Enriching Personal Growth and Communicative Competence through
Self-organised Interaction between Native and Non-native Speakers

Mohsen Hedayati
Mohsen.hedayati@utas.edu.au

Enriching Personal Growth and Communicative Competence through Self-organised Interaction between Native and Non-native Speakers

Mohsen Hedayati
University of Tasmania

Shakila Nur
University of Tasmania

Sherridan Emery
University of Tasmania

Halyna Pavlyshyn
University of Tasmania

Abstract

While studying abroad is one of the suitable opportunities for foreign language (L2) learners to develop their proficiency in the target language, the mere experience of living in a foreign environment does not necessarily help students to become proficient L2 speakers. It has been argued that interaction with other people can enhance study abroad students' personal growth and their proficiency with language skills and communicative competence.

The present case study reports on attempts by a self-organised group of international postgraduate students (IPSs) at an Australian university to improve their communicative competence through informal interaction with native speakers. The IPSs formed a weekly peer circle with native speakers to discuss language difficulties and cultural issues they experienced in using the target language (i.e. English). Over time the peer circle grew to include social occasions. For this study, members of the peer circle participated in an interview exploring impacts of the peer circle on their grammatical, sociocultural, and strategic competence.

Results from this small-scale study indicated that the participants had positive attitudes toward attending these self-organised circles. They found the program effective in helping them develop their personal skills and promoting their communicative competence at different levels.

Key word: native speaker, non-native speaker, communicative competence, personal growth.

Introduction

Foreign language learners in most cases do not have immediate access to authentic target language, and they are only provided with materials through texts and multi-media. Wildner-Bassett (1990) argues that the kind of communication in foreign language learning contexts, as opposed to second language learning, is artificial. Although the improvement of technology in recent decades has assisted foreign language learners to gain access to authentic materials, the need for real-life interaction with native-speakers of the target language cannot be overlooked. For many foreign language learners, studying abroad presents opportunities to engage in real-life communication with native speakers of the target language (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Freed, 1995; Isabelli, 2004).

Enriching Personal Growth and Communicative Competence through
Self-organised Interaction between Native and Non-native Speakers

Mohsen Hedayati
Mohsen.hedayati@utas.edu.au

There is a general presumption that students who study abroad, and are immersed in the target language will become fluent speakers of that language with a native-like accent and speaking style (Kenne, 2014; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). Nevertheless, research shows that study abroad students' success rate depends on a range of variables, for example, students' identity (Pellegrino, 2005), their motives and desire to interact (Kinginger, 2009).

This study emerged out of a self-organised weekly peer circle program initiated by an IPS at an Australian university. The program, called the Australian Tea Program (henceforth referred to as ATP), was established to create an enabling environment where non-native speakers (IPSs) and native speakers could participate in informal interactions aimed at enhancing communicative competence and interpersonal communication among post-graduate students. In this paper, we describe features of this self-organised program, and report on IPSs' perceptions of the ATP impacts on their personal growth, communicative skills, and their postgraduate candidature experience.

Literature review

In order to use a target language naturally, non-native speakers (NNS) go through complex processes of achieving communicative competence in the target language, which is likely to happen at different stages of language learning process for different learners (Kinginger, 2009). Achieving communicative competence, according to Pellegrino (2005), is coupled with one's personal growth and impact of the language learning experience on the NNS. This literature review provides a general background of communicative competence and personal-growth, and the relationship between these two conceptions. Following this a review of research on native and non-native interaction, as well as language learning and study abroad will be presented.

Communicative competence

The term 'communicative competence' emerged from the communicative approaches toward second language teaching and learning in 1980s and describes "a person's ability to communicate in an appropriate way" (García-Carbonell, Rising, Montero, & Watts, 2001, p. 484). In earlier theories mainly led by Chomsky (1965), speech was divided into two parts of competence (which accounted for knowledge of rules and principles), and performance (which accounted for the practical use of the rules). Communicative competence (CC) theories introduced two additional aspects of culture and context to address the significance of socioculturally appropriate utterances (Canale & Swain, 1980). In further developing a theoretical framework of communicative competence, Canale (1983) emphasised the four types of knowledge outlined below (extracted from the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics)*:

1. **Grammatical competence:** knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and semantics of a language
2. **Sociolinguistic competence:** knowledge of the relationship between language and its non-linguistic context, knowing how to use and respond appropriately to different types of speech acts, such as requests, apologies, thanks, and invitations, knowing which address forms should be used with different persons one speaks to and in different situations, and so forth
3. **Discourse competence:** that is knowing how to begin and end conversations
4. **Strategic competence:** that is, knowledge of communication strategies that can compensate for weakness in other areas (Richard & Schmidt, 2013; p. 90)

The concept of communicative competence indicates that acquisition of wide knowledge of grammar or vocabulary will not essentially help the second language learners to become proficient users of the target language (Canale and Swain, 1980). Sociolinguistic aspects of CC emphasise contextual

Enriching Personal Growth and Communicative Competence through
Self-organised Interaction between Native and Non-native Speakers

Mohsen Hedayati
Mohsen.hedayati@utas.edu.au

factors, which affect a NNS's language use in particular situations and conditions. These concepts apply to the language-related experiences of the study abroad language learners.

Many international students, even those who feel confident about their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, find it difficult to use the target language in an appropriate way (Pellegrino, 2005). Pellegrino (2005) points out that in study abroad situations, linguistic development, cultural understanding, and personal growth take place more or less simultaneously. Dwyer (2004) found that study abroad programs impact on attributes related to individuals' personal growth such as increased self-confidence. As Behrnd and Porzelt (2012) suggest, study abroad programs should not just aim to develop individuals' language skills, but also try to create opportunities for NNS students to engage with the target culture and establish connections with the members of the host culture.

The above findings suggest that personal growth results from interaction with native speakers in a study abroad context. Since interaction with native speakers depends on communicative skills, it may be inferred that personal growth and language learning have a reciprocal relationship in study abroad conditions. In other words, when language learners develop their communicative competence, they can engage more successfully with the target culture and native speakers, and this relationship applies the other way around. Therefore, native speakers play an important role in non-native speakers' language development in the target language environment (Pellegrino, 2005; Pica, 1991).

Native and non-Native Language Speaker Interaction

In the field of second language learning (L2), several studies have investigated interactions between native and non-native language speakers, and the effect of this kind of interaction on the language learners' linguistic development at different levels (Cheng, 2013; Kinginger, 2009; Pica, 1991; Young & Faux, 2011). Pica (1991) considers that the input received from native speakers can help non-native speakers to understand what is in the target language and what is not in the target language. This kind of real-life communication provides language learners with contextualised and comprehensible L2 input and repeated L2 exposure (Krashen, 1985; Pellegrino, 2005). Through interactions with native speakers, non-native speakers can enhance their communicative competence at linguistic, sociolinguistics, discursive, and strategic levels.

Studying abroad provides considerable opportunities for second language learners to enhance their language skills. Mere experience of living in a foreign environment, however, does not necessarily help students to become proficient L2 speakers (Kinginger, 2009). While it has been found that international students can develop their language skills by interacting with native speakers, many international students find it difficult to establish and maintain communication with native speakers. The challenge of understanding how international students can establish and maintain communication with native speakers was an initial incentive to conduct the current study.

The present case study reports on the attempts of a self-organised group of international postgraduate students to improve their communicative competence through informal interaction with native speakers. Hence, the research addresses the question of how can informal interaction between native speakers (NS) and multicultural non-native speakers (NNS) enhance the personal growth and communicative competence of NNS. A further aim of the research was to understand participation in a self-organised peer circle may help NNSs to better manage their PhD candidature.

Methodology

A pragmatic mixed methods approach (Cresswell & Plano-Clarke, 2010) was adopted in this case study to investigate how informal interaction with Australian colleagues (i.e. native speakers) can affect international postgraduate students' (i.e. non-native speakers) communicative competence, and

Enriching Personal Growth and Communicative Competence through
Self-organised Interaction between Native and Non-native Speakers

Mohsen Hedayati
Mohsen.hedayati@utas.edu.au

accordingly their PhD studies. The researchers conducted interviews with international postgraduate students (IPSs) who were members of the Australian Tea Program (ATP). Further details about the methods employed for data collection and analysis are presented in this section.

Participants

The participants in this study were eight international postgraduate students (IPSs) at University of Tasmania. There were four females and four males, and their ages ranged from 28 to 40 years old. This sample was randomly selected from the international students who participated in the Australian Tea Program (ATP). There were six IPSs from the Faculty of Education, one IPS from the Australian Maritime College (AMC), and one IPS from the Faculty of Arts. The participants were in different years of their candidature, ranging from first year to the third year. Considering the total number of IPSs who usually attended the ATP (usually between 7 and 15), eight participants in this study accounted for the majority of the IPSs who attended the ATP.

Procedure

Recruitment of participants: The researchers invited international postgraduate students (IPSs) who had joined the ATP to voluntarily participate in an interview. The study was conducted with ethics approval and information sheets and consent forms were distributed to IPSs during an ATP session. Eight IPSs volunteered to participate and the research team arranged mutually convenient times for conducting individual interviews with IPSs.

Australian Tea Program (ATP): The Australian Tea Program is a self-organised weekly learning circle with the purpose of enhancing communication and collaboration among postgraduate students in an Australian university. The ATP was initiated at the suggestion of one international postgraduate student who sought to facilitate and enhance communication among postgraduate students. An underlying assumption behind the formation of the ATP was that IPSs tended to experience language-related barriers in forming connections and relationships with the other IPSs and Australian colleagues. Therefore, the program began by inviting one interested Australian postgraduate student to attend these circles on a weekly basis on Friday afternoons. This native speaker played the role of the facilitator of the conversation among participants and in the following sessions, other native speakers joined the program as well. Although the number of participants varied from week to week, once the program was well established there were usually between two and four native speakers in attendance.

The program was open to everybody to attend from all faculties throughout the university. Sessions were free of charge and there was no formal membership process, participants simply turned up at the same time each week to the Music Room, which was made available for the purpose of this peer circle. The group commenced initially with five members and over the weeks the number of participants grew. There were no official announcements or purposeful recruitment efforts for the program; new participants usually heard about it through word-of-mouth from their friends. Unexpectedly after several ATP sessions, some local Australian residents from outside the university who had heard about this program from friends signalled interest in attending these sessions and learning more about other cultures and lifestyles from ATP members. These external participants became members of the ATP, however they were not included in this study.

Every session in the ATP lasted about one hour, which sometimes extended to two hours as the result of participants' interest in continuing the discussion. The ATP initially had a language focus, where IPSs sought help from the native speakers who attended the sessions. There were no predetermined topics or content for the meetings. Each conversation emerged spontaneously as a result of IPSs' curiosity about a particular Australian phrase, gesture, behaviour or a situation experienced by them

Enriching Personal Growth and Communicative Competence through
Self-organised Interaction between Native and Non-native Speakers

Mohsen Hedayati
Mohsen.hedayati@utas.edu.au

during the previous week. A list of activities undertaken within the ATP is presented in the results section. In later ATP sessions, the focus shifted from language to culture and social interactions, and IPSs played more active roles by sharing information about their cultures and traditions. However, participants continued to pause the discussion to ask questions related to language usage.

Interviews: The data were collected through individual interviews with participants. Interviews were semi-structured, each lasting for about 20 minutes. The interview consisted of Likert-scale question at the beginning, which asked participants about their own assessment of their language proficiency before and after residing in Australia, and two closed questions regarding participants' length of stay in Australia, and the frequency of their interaction with native speakers (see appendix 1). In this study, given the limited time and scope of the research, we decided to rely on the participants' own perception of their language proficiency, rather than using language proficiency tests or surveys. Considering the relatively small number of participants (8), we concluded that qualitative data could provide us with a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

The rest of the interview consisted of open-ended questions exploring the language difficulties that participants had experienced during their stay in Australia, and the possible effects of these difficulties on their candidature. The final questions asked about participants' experience of attending ATP, and how it had possibly affected their communicative skills (in particular) and PhD studies (in general).

The number and content of the interview questions were decided upon in a meeting amongst the research team members. The criteria for development of the questions were contextual factors (e.g. nature of the ATP) and prior research on interaction between native and non-natives speakers (Pica, 1991; Pellegrino, 2005). The interview questions were piloted which resulted in modifications to two of the questions. All the interviews were audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to analyse the data collected in this study. Through Thematic Analysis (TA), data were coded and analysed systematically, and patterns of meaning and themes were identified. The focus of data analysis in this study was to find shared meanings and experiences of the participants in the ATP. In this regard, we adopted both inductive (bottom-up) and deductive (top-down) TA approaches to analyse data at two levels: first, to locate themes and patterns of meaning from participants' responses (inductive), and secondly, to analyse data based on the concepts of native and non-native speaker interaction and personal growth principles (deductive).

Results

Results of the data analysis are presented under two main categories: firstly, description of participants' communicative skills before the ATP, and secondly, the results of the ATP on participants' communicative skills. This order helps to initially understand the language and residence (in Australia) background of participants, and then, see how the ATP has affected their communicative skills in relation to these factors. During the interviews, IPSs were encouraged to reflect on their own communicative skills in relation with two different time intervals: firstly, before and after coming to Australia, and secondly, before and after attending the ATP.

Description of participants' communicative skills before the ATP

The first four (quantitative) questions in the interview, asked about participants' length of residence in Australia, frequency of their communication with native speakers, and assessment of their language

Enriching Personal Growth and Communicative Competence through
Self-organised Interaction between Native and Non-native Speakers

Mohsen Hedayati
Mohsen.hedayati@utas.edu.au

proficiency before and after living in Australia. The responses to these questions are presented in table 1.

Participant	Length of living in Australia (month)	Frequency of English communication with NS (1-4)	Lang. proficiency Before (1-6)	Lang. proficiency After (1-6)
1	4	4	5	6
2	11	4	2	4
3	4	4	4	5
4	28	3	3	4
5	11	4	4	5
6	12	2	6	6
7	6	3	5	6
8	12	4	5	5
Average	**11**	**4**	**4.25**	**5.12**

Table 1

The average length of participants' stay in Australia was reported to be 11 months, ranging from 4 to 28 months. Regarding the frequency of communication with native speakers, most of the participants chose item four, which indicated multiple times per day, although some participants indicated they communicated with native speakers a few times per week or less. In response to language proficiency questions, participants were asked to choose a response between 1 to 6; 1 indicating very low proficiency and 6 standing for high proficiency. Participants' average assessment of their language proficiency before coming to Australia was 4.25, which raised to 5.12 after residing in this country. While this increase indicates development in IPSs language proficiency after living for several months in Australia, further open-ended questions were asked to get deeper understanding of the changes.

Question number 5 asked about the most common language difficulties that IPSs faced as they arrived in Australia. The language difficulties reported by the participants are categorized into three main language skills: listening, speaking and writing. There were not major difficulties reported relating to reading skills, grammar and vocabulary knowledge.

Listening: The most commonly reported problem with listening skills was attributed to Australian accents and speaking rate. Participants indicated that native speakers speak very fast, and their use of colloquial language made comprehension difficult for IPSs. Almost all participants indicated that one of the major challenges they encountered immediately after arriving in the country was the Australian accent. One of the participants said:

> It was very difficult for me the first day when I arrived, and I got a call, and this guy was talking with a very strong Australian accent, using some specific Australian words. And it was really difficult for me, I couldn't understand half of it.

These words resonate with the experience of another respondent who noted that:

> For the first few months when I arrived to Australia, it was too hard for me to understand people's speaking. And day-by-day it improved, I got better.

This participant explained that it had been more difficult for him to communicate with less educated Australians because of their accent. In general, the majority of the participants of the study agreed that

Enriching Personal Growth and Communicative Competence through
Self-organised Interaction between Native and Non-native Speakers

Mohsen Hedayati
Mohsen.hedayati@utas.edu.au

there is not a single Australian accent, and that people from different social statuses have different accents and styles of speaking which made it difficult for IPSs to understand them particularly in informal conversations. As noted by one of the participants:

> I find [it] particularly challenging to perceive these things, like idioms, slang, and colloquial words.

Speaking: Speaking skill difficulties reported by participants related to challenges in choosing the appropriate words according to various situations, as well as pronunciation of the words. One of the participants explained the difficulties this way:

> When I converse with native people [native speakers], sometimes [I] find lackings in myself in terms of using natural way of expression. For example, the use of connectors, phrases.

No difficulties relating to vocabulary knowledge were reported. A few IPSs mentioned that they found it difficult to articulate some letters in English, which were differently articulated in their native languages. Another area of complexity for IPSs is the connotation of words. There are words in other languages, which are also used in English (Australian), but which have different connotations. One of the respondents said:

> Certain words we use in a different way back in the country, and here in Australia it is used in a different way, so while communicating with the members [of ATP] here we have learnt their way, the way they use English words.

It was also reported that it was difficult for some of the IPSs to decide which particular words were often used together (i.e. collocations) to express a certain notion or feeling in a particular situation.

Writing: Difficulties reported by participants relating to writing skills tended to be in the communicative style of writing (e.g. email), rather than academic writing style (e.g. thesis). Among these language skill areas, writing was the least mentioned. Participants commented that when writing, they usually have time to think, re-write, and use various tools to help them overcome difficulties.

Many participants indicated that a lack of competence in these language skill areas diminished their confidence in communicating with others, which potentially reduced their engagement in extra-curricular activities within the university environment. IPSs indicated that better communicative skills could help them to sustain a sense of relaxation and sharing with colleagues and faculty members.

After inquiring into the language related difficulties experienced by IPS, participants were asked what language skills they had improved after residing in Australia (question 6). A majority of the participants reported that they had improved listening and speaking skills. They related the improvement of these two skills to their interactions with others, particularly native speakers. Participants also indicated that their writing and reading skills had improved as a result of reading books, journals and other materials, and completing writing assignments for their course.

Results of the ATP on Participants' Communicative Skills

The Australian Tea Program began with a focus on helping IPSs to enhance their language speaking and listening skills. All the sessions were held without having a predetermined topic, and the topics were emerged mainly out of the participants' immediate experiences inside and outside the university environment. As this was a small-scale study, there are limited claims that can be made as to the development of participants' communicative skills resulting from the ATP. The analysis of the qualitative data suggested that the ATP made some valuable linguistic and sociocultural contributions to IPSs' experiences of their PhD candidature.

Enriching Personal Growth and Communicative Competence through
Self-organised Interaction between Native and Non-native Speakers

Mohsen Hedayati
Mohsen.hedayati@utas.edu.au

The ATP from a Linguistic Angle

In contrast to usual language programs in universities, where materials are formerly developed and organised, the ATP did not follow a certain predetermined structure or framework. Topics discussed in the ATP arose spontaneously and were closely related to the IPSs' immediate needs. The reason for taking such an emergent approach was that participants already had a working command of English language, and thus the initial focus was on difficulties they experienced with the target language. Each session, participants introduced topics that they had encountered difficulties with in their various contexts (by way of illustration, topics from a selection of ATP sessions encompassed cultural practices, law, gestures used in speaking, sports, world languages, and different accents of English language).

Speaking was the main language skill that was explicitly practiced in the ATP. IPSs sought help from native speakers by asking questions related to colloquial language, slang, and shortened forms of words, which is a common practice in Australian English which leaves some NNS baffled. (e.g. Macca's stands for McDonald's). Pronunciation was the other language area often practiced in the ATP. This included largely the pronunciation of vowels (especially diphthongs), word stress, and intonation. These practices are closely related to the grammatical competence element under the concept of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Another topic of focus during ATP was practicing speech acts, such as requests, apologies, thanks, and invitations, and knowing which address forms should be used with different people in different situations. IPSs indicated that they encountered many situations in their immediate environments where they needed to use these speech acts appropriately. We can associate these practices to Canale and Swain's (1980) sociolinguistic competence notion.

The explicit practice of speaking skills accompanied the practice of listening skills. Through the emergent conversations within the ATP, IPSs experienced contextualised and comprehensible target language input from the native speaker group members (Krashen, 1985). Further, development of colloquial language and pronunciation simultaneously helped IPSs to enhance their comprehension of received target language. Participants reported increased confidence in using English language after attending the ATP:

> Well, the ATP has been very helpful to improve our speaking skills, like by interacting with native speakers you express your feelings, you get engaged with them, you make your presence felt in that group. So it has, obviously, helped me to improve my confidence.

One of the participants described the role of native speakers in the ATP as follows:

> I think they [native speakers] are important in our group, because when we learn a new language we turn to native speakers as kind of models. And sometimes we have some ideas that we don't know how to express. Or we do not understand, and we always turn to them for help or answers.

The ATP from a Sociocultural Angle

Sociocultural theories locate relationships and participation at the centre of learning. Rogoff (2003) contends "humans develop through their changing participation in the sociocultural activities of their communities, which also change" (p. 368). The ATP provided the space for all IPSs to bring their diverse histories, traditions and cultural backgrounds into a space in which this diversity was valued. Through their participation in the emergent conversations in the ATP their language speaking confidence grew as their comments in the previous section attest.

As the ATP progressed, its focus shifted from the explicit practice of language skills towards learning about each other and socialising together. IPSs' language enquiries became integrated into their

Enriching Personal Growth and Communicative Competence through
Self-organised Interaction between Native and Non-native Speakers

Mohsen Hedayati
Mohsen.hedayati@utas.edu.au

involvement in social activities within the ATP. New social practices commenced at the suggestion of different members of the ATP, providing opportunities for socialising and learning language and culture concurrently (the two elements are strongly related and linked to each other). Social activities included negotiation of meaning from different cultures through painting (in collaboration with an Elder from an Australian Aboriginal Community), celebrating national days and local events, and sharing food from different nations. These activities promoted negotiation of meaning and communication among postgraduate students in a non-threatening and secure environment. As one of the participants described:

> I think the ATP sometimes provided us with some different versions [of] how to look at the things and how to think about things. And this may help us improving our thinking, like critical thinking, and some other skills: how to understand different cultural diversities, have a contact with people from different cultures, how to communicate with these people.

Mediation, which lies in the heart of sociocultural theory approaches to language acquisition (Lantolf, 2000), was facilitated in the ATP through activities like painting and sharing of national foods. Within these activities, IPSs found the opportunity to socially construct meanings with native speakers and other IPSs. As the formerly quoted participant pointed out, the ATP created a relaxing environment in which members could personally improve their thinking skills and increase their literacy regarding cultural diversity.

One of the main objectives of the ATP was to help IPSs to successfully manage their PhD candidature by facilitating communication and cooperation among themselves and faculty members. The interview results revealed that IPSs found the ATP a secure environment where they could share information about their PhD research topics and receive feedback from their peers as indicated by this respondent's comment:

> Yes, it [ATP] is just that this feeling of sharing a common experience of being a PhD student… What does it mean for you to be a PhD student? How does it feel? How can you deal with it? So, sharing of all these ideas and difficulties, and feeling that you are not alone in this, I think it really helps.

Discussion

This study found that the IPSs who were participants in the Australian Tea Program had typically arrived in Australia with a good command of language skills. However, they encountered some language related difficulties during the initial stages of their residence in Australia. This gap may be traced back to the learning system the foreign language learners go through in their home countries. In many foreign language learning contexts, language learners usually do not have immediate access to authentic target language materials, and have limited access to practice their language knowledge in real-life situations with native speakers or other language learners who are competent users of that language (Borg, 2006). The time pressure inherent in such real-life conversational situations made the speaking and listening skills the main sources of initial difficulties for IPSs at the time of arrival to Australia. Attributing their difficulties to Australian accents, or frequent use of colloquial language, may indicate that the formal training which many of the IPSs had undertaken before leaving their home country had not sufficiently dealt with the varieties of English language and various genres and registers within it.

Studying abroad does not necessarily help all international students to improve their language skills. Prior research indicates that study abroad students' success rate depends on a range of variables, including their sense of identity, motives, and desire to interact (Kinginger, 2009). In this regard the findings in this study of the ATP were suggestive of positive directions in enabling informal social environments where spontaneous and supportive interactions can take place. The ATP offered

Enriching Personal Growth and Communicative Competence through
Self-organised Interaction between Native and Non-native Speakers

Mohsen Hedayati
Mohsen.hedayati@utas.edu.au

opportunities for IPSs to participate in regular English language communication with their peers, enhancing their sense of personal growth and engagement within their immediate community.

Members of the ATP described a range of linguistic benefits of participating in the group, which included improved communicative and comprehension skills and a greater sense of understanding the appropriate use of English. This suggests that the ATP supported ISPs in developing communicative competence (Canal & Swain, 1980) at the level of grammatical competence (defined as knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and semantics of a language). IPSs also reported enhanced levels of sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence in better understanding the appropriate use of language in different situations, and strategies for the initiation and maintenance of conversations, and compensating for weaknesses. While participants reported that this enhanced confidence with using English was beneficial for their studies, it is beyond the scope of this small-scale study to make claims of academic impacts of the ATP.

Socio-cultural benefits of participating in the ATP included feeling more comfortable in the university environment and a greater relaxation and engagement with their peers. Members described being more open to other cultures and ideas which may suggest the development of intercultural competence (Pellegrino, 2005), and overall this led to members reporting a sense of personal growth. The engagement with colleagues also studying in the postgraduate space offered a range of academic benefits for members of the group. This included having a better understanding of the requirements of being a PhD candidate as well as an enhanced knowledge of postgraduate research within the university more generally. Members reported being able to better manage problems related to their academic life as a result of being part of the ATP. This study has offered insights into linguistic and sociocultural benefits gained from participation in a self-organised peer circle. Recent research has also explored the impacts of such self-organised peer groups on IPSs' cultural wellbeing (Pavlyshyn, Emery, Hedayati & Nur, 2016). There may be value in universities supporting further research into self-organised peer groups to develop understandings about factors that are important for their successful establishment and ongoing sustainability, and to explore the academic impacts of participation in initiatives such as the ATP.

Conclusion

In the Australian educational system, where PhD candidature is mainly research-based, many international postgraduate students have limited interaction with their peers. They usually spend long hours doing research in their private workspace, often with infrequent opportunities to communicate with others, a situation that is particularly prevalent for international postgraduate students. In addition, the style of communication between PhD candidates and faculty members is often professional in nature, with a formality that can limit possibilities for scholarly conversations to emerge. Findings from this study conducted with international postgraduate students in an Australian suggest that participation in a self-organised peer group can enhance PhD candidates' engagement and personal growth, while supporting their development of communicative competence.

Enriching Personal Growth and Communicative Competence through
Self-organised Interaction between Native and Non-native Speakers

Mohsen Hedayati
Mohsen.hedayati@utas.edu.au

References

Amuzie, G. L., & Winke, P. (2009). Changes in language learning beliefs as a result of study abroad. *System*, *37*(3), 366-379.

Behrnd, V., & Porzelt, S. (2012). Intercultural competence and training outcomes of students with experiences abroad. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *36*(2), 213-223.

Borg, S. (2006). The distinctive characteristics of foreign language teachers. *Language Teaching Research*, 10(1), 3-31.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Canale, M. (1983). From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy. In J. C. Richards & R.W. Schmidt (Eds) *Language and Communication*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge. [1983/2013]. 2-27.

Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied linguistics*, *1*(1), 1-47.

Cheng, R. (2013). A non-native student's experience on collaborating with native peers in academic literacy development: A sociopolitical perspective. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 12*(1), 12-22.

Cresswell, J. W., & Plano-Clark, V. L. (2010). Designing and conducting mixed methods research (2 ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Dwyer, M. M. (2004). More Is Better: The Impact of Study Abroad Program Duration. *Frontiers: The interdisciplinary journal of study abroad*, *10*, 151-163.

García-Carbonell, A., Rising, B., Montero, B., & Watts, F. (2001). Simulation/gaming and the acquisition of communicative competence in another language. *Simulation & Gaming*, 32(4), 481-491

Isabelli, C., (2004). Study abroad for advanced foreign language majors: Optimal duration for developing complex structures In: *Byrnes, H., Maxim, H. (Eds.). Advanced Foreign Language Learning, A Challenge to College Programs*. Heinle, Canada, pp. 114–130.

Kinginger, C. (2009). *Language learning and study abroad*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Addison-Wesley Longman Ltd.

Lantolf, J. P. (2000). *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Pellegrino, V.A., (2005). *Study abroad and second language use: Constructing the self.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Pavlyshyn, H., Emery, S., Hedayati, M., & Nur, S. (2016). Crossing cultural boundaries with a cuppa: A case study of cultural wellbeing within a postgraduate peer circle. *Proceedings of the 2016 Australian Association of Research in Education Conference*, 27 November - 1 December 2016, Melbourne, Victoria. (2016) [Refereed Conference Paper].

Enriching Personal Growth and Communicative Competence through
Self-organised Interaction between Native and Non-native Speakers

Mohsen Hedayati
Mohsen.hedayati@utas.edu.au

Richards, J. C., & Schmidt, R. W. (2013). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Segalowitz, N., Freed, B.F., (2004). Context, contact, and cognition in oral fluency acquisition: Learning Spanish at home and study abroad contexts. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 26 (2), 173‑199.

Young, R., & Faux, W. V. (2011). Descriptions of difficult conversations between native and non-native English speakers: In-group membership and helping behaviors. *Qualitative Report, 16*(2), 494-508.

Wildner-Bassett, M. E. (1990). The clanger phenomenon and the foreign language learner. *IRAL-International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching,* 28(1), 27-42.

Enriching Personal Growth and Communicative Competence through
Self-organised Interaction between Native and Non-native Speakers

Mohsen Hedayati
Mohsen.hedayati@utas.edu.au

Appendices

Appendix 1.

Interview with IPSs

1. How long have you resided in Australia for the purpose of your postgraduate studies?

2. How often do you converse in English with native speakers during a typical week during your postgraduate studies?

   (Low level)   1 _____ 2 _____3 _____ 4   (High level)

          Rarely   a few   once per   multiple times

                    times   day   per day

3. In terms of your English language proficiency *before* coming to Australia, where would you place yourself on this continuum?

            Low level   1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5 ___ 6   High level

       of proficiency   of proficiency

4. In terms of your English language proficiency now that you have resided in Australia, where would you place yourself on this continuum?

            Low level   1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5 ___ 6   High level

       of proficiency   of proficiency

5. Please describe the language difficulties that you most often experience at the time of arrival in Australia.

6. How would you characterise the change in your English language proficiency?

7. What impact has the Australian Tea Program (ATP) had on your English language proficiency? What effects has the ATP had on your communicative skills?

8. In your experience how do your communicative skills affect your PhD candidature?