Oral proficiency gains of study abroad students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

A matched samples analysis

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This article presents a comparative study of the oral English proficiency gains of two groups of students, namely mobility students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic ($n = 26$), who were matched for background variables such as pre-departure oral proficiency, duration of stay, accommodation, and destination. Oral proficiency was measured before and after the stay using the Oral Proficiency Interview by Computer (OPIc). Results indicate that students staying abroad before the outbreak of the pandemic made significant progress while students staying abroad during the pandemic did not. Student comments suggest that this may be related to the measures taken to contain the pandemic, limiting opportunities for social networking and interaction. However, this impression could not be supported by statistical analyses of the self-reported number of social contacts or amount of English language use. The results point to the need for consideration of qualitative aspects of social interactions and language use and a more frequent and situated assessment of these.

Keywords: oral proficiency development, language use, social contacts, COVID-19, matched-pairs, higher education

1. Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. This had a serious impact on education in general and international student mobility in particular. Many of the measures implemented to restrict the spread of the virus affected international students, such as the closure of borders,

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the suspension of air traffic, orders to stay at home, the transition to remote teaching as well as the almost complete suspension of public life. An International Association of Universities (IAU) survey (Marinoni et al., 2020) showed that in Europe, almost all participating higher education institutions (95%) reported an impact on international student mobility. International students were grounded at their own or foreign institutions; some decided to interrupt their study programs while others were forced to do so because student exchange programs had been cancelled (Marinoni et al., 2020, p. 27). While the early emergency measures during the first wave probably had the greatest impact on social and campus life, which also affected the sheer number of mobility students enrolled at universities, the measures during later waves of the pandemic were less severe and student mobility slowly regained ground.

After the end of the first wave of the pandemic in late summer 2020, travel became possible again, and for a while, study abroad (SA) seemed to return to a new normal. Restrictions were gradually lifted in many places and students started or continued their SA programs. Nonetheless, these students embarked on their SA journey at a time when vaccinations were not yet available and the development of the pandemic was still uncertain. The COVID-related measures that were still in place varied across place and time, but they primarily entailed the maintenance of remote teaching, the cancellation of on-campus activities and events, restrictions on social gatherings, as well as closure of certain businesses. These measures can be assumed to have influenced students' lived experiences, in particular, their social and cultural integration in the host society making it more difficult for SA students to form new social contacts, a prime aim of SA experiences. Pre-COVID literature suggests that the establishment of social contacts during SA is an important predictor for the amount of target language (TL) practice and TL development of students (see 2.2). Hence, it seems plausible that the pandemic might also have had an effect on SA students' TL development as a result of restricting the possibilities for forming new social contacts.

To date, however, research on the effects of COVID on SA has rarely investigated how the pandemic affected the social integration (for exceptions see Bleichenbacher et al., under review; Devlin & Magliacane, 2021; Heinzmann et al., 2023) or TL development of international students (Arvidsson, 2023). Instead, it has focused on the impact of the pandemic on students' mental health and wellbeing (e.g., Hari et al., 2021; Mbous et al., 2024). The present paper tries to address this research gap by comparing the oral proficiency development of SA students before and during the pandemic and relating it to social contacts and language use. The study comprises students learning English in Anglophone and non-Anglophone host countries.

2. Literature review

2.1 Impact of SA on second language development

Since its early stages, much research into SA has focused on measuring outcomes in terms of second language (L2) development and has accumulated evidence for the effectiveness of SA for language learning. The reviews by Llanes (2011) and Borràs and Llanes (2021) testified that studying abroad is effective for the development of global foreign language proficiency as well as different linguistic skills.

Studies looking into the lexical development of SA students in comparison with at-home (AH) learners unanimously suggest that the SA context benefits vocabulary acquisition but, all in all, the number of these studies is still scarce. When it comes to grammar acquisition, studies are even less numerous and results are inconclusive (see Borràs & Llanes, 2021; Llanes, 2011), possibly also due to the different backgrounds and starting proficiency levels of the learners investigated as well as differing durations of stay (see Llanes, 2011). Research on the development of listening and reading skills is also scant so that conclusive evidence is lacking (see Borràs & Llanes, 2021; Llanes, 2011). With regard to writing skills there is more research, but results are contradictory with some studies suggesting that the SA context is superior to the AH context for the development of writing skills and others suggesting that it is not (see Borràs & Llanes, 2021; Llanes, 2011).

Oral production has been the most frequently investigated skill and, apart from vocabulary, the only domain for which there is an extensive body of research findings that, taken together, indicate that the SA context is more beneficial for oral proficiency gains than traditional AH instruction, even though not more beneficial than intensive AH instruction (Borràs & Llanes, 2021; Llanes, 2011). The constructs examined are varied and range from oral fluency (Freed, 1995; Freed et al., 2004; Hardison, 2014; Hardison & Okuno, 2022; Juan-Garau & Pérez-Vidal, 2007; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Valls-Ferrer & Mora, 2014; Yager, 1998), oral accuracy (e.g., Hardison, 2014; Hardison & Okuno, 2022; Juan-Garau, 2014), pronunciation (Avello et al., 2012; Hardison, 2014; Hardison & Okuno, 2022; Llanes, 2011; Muñoz & Llanes, 2014) to global measures of oral proficiency (Brecht et al., 1995; Jochum, 2014; Magnan & Back, 2007; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004), with positive effects having been found for most measures, even though results are contradictory as far as pronunciation is concerned.

Two commonly used instruments to assess global oral proficiency gains in SA research are the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI; see Jochum, 2014, for an overview of studies having used these two instruments). These instruments use the American Council on the

Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency scale, which has five main levels (Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior, and Distinguished), with the first three additionally divided into three sublevels (Low, Mid, and High). Results from studies comparing SA and AH students in a pre- and post-design using these global measures clearly point to the advantages of the SA context (Hernández, 2010; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). To our knowledge, only one study has used the Oral Proficiency Interview by Computer (OPIc) to test for oral proficiency gains of SA students in comparison to AH students. In the study by Jochum (2014), the SA students' scores on the OPIc increased by one proficiency level of the ACTFL scale on average, while AH students' scores only increased by half a level on average. This difference was found to be statistically significant.

Most of this research to date has investigated SA students' learning of the official language of the host country. With the growing prevalence of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in European settings (Köylü, 2021), a new learning environment has emerged for English learners studying abroad in continental Europe. In this context, English is considered a lingua franca alongside the official languages of the host countries. Thanks to programs like ERASMUS+ that enhance student mobility, this non-Anglophone setting has become more significant for L2 English learners, particularly following Brexit. Referred to as English as a lingua franca study abroad (ELFSA) (Köylü, 2016), the potential of this context for English TL development has only been the subject of a limited number of research studies. The available evidence to date, however, attests a clear potential for the development of English language competencies in ELFSA contexts that is at least comparable to the potential of traditional English-speaking destinations.

The first study dedicated to English proficiency development of SA students in an ELFSA context was the study by Llanes et al. (2016). They examined whether ERASMUS students using English as a lingua franca (ELF) in a non-English-speaking country would enhance their English proficiency (in terms of writing, vocabulary, and grammar). The results indicated a significant improvement in English proficiency (measured by the Oxford Placement Test and a short essay). In a subsequent study, Llanes (2019) investigated the oral English skills and overall English proficiency of a group of Catalan/Spanish English learners participating in a mobility program in different non-English-speaking European countries (Italy, Denmark, Germany, Belgium, Finland, or the Netherlands). Once again, she was able to demonstrate that the students made significant progress in their global English proficiency (measured by the Oral Proficiency Test) as well as their oral skills, with gains being significant in terms of fluency and lexical variety, but not in terms of grammatical complexity or accuracy.

While these two studies show that SA students can improve their English proficiency even in a non-English-speaking environment, they do not allow con-

clusions to be drawn about whether these students would have achieved greater linguistic progress in an English-speaking environment, as no comparisons between the two contexts were made. This is where the studies by Köylü (2016, 2021), Köylü and Tracy-Ventura (2022), and Borràs (2023) come into play. Köylü (2021) compared the development of oral skills of Turkish mobility students in an ELF context with that of mobility students in a traditionally English-speaking context. She found no superiority of the English-speaking context over the ELF context.

Similarly, Köylü (2016) and Köylü and Tracy-Ventura (2022) examined the effects of a 16-week mobility experience in an ELF context on oral and written complexity, accuracy, and fluency in English. The studies included two comparison groups: one group of students learning English in an English-speaking country and another group learning English in their home country, Turkey. The results of both studies indicate that the traditional Anglophone context and the ELF context are equally beneficial for oral and written L2 development. These results are once more corroborated by the recent study by Borras (2023), which compared the English proficiency gains (writing and general proficiency) of Catalan/Spanish undergraduates staying either in an Anglophone (United States or United Kingdom) or non-Anglophone (different European destinations) country and once again found no differences between those two groups. Hence, the available evidence to date suggests that ELFSA contexts offer equally beneficial opportunities for mobility students to develop their L2 English oral proficiency.

2.2 The relationship between L2 development and social networks in study abroad

Fairly logically, researchers often assume that interactions with first language (L1) speakers of the TL are critical to the development of TL skills (Borràs & Llanes, 2021; Kennedy Terry, 2022) and that the SA setting offers ideal opportunities for such interactions. In addition to the classroom setting and the homestay setting, SA offers a wealth of opportunities for interactions in the TL in daily life through clubs, social events, part-time jobs, community service, etcetera (Dewey et al., 2013). Fraser (2002) and Whitworth (2006) found that engaging in social activities outside the classroom and the homestay setting (e.g., playing on football teams, participating in internships) positively impacted linguistic development. Unsurprisingly, much of the research investigating the impact of SA on L2 proficiency development has attempted to establish links between social relationships developed during SA and overall L2 gains (Borràs & Llanes, 2021; Isabelli-García, 2006), with variable success. To date, the quantification and characterization of interactions between SA students and speakers of a TL remain a complex

endeavor (Kennedy Terry, 2022) and the widely used self-report measures entail a number of limitations, such as respondents' difficulty to accurately estimate frequency and duration of interactions in retrospect and concomitant inflation of responses (Mitchell, 2021). Several studies have tackled the complex endeavor of quantifying and characterizing students' interactions during SA by using the Language Contact Profile (LCP; Freed et al., 2004). While some researchers have been able to find a significant correlation between LCP scores and proficiency gains during SA (e.g., Dewey, 2008; Hernández, 2010; Muñoz & Llanes, 2014; Valls-Ferrer & Mora, 2014), others have not (e.g., Magnan & Back, 2007; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). Magnan and Back (2007), for example, found no significant difference in linguistic progress (as measured by OPI) between students who lived with native speakers (NSs) and those who lived by themselves or with L2 speakers. Based on their findings, Segalowitz and Freed (2004) also concluded that the amount of in-class and out-of-class contact appear to have only a weak and indirect impact on TL gains. Hernández (2010), in contrast, found that students' contact with the Spanish language, as measured by a modified LCP, had a significant effect on their speaking improvement. Muñoz and Llanes (2014), using a questionnaire similar to the LCP to measure the amount and type of L2 contact, showed that self-reported hours spent speaking English in general, in class, and with NSs correlated significantly and positively with language gains measured via foreign accent. Similarly, Valls-Ferrer and Mora (2014) found that more speaking time with L1 speakers resulted in higher language gains, particularly improving oral fluency.

In addition to collecting self-reports on language use during SA, researchers have shown interest in the social relations which sojourners develop when abroad and several studies have investigated how SA students' social network formation impacts their L2 development. Isabelli-García (2006) was among the first to show that the analysis of social networks can critically enhance our understanding of L2 development during an SA period. In her 2006 study, informal out-of-class contact, as measured by daily log sheets at three points in time during the SA, was shown to greatly enhance TL development. She found that highly motivated students had more extensive social networks with locals, which correlated with language gains.

In view of the mixed findings on the relationship between L2 development and L2 engagement, it is not surprising that researchers such as Dewey et al. (2012) and Dewey et al. (2013) and, more recently, Kennedy Terry (2022) have advocated for a more fine-grained analysis of SA participants' interactions with TL speakers using social network analysis and considering the size of students' social networks, and the dispersion, durability and intensity of social contacts. The Study Abroad Social Interaction Questionnaire (SASIQ) constitutes an

instrument that is suitable to determine these features. Dewey et al. (2012) used the SASIQ to measure both the nature and structure of SA participants' social networks. They found that learner networks with TL speakers contribute to self-perceived oral proficiency gains during the SA period. Similarly, but in a different context, Dewey et al. (2013) showed that the intensity of network ties with TL speakers was a significant predictor of self-perceived oral proficiency gains. However, these findings need to be interpreted with caution as they draw on self-reported data to measure oral proficiency gains. Baker-Smemoe et al. (2014) showed that of all the variables considered in their analysis (including inter alia personality, amount of L2 use, etcetera) and apart from intercultural sensitivity, social network variables were the strongest predictors of language gains measured via OPI. In Baker-Smemoe et al.'s (2014) analysis, the following four social network variables stood out as crucial: the English proficiency of learners' friends, the change in the size of students' networks over time, the intensity of their friendships, and dispersion, in other words, the number of social groups they participated in (p. 478).

When considering that the English proficiency of SA students' friends turned out to be an important predictor of proficiency gains in Baker-Smemoe et al. (2014), it once again seems worthwhile to investigate the ELFSA context as one might expect differences in amount and quality of language engagement between students staying in an ELFSA or Anglophone context. Given that English is not the L1 of the local population in ELFSA contexts, it can be assumed that SA students in an ELFSA context will have few opportunities to interact with L1 speakers of English and that, hence, the proficiency of their interlocutors may be lower than if they stayed in an Anglophone context.

However, differences between EFLSA and Anglophone contexts regarding SA students' social network composition and their language use have hardly been investigated so far. To the authors' knowledge, there are only two recent studies addressing this issue. The first is the study by Borràs and Llanes (2022), which compares L2 gains in ELFSA and Anglophone countries and qualitatively examines the use of the L1, L2, and L3 in these contexts. They found some differences in the amount of L2 use, with English being used more by participants in the traditional SA group than by those in the ELFSA countries, but this did not have an impact on their language gains. As no significance tests were run, it cannot be ascertained whether these differences in language use are significant.

The second study addressing this issue is the study by Heinzmann et al. (forthcoming) investigating different patterns of social contacts of 121 study abroad students in ELFSA and Anglophone contexts and the relationship of these with students' language use while abroad and their TL development. Findings indicate that social network patterns in the two contexts differ as students in an

ELFSA context tend to have less contact with the local population than students in an Anglophone context and more contact with other international students, but that students with very different network patterns and interactional partners make comparable progress in terms of oral proficiency. This suggests that, while it seems that social networks and language use of SA students are likely to differ in different contexts, this does not necessarily have an effect on TL development as different forms and types of interaction may be conducive to learning. It is exactly these forms and types of social interactions which were sensitively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as many classic opportunities for social networking of SA students, such as the physical classroom, university societies and clubs, extracurricular activities, etcetera, were not available.

2.3 The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on social networks and language gains

More than four years since the first outbreak of COVID-19, evidence for a profound impact of the pandemic on students' social networks has accumulated, in particular, as far as the first wave of the pandemic is concerned. Two main research foci have been the influence of diminished social contacts on mental wellbeing and health, and the range of strategies made available and employed by students to cope with the situation. Hari et al. (2021) conducted interviews with 14 international students in Ontario, many of whom recounted "experiences of severe anxiety, loneliness and gaps in social networks," but also described their "reliance on transnational networks" (p. 15), which especially include their family members. Koris et al. (2021) interviewed 14 Erasmus students in spring 2020 to find out how they coped with the pandemic in the domains of affective, behavioral, and cognitive adaptation. The authors reported that the students experienced a "negative impact of reduced social interaction," but also feelings of self-satisfaction derived from the successful completion of virtual coursework (p. 475). Mbous et al. (2024), who conducted focus group interviews with 13 SA students in the United States during the pandemic, found some evidence on the importance of social support and students' coping strategies, but reported an overall bleak picture of international students who found themselves "suddenly in want of human interactions" (p. 8), and spiraled towards more loneliness due to reduced opportunities to meet with people. These ambivalent results are mirrored in clinical studies such as Labrague et al. (2021) in a Malaysian context, or Sitarz et al. (2021) on Polish students' coping strategies with different kinds of emotional distress at roughly the same time. Emotional distress was associated with loneliness as one prime factor, but students were also found to be "rather willing to cope positively with the pandemic" (p. 17).

Outside the domain of students in international contexts, Émon et al. (2021) interviewed 14 secondary school leavers (aged 18–19) in late summer 2020 in Ireland and assigned them, based on how they accounted for their life since the first outbreak, to three different categories: "the shielded," "the worried/uncertain," and "the discontented." They found that "the shielded" were strengthened, amongst other factors, by their "determination to cultivate new social networks and to maintain old friendships" (p. 12), while a defining characteristic of "the discontented" was loneliness and a lack of social activities. Finally, in a questionnaire study, Elmer et al. (2020) compared 282 Swiss students in 2020 with 54 students who had completed the same questionnaire in 2019 (before the pandemic). They found that during the pandemic students reported fewer interactions and study partners and were more likely to be isolated. At the same time, they reported higher levels of stress, anxiety, and loneliness compared to students before the pandemic. Based on these results, the authors argued that especially newly enrolled students "should receive opportunities to interact and socialize in informal social settings" (Elmer et al., 2020, p. 19). At the time of our research, however, the creation of such opportunities in the students' different destination was only in its beginnings.

Research on social contacts entertained by SA students during later waves of the pandemic (fall 2020, spring 2021, fall 2021) point a less bleak picture but still point towards effects of the pandemic on the establishment and maintenance of social ties. Devlin and Magliacane (2021) reported that restricted access to physical and socially-constructed spaces, for example, in the university or accommodation, mostly had a constraining effect on learner agency as it limited the opportunities for TL interactions and it also denied students the agency to co-construct language development spaces. Similarly to Devlin and Magliacane (2021), Bleichenbacher et al. (under review) also found that students experienced the COVID-19 measures as constraining in the sense that it limited their opportunities to establish new or more friendships. However, some students also explicitly highlighted the affordances of the extraordinary circumstances in that they were able to develop meaningful and deeper friendships with those few people they met.

To the authors' knowledge there is only one study to date investigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on language gains. The study by Arvidsson (2023) compared 10 Swedish SA students' patterns of TL use and perceived linguistic progress in France during the COVID-19 pandemic (spring 2021) with those of a comparable group of 25 Swedish SA students who studied in France before the pandemic. The results suggest that despite the exceptional circumstances during the pandemic, SA offered beneficial conditions for language learning. A comparison of the two groups revealed that frequency of TL use and types of activities engaged in did not differ between the two groups. They used the TL equally often and in

almost identical ways. Furthermore, the self-perceived linguistic progress in reading, writing, listening, and speaking was comparable in the two groups.

3. Research questions

Given the effect of the pandemic on the social networks of students and the potential importance attributed to these networks for language development in an SA setting, our study tries to shed light on the following research questions:

RQ 1: Does the development of oral English proficiency differ between students who completed their stay abroad before the COVID-19 pandemic (pre-COVID-19 group) and students who started the stay abroad after the pandemic outbreak (COVID-19 group)?

RQ 2: Do social contacts and language use differ between the pre-COVID-19 group and the COVID-19 group?

4. Method

The study presented here is a comparative study of the oral English proficiency gains measured with the Oral Proficiency Interview by Computer (OPIc; see 4.2. for more details on the instrument) of 13 SA pre-COVID-19 and 13 COVID-19 students matched for important background variables. Matched sampling is a statistical technique which has been proposed as a solution to problems of bias that arise in quasi-experimental studies, where the treatment cannot be randomly assigned to groups (Becker, 2011; Rubin, 1973). Therefore, special measures must be taken to control confounding variables related to the individual. In studies with matched samples, the study participants of the samples are assigned to each other in pairs with respect to the confounding variables to be controlled (Bortz & Döring, 2009, p. 525). The idea is to compare individuals in a non-randomly generated "treatment group" to similar individuals in a non-randomly produced "comparison group" by identifying treated individuals who share the same background characteristics as untreated individuals. The goal of this matching is to be able to attribute identified differences between the groups clearly to the effect of the treatment.

Since no randomized assignment to the two groups pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 could be made in the context of the present study and thus an experimental design was not possible, a matching procedure was used. Each person in the pre-COVID-19 group was assigned a comparable person from the COVID-19

group. The following characteristics were considered as relevant covariates for matching:

- Length of stay abroad
- Oral English proficiency before the stay
- Type of stay: language school, mobility/exchange semester, internship/work
- Context of stay: English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) or English-speaking country (ENG)

Even if there are several software packages for different matching procedures (Becker, 2011, p. 33), matching was done manually due to the small sample size of our study by assigning one person from the pre-COVID-19 group to another person from the COVID-19 group with as identical characteristics as possible. Since exact matching was not always possible, tolerance ranges were defined for the duration of the stay (maximum difference of 2.5 weeks) and the oral proficiency level before the stay (maximum difference of one OPIc proficiency level; see Section 4.2). In 11 out of 13 pairs, an exact matching of the pre-OPIc scores could be realized. In two pairs, the difference is one proficiency level (for an explanation of the OPIc scores see Section 4.3).

4.1 Participants

Table 1 offers an overview of the matched sample. Our research participants were higher education students enrolled at Swiss, German, or Austrian higher education institutions that studied abroad for a minimum of eight weeks. At home, they were enrolled in English studies at universities or teacher education institutions. All of them studied abroad to learn English. For the students studying in an ELFSA context, the primary linguistic aim was also to study English rather than to study the local language. For the COVID-19 subsample, the table additionally provides information on when the students were abroad and the COVID measures in place at that time in the respective place.[1] One student was abroad in fall 2020, the remaining participants in spring, summer, or fall 2021. The COVID-19 SA students went to different host countries, which adopted different approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic. As is evident from the table below, all participants were affected by COVID measures. The most notable restriction that they faced was probably the inability to regularly attend on-site classes. Only one of

1. The information on the mode of teaching during the stay under the COVID measures was provided by the students themselves in our questionnaire. The information on policy responses regarding public events, social gathering, and face covering was taken from Our World in Data (Mathieu et al., 2020).

the students enjoyed face-to-face teaching throughout the stay. Another one was entirely bound to remote teaching and the great majority experienced a mixture of face-to-face and remote teaching, which limited opportunities to physically meet classmates and establish friendships. Two of the students did not indicate the format of teaching that they were exposed to. As can be seen in Table 1 all participants were confronted with restrictions on social gatherings and public events in their host destination even though with varying degrees of severity. In general, participants studying abroad in fall 2021 were affected by less severe restrictions. Students' perceptions on how the pandemic-induced circumstances influenced the development of their linguistic skills will be presented in the results section.

Table 1. Matched sample of pre- and COVID-19 SA students

Group	Destination	Context	Length of stay (weeks)	Type of stay	Pre-OPIc (value)	Post-OPIc (value)	Time of SA	COVID measures
Pre	United Kingdom	ENG	13.3	EX	7	8		–
COVID	United, Kingdom	ENG	11.6	EX	7	7	Fall 2020	Mix of online and remote teaching; Cancellation of public events required Restrictions on gatherings: < 10 people Pre-Christmas lockdown as of November 5th Masks required in all public spaces
Pre	Norway	ELF	25.0	EX	7	9		–
COVID	Estonia	ELF	23.6	EX	7	8	Spring 2021	Mix of online and remote teaching; Cancellation of public events required; towards the end of the stay only recommended Restrictions on gatherings: beginning < 10 people, later restrictions on very large gatherings Masks required in some public spaces

Table 1. *(continued)*

Group	Destination	Context	Length of stay (weeks)	Type of stay	Pre-OPIc (value)	Post-OPIc (value)	Time of SA	COVID measures
Pre	Canada	ELF	18.3	EX	8	10		–
COVID	Malta	ELF	19.3	EX	8	9	Spring 2021	Teaching: NA; Restrictions on gatherings: < 10 people Cancellation of public events required; Masks required outside the home at all times regardless of location or presence of others
Pre	Ireland	ENG	15.7	EX	9	9		–
COVID	United Kingdom	ENG	16.9	EX	9	9	Spring 2021	Remote teaching only Restrictions on gatherings: < 10 people Cancellation of public events required; towards the end of the stay only recommended Masks required in all public spaces
Pre	Canada	ENG	10.0	LS	7	8		–
COVID	United, Kingdom	ENG	9.0	LS	7	7	Summer 2021	Teaching: NA; Cancellation of public events recommended Restrictions on gatherings: < 10 people Masks required in all public spaces
Pre	Canada	ENG	11.4	LS	8	8		–
COVID	United States	ENG	11.9	LS	8	8	Summer 2021	Mix of online and remote teaching Cancellation of public events at times recommended at times required Restrictions on gatherings: at times < 10 people, at times 10–100 people Masks required in all public spaces in the beginning later softened to some public spaces

Table 1. *(continued)*

Group	Destination	Context	Length of stay (weeks)	Type of stay	Pre-OPIc (value)	Post-OPIc (value)	Time of SA	COVID measures
Pre	Denmark	ELF	17.0	EX	7	9		–
COVID	Portugal	ELF	16.4	EX	7	7	Fall 2021	Mix of online and remote teaching Cancellation of public events recommended Restrictions on gatherings: 100–1000 people Masks required in some public spaces in the beginning and in all public spaces in the end
Pre	United, Kingdom	ENG	17.1	EX	7	7		–
COVID	United, Kingdom	ENG	19.6	EX	7	8	Fall 2021	Mix of online and remote teaching Cancellation of public events recommended Restrictions on gatherings: 10–100 people Masks required in all public spaces
Pre	United, Kingdom	ENG	11.9	LS*	8	9		–
COVID	United, Kingdom	ENG	11.6	IW*	8	8	Fall 2021	Face-to-face teaching Cancellation of public events recommended Restrictions on gatherings: 10–100 people Masks required in all public spaces
Pre	United, Kingdom	ENG	20.3	EX	8*	10		–
COVID	United, Kingdom	ENG	20.3	EX	9*	9	Fall 2021	Mix of online and remote teaching Cancellation of public events recommended Restrictions on gatherings: 10–100 people

Table 1. *(continued)*

Group	Destination	Context	Length of stay (weeks)	Type of stay	Pre-OPIc (value)	Post-OPIc (value)	Time of SA	COVID measures
								Masks required in all public spaces
Pre	Ireland	ENG	15.6	EX	9	9		–
COVID	United, Kingdom	ENG	14.1	EX	9	9	Fall 2021	Mix of online and remote teaching Cancellation of public events recommended Restrictions on gatherings: 10–100 people Masks required in all public spaces
Pre	Latvia	ELF	16.6	EX	9	9		–
COVID	Israel	ELF	16.0	EX	9	8	Fall 2021	Mix of online and remote teaching Cancellation of public events recommended Restrictions on gatherings: beginning 10–100 people; later 100–1000 people Masks required in some public spaces
Pre	Finland	ELF	16.1	EX	9*	9		–
COVID	Finland	ELF	17.4	EX	8*	8	Fall 2021	Mix of online and remote teaching Cancellation of public events recommended in the beginning and required at the end Restrictions on gatherings: beginning < 10 people; later 10–100 people Masks recommended

Note. ENG: English-speaking context; ELF: English as Lingua Franca context; LS: language school; EX: mobility/exchange semester at a university or university of applied sciences; IW: internship/work; *: no exact match.

4.2 Instruments

The students' oral proficiency was measured using the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview by Computer (OPIc) before and after the sojourn. The OPIc is an internet-based criterion-referenced test for reliable and valid oral proficiency testing at a large scale. Several independent studies attest high test-retest and inter-rater reliabilities to the OPIc, even though rater agreement varies at different points on the scale (see Isbell & Winke, 2019). Research also suggests that OPIc ratings highly correspond to OPI ratings, even though there is a slight tendency for OPIc scores to be higher (Isbell & Winke, 2019; Thompson et al., 2016).

The test assesses functional oral language proficiency. During the test, the test takers interact with an avatar. The oral productions are recorded and then evaluated by human raters. In our study we used commercial OPIcs, which are single rated by an ACTFL certified OPIc rater. The speech samples are rated according to the ACTFL scale, which comprises the following ten proficiency levels: Novice Low (1), Novice Mid (2), Novice High (3), Intermediate Low (4), Intermediate Mid (5), Intermediate High (6), Advanced Low (7), Advanced Intermediate (8), Advanced High (9), and Superior (10). Raters evaluate candidate performances holistically across all prompts (Isbell & Winke, 2019).

Apart from the OPIc results, the analysis will also draw on data from two online questionnaires. The first is an online social contact and language use questionnaire administered to participants 7 or 11 weeks into their stay (depending on the duration of their stay). It was inspired by the Study Abroad Social Interaction Questionnaire (SASIQ; Dewey et al., 2013; Dewey et al., 2012) but adapted for our study purposes. In this questionnaire, participants were asked to list up to 20 persons with whom they regularly had contact taking into account both people in the country of residence and at home, as well as various forms of communication (e.g., direct conversation, phone, chat, video calls). For each person listed, the following information was collected: regular place of residence, first language(s), English skills (compared to own person), contact hours per week, language(s) used, communication channel(s) and relationship to this person (family/relatives, partner, close friend, friend, acquaintance). All questions which are relevant for the present study are added in Appendix A. The second online questionnaire, which after the outbreak of the pandemic was adapted to incorporate some COVID-19 related questions, was sent out two weeks after the end of the stay. The question relevant for the present article asked participants to what extent the situation concerning the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the development of their English language skills. Of the 13 COVID students of the matched sample, 11 answered this question.

4.3 Analysis

In order to analyze the data statistically, the OPIc test results were assigned numerical values as outlined in Section 4.2 (e.g., 7 for Advanced Low, 8 for Advanced Intermediate) in line with previous research employing the OPI or OPIc to measure proficiency (see Hernández, 2010; Jochum, 2014). Once the values were assigned, a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test of the OPIc values before and after the stay was conducted independently in both groups to test whether the language competencies in the pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 groups changed significantly between the beginning and end of their stay abroad. The Wilcoxon test for dependent samples tests whether the central tendencies of two dependent samples are different. This test is used when the conditions for a t-test for dependent samples are not met, as is the case with the results of the OPIc test, which do not have a metric scale level. In addition, a series of t-tests was employed to examine whether the pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 groups differed in terms of language use and social contacts entertained.[2]

5. Results

The proficiency rating for the pre-COVID-19 participants ranged from Advanced Low (7) to Advanced High (9) both in the pre- and the post-test. The same is true for the COVID-19 group participants (see Table 2). As the differing means suggest, though, the distribution is different in the two groups.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the pre-COVID-19 and the COVID-19 group

Group	OPIc values	N	M	SD	Min	Max
Pre-COVID-19	Pre-OPIc	13	7.92	.862	7	9
	Post-OPIc	13	8.77	.832	7	9
COVID-19	Pre-OPIc	13	7.92	.862	7	9
	Post-OPIc	13	8.08	.760	7	9

2. Histograms of the distribution of the differences in language use and social contacts show an approximate normal distribution of the data in our sample. Since the t-test is relatively robust to deviations from the normal distribution, this method can be considered appropriate. Nonetheless, we have also carried out the analyses using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests and results were the same.

Figure 1 illustrates the oral proficiency gains for each individual of the matched sample. Each person is assigned an identification number (ID). Persons with an ID from 1 to 29 (indicated in yellow) belong to the pre-COVID-19 group whereas those with an ID from 74 to 199 (indicated in blue) are part of the COVID-19 group. Changes in oral proficiency from the pre- to post-OPIc test are indicated by a blue arrow. In the pre-COVID-19 group, seven individuals show gains in oral proficiency from pre-test to post-test. Four cases even increase their oral proficiency by two levels. In the COVID-19 group there are fewer gains. Only three cases improved by one level. There is even one case with a decrease in oral proficiency.

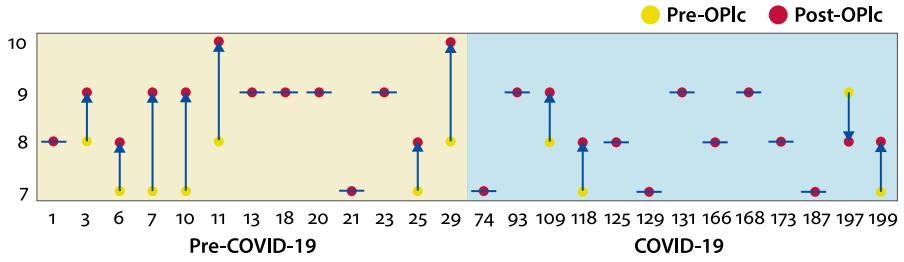

Figure 1. OPIc test language gains (pre to post)

The results of the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test show a significant improvement in oral proficiency in the pre-COVID-19 group of students ($z = -2.428$, $p = .015$, $n = 13$). The effect size is $r = .67$ and corresponds to a strong effect according to Cohen (1992). In the COVID-19 group, on the other hand, no significant change in oral proficiency can be detected ($z = -1.000$, $p = .317$, $n = 13$).

In view of the social distancing measures that were in place during the pandemic, and the importance attributed to social networks and language use for language gains in the literature, we next examined whether the two groups also differed in terms of their social contacts and language use during their stay. The following question was deemed relevant in this regard: can the differential growth in oral proficiency between the two groups, at least in part, be explained by limited opportunities for contact and reduced language use due to the pandemic restrictions?

The responses of three of the COVID-19 participants in the post-questionnaire suggest that because of the pandemic-related measures, it was more difficult to establish new contacts and the number of newly established contacts was smaller. In those cases, contacts were limited to a smaller circle of people, primarily consisting of (international) house- or roommates. On the other hand, seven of 11 students did not feel that the extraordinary situation impeded the

development of their English language competence much, as most of their daily interactions were still carried out in English. One person felt that online teaching led to reduced opportunities for (face-to-face) interactions, which in turn, gave her fewer opportunities to practice her oral English and pronunciation skills. None of the participants mentioned modifications to in-person interactions (e.g., the wearing of masks), which would lead to a reduction of visual speech cues.

Even though the comments of the COVID-19 group suggest that the social distancing measures, in some cases, led to smaller social circles and fewer opportunities to practice their oral English skills, the comparison of the self-reported social contacts and language use of the pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 groups did not yield significant differences in the number of social contacts entertained (see Table 3) or the quantity of language use with contacts in various languages (see Table 4). Both groups reported regularly interacting with comparable numbers of previously known and newly established contacts. Some significant differences could be identified in terms of the configuration of social contacts as students in the pre-COVID-19 group indicated having more new L1-speaking (German-speaking) contacts and more new colleagues. However, these differences in social contacts did not affect language use as the duration of use (hours per week) of English (TL), German (L1), and other languages did not differ significantly across the groups.

Table 3. Comparison of means in pre- and COVID-19 group for social contacts ($n = 26$)

Social contacts	Pre-COVID-19		COVID-19		Min	Max	T	p
	M	SD	M	SD				
Previously known contacts	5.00	3.49	4.92	3.33	0	12	.058	.955
Newly established contacts	8.00	3.19	6.92	3.86	1	13	.775	.446
New contacts by first language								
German (L1) speaking	2.85	1.86	1.62	1.19	0	6	2.005	.056
English speaking	2.00	2.04	2.46	3.28	0	9	−.431	.671
Other languages speaking	3.77	2.68	3.00	2.52	0	8	.754	.458
New contacts by residence								
Locals	1.92	2.25	2.08	3.15	0	9	−.143	.887
Internationals	2.92	2.18	3.00	2.58	0	8	−.082	.935
From German (L1) speaking countries	3.08	1.85	1.69	1.25	0	6	2.238	.035*
New contacts by relation status								

Table 3. *(continued)*

Social contacts	Pre-COVID-19		COVID-19		Min	Max	T	p
	M	SD	M	SD				
Romantic relations	.00	.00	.08	.28	0	1	−1.000	.337
Friends	2.46	2.60	3.46	2.26	0	8	−1.046	.306
Colleagues	3.69	2.75	1.15	2.03	0	8	2.675	.013*
Acquaintances	.62	.96	1.31	2.02	0	7	−1.118	.275
Host family	.77	1.30	.15	.55	0	3	1.569	.136
Total contacts	13.00	4.10	11.85	5.40	4	20	.614	.545

Table 4. Comparison of means in pre- and COVID-19 group for language use with social contacts (hours per week, $n = 26$)

Language/s used	Pre-COVID-19		COVID-19		t(24)	p
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
English	60.50	53.60	52.84	38.45	.419	.679
German	20.85	17.20	25.81	32.54	−.486	.631
Other languages	6.65	20.83	.97	3.06	.974	.340

6. Discussion and conclusions

The comparison of the oral proficiency gains of the pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 SA students illustrates that the students who went abroad during the pandemic made significantly less progress in terms of their oral English proficiency than those who went abroad before the outbreak of the pandemic. Evidently, studying abroad during the pandemic, which was an era characterized by social distancing measures and online teaching, was not an ideal context for the development of language skills at or above an advanced level. This finding contrasts with the results in the study by Arvidsson (2023), in which students studying abroad during the pandemic reported as much TL progress in all four skills as those studying abroad before the pandemic.

There are different possible explanations for these discrepant findings. Firstly, while Arvidsson's results are based on self-assessment measures, those presented here are based on tests. It is possible that students who studied abroad during the pandemic had more modest expectations regarding their proficiency development being aware of the constraints in place and that they might have been more

easily satisfied with their progress, which could have affected their self-assessment of progress. Secondly, the students in Arvidsson's study had an intermediate level of TL competence while our students had an advanced level of TL competence. It is known from previous research that higher levels of initial proficiency are associated with slower rates of progression (Isbell et al., 2019). It is conceivable that learners with lower proficiency levels make progress more easily even in settings where social interaction opportunities are constrained. Furthermore, and notwithstanding the pandemic, students in Arvidsson's study were enrolled in onsite classes while most of our SA students (9 out of 13) experienced a mixture of online and onsite classes and one had to make do with online classes.

Surprisingly enough, the analysis of students' social contacts and language use suggests that differences in language gains between the pre-COVID-19 and the COVID-19 group cannot be explained by differences in the quantity of social contacts and language use. Students seemed to use their languages to a similar extent and with a comparable number of contacts. Our findings regarding language use are in line with the findings of Arvidsson's (2023) study who also did not find any differences in the frequency and type of TL language use between students staying abroad before and during the pandemic. Hence, the only two studies thus far comparing TL use of SA students before and during the pandemic both suggest that, despite social distancing measures in place and the closing of some public spaces, the pandemic did not necessarily negatively impact the number of social contacts entertained by SA students and the amount of TL use. While the pandemic may not have affected quantitative aspects of social interactions in the TL, qualitative studies indicate that it did affect qualitative aspects of social interactions (see Bleichenbacher et al., under review).

The lack of association between the language use data and language gains raises questions about what aspects may or may not be essential for the development of oral proficiency in a SA context and invites further explorations in this field. The most obvious question arising from the results is the following: are social contacts and language use with social contacts less relevant for linguistic development in a SA context than commonly assumed? Research into the relationship between language gains and social ties in SA so far has produced inconsistent results, with some studies pointing to the importance of social ties for language gains (e.g., Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014; Dewey, 2008; Hernández, 2010; Isabelli-García, 2006; Muñoz & Llanes, 2014; Valls-Ferrer & Mora, 2014) and others failing to establish a link (e.g., Magnan & Back, 2007; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004).

Future research could investigate, for example, if the importance of social contacts for linguistic development varies depending on the TL proficiency level of the SA participants as has been suggested by Freed's (1990) study where lower-

level learners appeared to benefit more from interaction with L1 speakers than advanced learners. The participants in the present study were all advanced users of English. More research on advanced learners could elucidate if, at this level, social interactions are not key for progressing to a more proficient level and, if yes, which contexts and patterns of language use contribute to particularly rich zones of proximal development for these learners. Also, future research could investigate how these contexts and patterns of language use can be measured fruitfully.

7. Limitations and future directions

A number of methodological limitations in the present study might have compromised the inquiry into a possible link between students' social contacts, their language use, and their oral proficiency gains. For example, the sample may have been too small to detect significant relationships. A further limitation is that we are comparing students with different English L1 or ELF destinations which may not necessarily be comparable in terms of their linguistic affordances. Future research into ELFSA could fruitfully investigate whether different ELF contexts are equally conducive to English learning. Moreover, the social contact questionnaire used in the study may have failed to tap into certain relevant aspects of social interactions and language use. It needs to be pointed out, for example, that the social contact questionnaire did not specifically investigate the language use in educational settings, an important domain of practice which, so far, has hardly been considered in SA research (Mitchell, 2021). It may be that this is an area where the COVID-19 SA students differed markedly from previous SA students in terms of interactions and language use in that the COVID-19 SA students who were affected by emergency remote teaching had fewer opportunities for interaction in academic registers. Especially in the early phases of the pandemic, teaching staff may have been particularly busy or overcharged with handling the necessary online tools, hence they may not have been able to devote much attention to the interactional quality of their online classroom. In this sense, the results of the present study tentatively point to the importance of high-quality tertiary teaching and learning settings for SA students and the need for rich, language-sensitive learning opportunities in online settings. Moreover, it needs to be acknowledged that we are comparing different geographical contexts with different COVID-19-related measures in place, which might have influenced students' language learning.

Furthermore, the social contact and language use questionnaire employed in the study focuses on quantitative aspects of social contacts and language use (number of contacts and duration of language use) and does not provide information on qualitative aspects (e.g., intensity of contact, complexity, and quality

of language use). It retrospectively records social contacts and language use over the timespan of one month. The reliability of self-report instruments, in contrast to direct observation, has often been criticized due to possible recall bias effects (Arndt et al., 2021; Bradburn et al., 1987; Mitchell, 2021). It is not uncommon for studies employing questionnaires of this type to be unable to establish links between social contact variables and language gains (Magnan & Back, 2007; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). Possibly, a focus on qualitative aspects of social interactions and language use (e.g., by means of journals or interviews) or a more frequent and situated assessment, as is possible with the LANG-TRACK-APP (Arndt et al., 2021), might have yielded more nuanced results. Future research is needed on SA students of differing proficiency levels, involving different instruments covering language use in different domains, to shed more light on the complex relationships between social contacts, language engagement, and language development in the SA context.

8. Conclusion

This comparative study of oral English proficiency gains of SA students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic indicates that students studying abroad during the pandemic made less progress than comparable students studying abroad before the pandemic. Even though individual student comments suggest that this may be related to social restrictions that were in place to contain the pandemic, which limited opportunities for social networking and interaction, the quantitative analysis of self-reported socializing patterns and language use reveals comparable conditions for the two groups. Hence, social distancing measures in place along with the restrictions on public events and gatherings apparently did not negatively impact the number of social contacts entertained by SA students and the amount of TL use. However, our data does not allow us to make comprehensive statements about more fine-grained, qualitative aspects of language use during the COVID situation. The results call for more research into the relationship between social contacts, language use, and proficiency gains of SA students of different proficiency levels, as well as into the importance of the educational context as a provider of high-quality academic language for the linguistic development of advanced learners.

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Appendix A. Selected questionnaire items

Original questionnaire item (in German)	English translation
Bitte geben Sie für jede Person an, ob Sie diese bereits vor Ihrem Auslandaufenthalt gekannt haben oder ob Sie sie während des Aufenthalts kennengelernt haben.	For each person, please indicate whether you knew them before your stay abroad or whether you got to know them during your stay.
Antwortoptionen:	Answer options:
– Vor Auslandaufenthalt gekannt	– Known before stay abroad

Appendix A. *(continued)*

Original questionnaire item (in German)	English translation
– Während Auslandaufenthalt kennengelernt	– Got to know during stay abroad
Bitte geben Sie an, in welchem Land [Person] normalerweise wohnt (Hauptwohnsitz). Antwortoptionen: – Schweiz – Deutschland – Österreich – Im Land des Auslandaufenthalts – Anderes Land, nämlich… – Weiss ich nicht	Please indicate in which country [name of person] normally resides (primary residence). Answer options: – Switzerland – Germany – Austria – In the host country – Other country, namely… – I don't know
Bitte geben Sie die Erstsprache/n von [Person] an. Als Erstsprachen gelten jene Sprachen, die man als Erstes gelernt hat und mit denen man aufgewachsen ist. Mehrfachnennungen sind möglich. Antwortoptionen: – Hochdeutsch – Schweizerdeutscher, österreichischer oder deutscher (regionaler) Dialekt – Französisch – Italienisch – Rätoromanisch – Englisch – Albanisch – Arabisch – Bosnisch, Kroatisch, Montenigrinisch, Serbisch – Griechisch – Kurdisch – Spanisch – Polnisch – Portugiesisch – Russisch – Türkisch – Andere, nämlich:	Please indicate the first language(s) of [name of person]. First languages are those that one learned first and grew up with. Multiple answers are possible. Answer options: – Standard German – Swiss, Austrian or German (regional) dialect – French – Italian – Romansh – English – Albanian – Arabic – Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian – Greek – Kurdish – Spanish – Polish – Portuguese – Russian – Turkish – Other, namely: – I don't know

Appendix A. *(continued)*

Original questionnaire item (in German)	English translation
– Weiss ich nicht	
Wie schätzen Sie die Englischkompetenzen von [Person] ein? Antwortoptionen: – schlechter als meine Englischkompetenzen – ungefähr gleich gut wie meine Englischkompetenzen – besser als meine Englischkompetenzen – kann ich nicht beurteilen	How would you rate [name of the person's] English skills? Answer options: – worse than my English skills – about the same as my English skills – better than my English skills – I cannot judge
Denken Sie an die Zeit seit Beginn Ihres Auslandaufenthalts. Bitte geben Sie an, wie viele Stunden Sie durchschnittlich pro Woche mit [Person] Kontakt hatten.	Think about the time since the beginning of your stay abroad. Please indicate how many hours per week on average you had contact with [name of person].
Bitte geben Sie an, wie viel Prozent der Zeit Sie seit Beginn Ihres Auslandaufenthalts die folgenden Sprachen in der Kommunikation mit [Person] verwendet haben (Gesamtwert 100%). – Englisch – Deutsch – andere Sprache/n	Please indicate the percentage of time you have used the following languages in communicating with [name of person] since the beginning of your stay abroad (total 100%). – English – German – other language/s
Wie würden Sie Ihre Beziehung zu [Person] beschreiben? Antwortoptionen: – Liebesbeziehung – Freund/in – Kollege/Kollegin – Bekannte/r – Familie und Verwandtschaft – Gastfamilie – andere, nämlich:	How would you describe your relationship with [name of person]? Answer options: – Romantic relations – Friend – Colleagues – Acquaintance – Family and relatives – Host family – other, namely:

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