



The Impact of Cultural Contact on Exchange Students' Foreign Language Development

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i2.1725>

APA Citation: EL-Asri, S. & El Karfa, A. (2024). The Impact of Cultural Contact on Exchange Students' Foreign Language Development. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*. 6(2),523-532. <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i2.1725>

Received:

25/04/2024

Accepted:

15/06/2024

Keywords:

cultural student exchange, cultural contact, language skills, language fluency, language proficiency.

Abstract

It is well-known that participating in a cultural exchange program brings about many personal, social, academic, and professional benefits for the exchange student. One of those benefits is improving the student's foreign language. The current study, therefore, aims to investigate how cultural exchange student programs lead to the improvement of students' language skills, in particular, and overall language fluency and proficiency, in general. The data was gathered through a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. 16 Moroccan exchange alumni from the YES (Youth Exchange Scholarship) program were recruited using snowball sampling to take part in the study and evaluate how their proficiency in English has progressed thanks to the ten months of cultural exchange they have spent in the host country and the most helpful activities that helped them improve their language skills. Then seven of them were selected to give more insights into this language improvement. The data from the questionnaire and the interviews showed that students relied on different activities to further improve their productive and receptive skills making use of the contact they had with native speakers in the host country. Moreover, the data revealed a significant improvement in the students' language proficiency and language fluency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Participation in cultural exchange programs provides different growth opportunities for students at all personal, academic, and professional levels. Hence, such exchange programs have proved to be "efficient, meaningful, and valuable for students" (Hien, 2022, p. 156) as they "may contribute in large to positive and lasting life changes" (Sustarsic, 2020, p. 914). One of those noticeable changes in exchange programs is the development of foreign language competency; a development that has been constantly reported by the literature (Leutwyler, 2014; Dressler et al., 2021). This development comes mostly as a result of the opportunities students are provided with to make use of the language and the sense of accomplishment that serves as a motivational incentive for them to become proficient in the language (Wang, 2013).

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Moreover, students join the exchange program knowing that they will have plenty of opportunities to practice the language as, in this case English, takes the main role of communication (Takehara et al., 2018) as they will be immersed in real-life situations in which they will use only English (Berg et al., 2012), and according to Ortega Islas (2018) even for those who are already fluent in the host country language “studying in another country increases considerably the language practice in the everyday life by being surrounded by native speakers not only from the host country but also from other countries with the same language.”

In this regard, language proficiency can help increase sociocultural adaptation as it facilitates students' engagement in cultural learning opportunities (Wilson et al., 2013) and reduces sociocultural adjustment problems (Ward & Kennedy, 1993, as cited in Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Masgoret and Ward (2006) further advocate that mastery and knowledge of the language spoken in the host culture plays a ‘central role’ within the cultural learning process as it is “the primary medium through which cultural information is communicated” (p.63).

The current paper, in this context, aims to explore how cultural exchange and cultural contact can help improve students' language proficiency and fluency by unveiling the most helpful activities in enhancing students' language skills based on the language learning experiences of young cultural exchange returnees during their exchange experience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Cultural Exchange Programs

The experience of exchange and study abroad programs is widely regarded as a necessary bonus for the academic and personal development of the student by many academic institutions in the 21st century (Gaia, 2015). It also provides students with ‘multifaceted learning perspectives’ that help them explore and prepare for their future careers (Dressler et al., 2021). It also serves as an empowerment tool for students to “find common ground, share ideas, and build friendships with peers and adults in the host country” (Besony et al., 2015).

Most importantly, such programs provide one of the best ways to practice a language as it puts the student in direct contact with native speakers of the language in the host country (Ortega Islas, 2018; Suryanto et al., 2022). Through these exchange programs, students “can expect exposure to foreign languages and cultures, and possibly have opportunities to learn the language and immerse themselves in cultural experiences” (Costello, 2015, p.50). This type of contact is believed to reinforce and enhance language proficiency and communication competency which, in turn, stimulates effective intercultural relations (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). In this context, the study can be situated within educational theories that view this type

of language proficiency development as a part of transformative learning theory (Coleman, 2013, as cited in Ji, 2020).

2.2. Developing Students' Foreign Language Proficiency

According to Campbell (2016), integrating into the host community and developing social relationships with native speakers and communicating with them is one of the best ways to learn a foreign language. Many students undergo the experience of exchange to improve their language skills and communication abilities. This has been confirmed by Llanes et al. (2016) who confirm that students opt for exchange to acquire the language in general and develop their oral skills in particular. Hence, the development includes improving the four main language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing as well as developing the students' communicative abilities. This improvement happens as mentioned earlier thanks to the direct interaction of students with their host community and the daily usage of language (Suryanto et al., 2022). In this sense, the learning process is fully individual as "what is learned is learned through the youngster's direct interaction with the physical environment" (Tomasello et al., 1993, p.496). Moreover, language development is considered one of the most measurable variables that results from study abroad experiences (DeGraaf et al., 2013). However, even though developing students' language proficiency is considered by some as a complementary component of sociocultural adaptation, which refers to "the ability to "fit in" or negotiate effective interactions in a new cultural milieu," it is still a requirement for better social interaction which constitutes a great part of the construct of sociocultural adaptation (Masgoret & Ward, 2006).

2.3. Previous Studies on Foreign Language Learning among Exchange Students

There is ample evidence in the literature on the successful learning and development of foreign languages, namely English, during and after student exchange. This language learning is influenced by several factors. For instance, in a study done by Spender (2011), he found that students' language learning has been influenced by relationships with host country nationals through an acculturation process. Similarly, various studies (e.g., Berg et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2016; Suryanto et al., 2022) found out that engaging in interactive real-life situations during exchange provides students with enough opportunities to practice the language. In a more recent study, Sustarsic (2020) has revealed that some of the immediate impacts of cultural exchange include also enhanced English language skills.

However, although these studies have been successful in highlighting one of the primary benefits of cultural and international exchange, there is a noticeable paucity in the level of activities opted for by students to improve their language skills and overall language

proficiency. Hence, the present study contributes significantly to the body of literature related to foreign language development during exchange.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

3.1. Research Questions

This research paper aims to investigate the experiences of exchange students in order to explore the best activities that they engage in the real context of the target language to improve their language skills and increase their language proficiency. To achieve these objectives, the current study focuses on the following questions:

- What language skills do exchange students most improve after their exchange?
- What are the activities most helpful in improving exchange students' language skills?
- How fluent are exchange students in the host language pre and post-exchange?

It is hypothesized that cultural exchange may likely lead to improved language skills and increased language proficiency.

3.2. Participants

For questionnaire data collection, following the snowball sampling method, a total of 16 Moroccan alumni of the YES (Youth Exchange Scholarship) program were recruited in the study. The participants had the chance to benefit from a ten-month educational and cultural exchange program fully funded by the U.S. Department of State that targets high school students between the ages of 15 to 17 (U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Morocco, 2023) which makes the selection of this group highly significant. The participants were 14 females (75%) and 4 males (25%) who ranged in age from under 20 to above 30. They belonged to different educational levels: 6 were high school students (37.5%), 5 were master students (31.3%), 3 were Bachelor students (18.8%) and 2 were PhD students (12.5%). For the interview data collection, 7 participants were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews; they belonged to different exchange years: 2 were 2022 alumni, 2 were 2019 alumni, 1 was a 2010 alumna, and 2 were 2009 alumni.

3.3. Research Design

The current study followed a mixed-method research approach making use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Statistical data was obtained through the quantitative method whereas qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews.

3.4. Instruments

To collect the quantitative data, after eliciting demographic data, including gender, age, and level of education; the questionnaire included items that targeted language improvement

and fluency of students pre and post-exchange. It included 8 main items; 4 items targeted the activities used to enhance language skills, and 4 items were used to reflect on the returnee’s personal enhancement at the level of language proficiency before and after the exchange.

Then, in order to have in-depth qualitative data, the semi-structured interviews included questions that targeted this language enhancement, and the language skills most improved during the exchange.

3.5. Data Analysis

The collected data from the questionnaire was run by SPSS software version 26.0 and Microsoft Excel to analyze and interpret the research results. As for the semi-structured interviews, they were collected and themed according to the guiding research questions.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first question aimed to identify the language skill(s) exchange students improve in most during their exchange. To answer this question, they were first asked to report on the language skills they were best prepared to perform and least prepared to perform before embarking on their exchange journey. As can be shown in Figure One, an equal number of respondents (28.9%) reported that they were best prepared to perform the speaking, listening, and reading whereas a majority of 64.7% reported that they were least prepared to perform the writing skill. Speaking was also absent from the skills least prepared to perform unlike reading and listening (17.6% for each) which indicates that the respondents had a good command of this skill in comparison to writing.

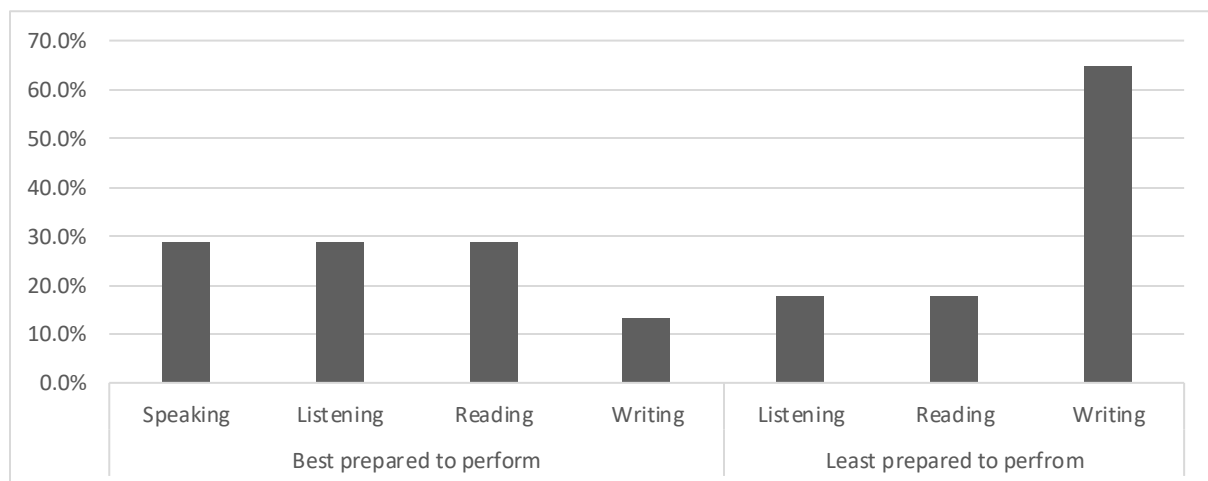


Figure 1: *The language skills respondents were best prepared to perform and least prepared to perform pre-exchange*

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The second question aimed to explore the activities most helpful from the point of view of exchange students in developing their receptive and productive language skills. The results as presented in Table One show that for listening, 43.75% of respondents voted that the activity most helpful to them was listening to the language spoken at school with teachers and classmates followed by over 30% who voted for listening to the language spoken in informal conversational situations with native speakers; in contrast, over 68% of respondents voted that speaking the language spoken in informal conversational situations with native speakers. have helped them improve their speaking skill. For writing, a majority of 80% reported that writing essays and other formal assignments for the class has been helpful for them in improving their writing skills. As for writing, over 60% of respondents have chosen reading literature as the activity most helpful in improving their reading skills.

Table 1:*The activities used by respondents to improve their language skills during the exchange*

Language Skill	Activities	Value
Listening	Listening to the language spoken at school with native teachers and classmates.	43.75%
	Listening to the language produced by different media	25%
	Listening to the language spoken in informal conversational situations with native speakers	31.25%
Speaking	Speaking the language spoken at school with native teachers and classmates	31.25%
	Speaking the language spoken in informal conversational situations with native speakers	68.75%
Writing	Writing essays and other formal assignment for class	80%
	Writing emails and letters	13.3%
	Journaling and diary entries	6.7%
Reading	Reading textbook materials in class	25%
	Reading emails and material on the internet	12.5%
	Reading literature	62.5%

The third question aimed to identify how fluent exchange students become post-exchange in comparison to how fluent they are pre-exchange. Figure 2 below clearly shows a significant improvement in almost all of the participating students' level of fluency as perceived by them

pre and post-exchange which indicates how cultural exchange can lead to developing students' language proficiency.

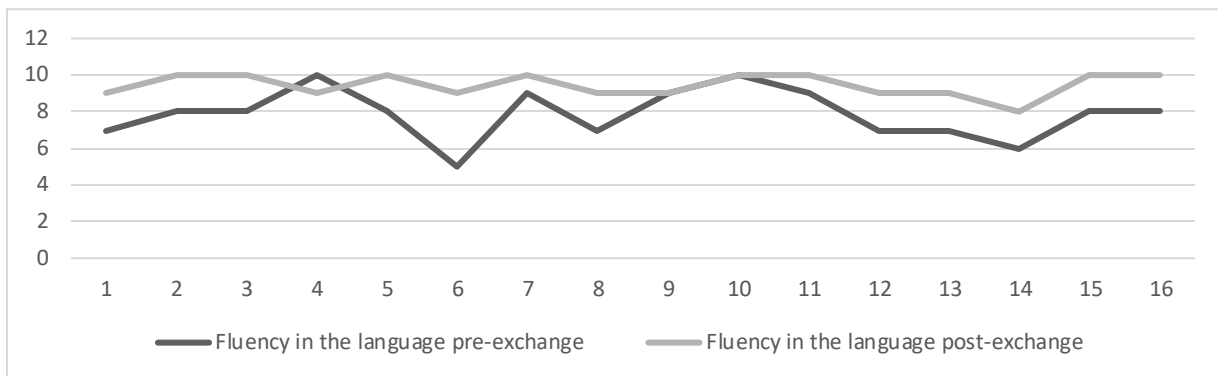


Figure 2: Comparison between respondents' language fluency pre-exchange and post-exchange

The above results have been supported by testimonies from the 7 selected interviewees post their exchange experience concerning how well their language skills and language fluency have improved during their exchange experience as most of them reported how they have become proficient and fluent in the language and even become native-like at the level of pronunciation. Some of them have even highlighted how their mastery of the language has led to influencing their career choices. The following are some of the interview extracts as stated by the interviewees.

“Academically, my English is way better and much more articulated. One of the things that I still see is the way everyone still says that my English and accent are impeccable. I was lucky enough to really hon in on my English and get that American-sounding accent which I still use today at my job since I work for an American company,” Interviewee One.

“Mastering English has allowed me to tap into many exceptional opportunities. A career that heavily relies on mastery of the English language,” Interviewee Two.

“My exchange experience has also helped me to improve my English and enhance my language skills.” Interviewee Three.

“Academically, I enhanced my language skills significantly, especially in writing and speaking,” Interviewee Seven.

To sum up, both results from the questionnaires and the interviews clearly indicate that though most students were well-prepared to perform the four language skills, especially

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speaking, they still made use of various helpful activities in different (formal and informal) situations and contexts with native speakers. to further improve their language skills. Moreover, the results show that participating in cultural exchange leads to a positive influence on students' overall language proficiency and acquired fluency. These results are consistent with results from previous studies that shed light on how cultural exchange helps students improve their mastery of the host language (e.g. Llanes et al. 2016; Ortega Islas, 2018; Suryanto et al, 2022). Furthermore, Results from the interviews have also shown how this increased fluency in English has greatly influenced some of the participants' career choices.

4.1. Limitations and Recommendations

The small scope of the is considered on limitation of the study despite the positive results it has yielded as evidence would be more convincing if a larger scale study is conducted. Another limitation is that the current study tracks the development of exchange students in the four skills at face value. Hence, further studies can provide in-depth tracking of the development of each skill separately throughout the exchange experience duration.

5. CONCLUSION

The current paper was an attempt to explore how cultural exchange leads to students' language skills development and language proficiency and fluency by investigating the most helpful activities that exchange students can participate in so as to hone their language abilities. The results confirm how engaging in activities such as listening and speaking in both formal and informal conversations with native speakers have improved their receptive language skills, and how writing essays and another formal assignments for class and reading literature have helped to further improve their productive skills. The study also shows a significant change in most of the student's level of fluency in the host country's language pre and post-exchange as well as mastering a native-like accent.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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