevels	Total
Experimental	23 (27%)	49 (57%)	13 (15%)	1 (1%)	86
Control	20 (32%)	35 (56%)	7 (11%)	1 (2%)	63
Total	43	84	20	2	149

A paired samples *t* test showed that participants experienced significant gains in their oral proficiency ratings, $t(148)=-13.23$, $p<.001$, $r=.74$; however, there was no significant difference in gains between groups. An ANCOVA comparing the two groups using the post-SOPI as dependent variable and pre-SOPI as covariate was not significant, $F(1)=0.202$, $p=.654$. Similarly, analyses of the gains by language did not show any significant differences between the experimental and control groups. Therefore, in response to the first research question, participants did make gains in oral proficiency after one semester abroad, but there was no significant difference in gains made by participants whose families received the training intervention and those whose families did not.

4.2. Factors affecting language gains

The second research question addressed how student characteristics and interaction with the target language affected oral proficiency gains. Given the structure of the ACTFL levels, there is not a wide range of potential growth outcomes for students over one semester; indeed, the majority of study participants gained just one sublevel in SOPI ratings or made no gains. For this analysis, students were divided into groups of “gainers” and “non-gainers” and growth was analysed using binary logistic regression with separate models testing variables related to student characteristics, target language contact, and host family language activities. For each model, independent variables were first tested for multicollinearity and determined to be appropriate for inclusion.

The student background variables analysed were home language (monolingual English or multilingual), amount of prior target language study (0 to 15 years), pretest SOPI rating, and gender. Table 6 shows the significant results of the logistic regression, Nagelkerke $R^2=.109$.

Table 6. Logistic regression of student characteristics predicting gains

Factor	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	Odds Ratio
Pre SOPI	-1.316*	.405	.27

Notes. *B*: unstandardized estimates; *S.E.*: standard error; * $p<.05$

Table 6 indicates that the only student background variable that predicts language gains is starting proficiency level, with students more likely to gain if they began at a lower level.

Total weekly hours spent on target language reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities as reported in student post-surveys were entered into a logistic regression; however, none emerged as a significant predictor of language gains. Students also reported weekly hours spent using the target language while participating in language partner exchanges, volunteer activities, work, classes outside the academic programme, and extracurricular organizations including sports teams. Total weekly hours spent on each type of activity were considered in a logistic regression with significant results shown in Table 7, Nagelkerke $R^2=.059$. The only student activity variable that contributed significantly to language gains was time engaged in a language exchange, with more time spent on language exchanges resulting in greater gains in proficiency.

Table 7. Logistic regression of student activities predicting gains

Factor	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	Odds Ratio
Language Exchange	.338*	.155	1.402

Notes. *B*: unstandardized estimates; *S.E.*: standard error; * $p<.05$

The final logistic regression examined the frequency with which families undertook various language activities with their hosted students. The post-survey asked families about the frequency with which they corrected student speech, discussed grammar rules, talked about idioms, asked the student questions, read the student's writings, watched television and films together, and discussed current events. Table 8 shows the significant results of the logistic regression, Nagelkerke $R^2=.069$.

Table 8. Logistic regression of family behaviours predicting gains

Factor	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	Odds Ratio
Discussion of idioms	-.43*	.22	0.65

Notes. *B*: unstandardized estimates; *S.E.*: standard error; * $p<.05$

As Table 8 demonstrates, the only variable that contributed significantly to the model was the frequency of discussing idioms. However, this relationship was negative, indicating that the more often a family reported they discussed idioms, the less likely the student was to gain on the SOPI.

4.3. Participant perspectives

Open-ended questions at the conclusion of the post-surveys were designed to elicit attitudinal feedback from participants. Table 9 lists coded responses to the student survey question “What could your host family have done to help you learn more [target language]?” by group.

Table 9. What host family could have done (5 or more responses)

Response	Experimental Group (n=64)	Control Group (n=45)	Total (n=109)
They were great	14 (21.9%)	13 (28.9%)	27 (24.8%)
Correct me more	9 (14.1%)	8 (17.8%)	17 (15.6%)
Interact with me more	10 (15.6%)	4 (8.9%)	14 (12.8%)
Spend more time with me	6 (9.4%)	1 (2.2%)	7 (6.4%)
Be more patient with my speech	5 (7.8%)	2 (4.4%)	7 (6.4%)
Ask me more questions	3 (4.7%)	4 (8.9%)	7 (6.4%)
Don't speak English/Use the target language	3 (4.7%)	4 (8.9%)	7 (6.4%)
Initiate more conversations	3 (4.7%)	4 (8.9%)	7 (6.4%)
Involve me in activities outside the home	5 (7.8%)	1 (2.2%)	6 (5.5%)
Use less colloquial speech	4 (6.3%)	2 (4.4%)	6 (5.5%)
I should have done more	4 (6.3%)	1 (2.2%)	5 (4.6%)
Watch TV/movies together	3 (4.7%)	2 (4.4%)	5 (4.6%)

Note: Responses could be coded in multiple categories.

The most popular responses did not vary between groups, with positive comments about host family contributions most common for both groups, followed by requests for more correction of student speech. Proportionally more experimental than control group students requested that their families interact with them more and spend more time with them, while a greater proportion of the control group students, whose families did not receive training on extending conversations through the use of questions, wanted their families to ask more questions and initiate more conversations, as well as use the target language rather than English. Five students assumed responsibility for limitations to their language learning, explaining that they should have engaged more with the family. Other responses provided by multiple students included reviewing assignments, speaking more slowly, doing activities together, and forcing the student to speak (4 responses each), as well as not treating the student as a financial exchange (3 responses). Four students reported a desire for a different composition of host family (more than one member or a sibling of similar age).

Table 10 shows coded responses to the family survey question “How could the training be more effective and useful to you as a host?”

Table 10. How could training be more effective? (2 or more responses)

Response	Total ($n=53$)
Training is beneficial	30
It is good to exchange ideas in a group	6
Have more sessions	5
Success depends on student characteristics	5
Advise taking students on outings	3
Have longer training	2
Differentiate training based on student proficiency	2

Note: Responses could be coded in multiple categories.

As shown in Table 10, host families had a positive response to the training session and particularly praised the group structure as helpful for exchanging ideas. All suggestions for changes reflected a desire for expanded training, including having additional, longer, or differentiated sessions. Five host family participants noted that the success of the strategies discussed during training would depend on student characteristics such as openness.

5. Discussion

The finding that study participants as a group demonstrated significant oral proficiency gains as measured by the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines after a semester abroad is consistent with previous research (see, e.g., Hernández, 2010b; Lindseth, 2010; Magnan & Back, 2007; Mendelson, 2004a). This study further aimed to investigate whether a host family intervention would result in increased oral proficiency gains; however, results demonstrated that students whose families received training on extending conversation in the home did not outperform students whose families were not trained.

Additional study findings point to important considerations for study abroad programmes to promote oral proficiency gains. First, students should be encouraged to participate in language partner exchanges because this type of target language contact was found to be a significant predictor of gains. Second, the relationship between initial proficiency levels and language gains supports the idea that students of lower levels can benefit from a study abroad experience. This finding is not surprising given previous study abroad research that has found students at lower levels make greater gains as discriminated by the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (Freed, 1998; Llanes, 2011; Lindseth, 2010; Magnan & Back, 2007; Milleret, 1991). It also supports the call in the literature for other measures that might better capture progress made by study abroad learners, particularly those who begin at higher levels (Freed, 1998; Llanes, 2011). It is unclear from the limited survey data why host family discussion of idioms would also be a negative predictor of gains; perhaps this type of explicit language instruction is not the most beneficial target language input for learners in the homestay. Instead of replicating classroom roles and discourse patterns, which Wilkinson (2002) found to be typical of student conversations with their hosts, families could better stimulate student language development by providing greater exposure to their natural native speaker conversational norms.

Finally, the open-ended comments provided by both students and host families in post-surveys affirm both the objective and the design of the training intervention. Families clearly welcomed this additional content provided by the programme, as more than half of respondents took time to describe how they found the session to be beneficial and 17% requested expansions to the training. Student suggestions that their family could have helped them learn more language by increasing interaction and time spent with them as well as asking more questions and initiating more conversations also validated the content of the training.

6. Limitations

Within the research design, the study has some necessary limitations. First, findings related to target language use are based on self-reported survey data which gauges only the quantity of target language contact and may not accurately or fully reflect what occurred while abroad. It is hoped that recordings of homestay conversations made by a subset of students will provide evidence of the quality of typical student-host interactions. Second, as noted in other research, the SOPI rating scale may not be fine-grained enough to discern progression made during a semester abroad, especially for students who begin with higher proficiency levels. To address this limitation, SOPI responses will be transcribed so that pretest and posttest performances can be compared using other metrics. Finally, the precise content of the training intervention could not be controlled across sites and times of implementation. This degree of flexibility was appropriate, however, to provide for a design that could be replicated by other study abroad programmes.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to add to the research on oral proficiency development in study abroad homestays by investigating an intervention designed to increase student interaction with hosts implemented through training of families. Perhaps because the training consisted of a single brief session, the intervention was too limited to result in statistically significant differences between groups. Further research could examine the effects of expanded training based on student and host suggestions given in surveys and findings from language socialization research (C. Kinginger, personal communication, April 12, 2013). It could also be beneficial to provide training to students to encourage them to participate in conversations at home and consider their responsibility to engage in family activities, which might address the discrepancy in student and host perspectives on who should initiate those efforts (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004). Future studies should also consider additional means of assessing oral proficiency gains as well as gains in other language skills. Subsequent phases of this project plan to pursue in-depth analysis of the survey data to consider other factors that promote or discourage oral proficiency gains, examine what recorded conversation data reveals about target language use in the homestay, and review transcriptions of SOPIs for language growth not discerned in holistic ratings. It is hoped that these areas of research will inform stakeholders about how to optimize the language learning benefits of study abroad homestays.

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