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## **Do students improve their German vowel pronunciation during study abroad? It's a matter of perspective**

Language immersion is commonly regarded as the most effective method for second language (L2) learning and it has typically been supposed that study abroad provides the best immersion context (Freed et al., 2004). Previous studies appear to support this assumption demonstrating that students on study abroad make more improvements than those who studied at home in language classes (cf. O'Brien, 2004; Stevens, 2001). The basis of comparison for these studies has typically been to compare the productions of L2 learners against those of native speakers since the assumed goal is to produce the L2 sounds in a more native-like manner by the end of the immersion experience.

Although study abroad programs have generally been shown to lead to improvements, many questions still remain about the nature of these improvements. The current study addresses several such questions. First, can students improve their L2 production of the German front rounded vowels during a short term study abroad? Second, does proficiency level impact the improvements subjects make, i.e., do less advanced learners make more improvements than more advanced learners since they have more room for improvement? And concomitantly, what is the nature of these improvements? To answer these questions, we recorded 23 students reading 10 sentences each for the 4 rounded German umlaut vowels at the start and end of an 11 week study abroad. Subjects were assigned to one of three groups, namely beginner, intermediate and advanced, based on the proficiency level of the courses to which they were assigned during their instruction at the Goethe Institute (using proficiency guidelines of the Common European Framework). Vowels were analyzed acoustically and compared against those of four native German speakers.

Results provide insights into the nature of pronunciation changes. When L2 learners' productions were compared against those of native speakers, subjects appeared to actually get worse in their pronunciation overall by the end of study abroad. In other words, formant measurements for subjects across groups tended to become less like those of native speakers overall if they underwent any changes. However, when productions of vowels were compared against one another, i.e., /y/ versus /Y/, subjects demonstrated an emergence of new vowel contrasts, which is in itself a manner of improvement. In this aspect, advanced learners made more improvements in establishing new vowel contrasts. Thus, although subjects did not improve in producing the vowels in a more native-like manner, the results show that learners nevertheless improved by developing new phonemic contrasts between vowels, even if those contrasts were produced acoustically in a different vowel space than that used in the vowel production of native speakers.