

Language Learning in Study Abroad: Case Histories of Americans in France

by Celeste Kinginger

The Pennsylvania State University
Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education
and Research

To appear as *The Modern Language
Journal Monograph* (Blackwell
Publishing) in 2008

This study was funded by a grant from the United States Department of Education (CFDA 84.229, P229A020010) to the Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research at the Pennsylvania State University. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and one should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

Rationale for the project

Study abroad (SA) has long been understood as a major source of foreign language competence for American students. Based on a large-scale, national assessment project, Carroll (1967) named time spent abroad as one of the most potent variables predicting language proficiency. Based on this solid proof claim, researchers have since investigated language learning in SA using diverse methods and adopting a wide variety of theoretical approaches (e.g., DuFon & Churchill, 2006; Freed, 1995). Over time, concern with general proficiency has given way to studies in which particular aspects of language competence (e.g., fluency, vocabulary growth, pragmatics) are scrutinized in separate studies. The results of these investigations generally show that while SA is certainly a productive context for language learning, its outcomes are neither as dramatic nor as equally distributed among students as one might hope they would be.

One of the key features of the SA literature is the regular documentation of individual differences in achievement outcomes, often attributed to such features as gender (e.g., Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsburg, 1995; Polanyi, 1995) or personality (DeKeyser, 1991). According to Huebner (1995), SA appears to accentuate individual differences: "the overseas experience seems to result in a much wider variety of performances and behaviors than does study at home" (p. 191). In light of these findings, contemporary scholarship has examined precisely what is it that students *do* while abroad, and these results are correlated with documented outcomes. Research examining the calendar diaries (Ginsberg & Miller, 2000), Language Contact Profiles (Freed, Segalowitz & Dewey, 2004), or documented social

networks (Isabelli-Garcia, 2006) of language learners abroad has shown that the greater the precision with which students' activity is documented, the more likely it is that credible links between the nature of the experience and learning outcomes can be shown.

In the meantime, there exists an abundant and growing research base of qualitative inquiry examining the process of language learning for Americans abroad. This research clearly shows that the nature of students' interactions abroad depends, on the one hand, upon the students' own priorities and interpretations of SA, and on the other, upon how these same students are received in the various social contexts and institutions they frequent while abroad. Some students shy away from all but the most rudimentary of interactions (Levin, 1991), whereas others make a personal mission of gaining access to local cultural institutions and social contexts (Kinginger, 2004). Some students are received with warmth and enthusiasm, whereas others find their presence noted with hostility or, at best, indifference (Wilkinson, 1998). Over the course of their sojourn abroad, American students often find that aspects of their gender, race, or national identity become highlighted in confusing, perhaps alienating ways (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005; Talburt & Stewart, 1999; Twombly, 1995).

Thus, taken together, the research base on language learning abroad includes: 1) ethnographic studies elucidating the qualities of the experience without corresponding documentation of outcomes; and 2) numerous studies documenting individual differences in outcomes which would rely, for effective interpretation, upon greater understanding of the qualities of the experience. As noted by Ginsburg and Miller (2000), if we want to understand language learning abroad, "we must dig deeper into the qualities and specific of student experiences, we must understand what students bring to them and how they use them *for learning*" (p. 256). In order to move in this direction, as DeKeyser (1991) has recommended, further research on the role of a stay abroad for language development "should not be limited to a simple pre-post design with or without a control group, but should be longitudinal, that is, follow the learners closely throughout the overseas experience, and *integrate test data with more ethnographic data*, paying due attention to individual differences (pp. 117 – 188, italics added).

Research design

The major aim of this project is to take up the challenge of "digging deeper" into the qualities and specifics of student experiences abroad while retaining a focus on the documentation of learning outcomes. Previous research on language learning has gone a long way toward debunking myths about SA as an unproblematic immersion experience. However, this research has also led to further questions; in addition to knowing what students do while abroad, it is useful to know why they choose SA, and what language learning in this context

means to them as American undergraduate students. It is helpful to examine the accessibility of language learning resources within host communities and the students' dispositions toward them (Norton, 2000).

While maintaining a focus on traditional language assessment, this project derives its main guiding principles from contemporary sociocultural theory, an approach insisting upon the dialectical relationship between language learning (and other human activity) and its social, historical, and institutional context (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Wertsch, 1998). Three key insights inform the study's design. The first of these is the notion that human action is fundamentally mediated: humans think, speak, and act by using cultural tools, including the narrative resources that characterize particular social settings (Bruner, 1986; Wertsch, 1998; 2002). In the case under consideration, students' dispositions toward language learning in SA will be partially shaped by a previously internalized repertoire of interpretive resources circulating in American society, including "collective memory" (Wertsch, 2002) of Franco-American history, and widely shared "social representations" (Moore, 2006) of SA, of language learning, of France and of the French. The second key notion is that the proper study of higher mental functions is developmental, that is, historical. Thus, a major aim of the study is to reconstruct the history of participation in language learning both for the group and for focal individual students. Finally, within this approach research subjects are interpreted as intentional human agents who play a defining role in their own development. If language is to be learned, the students involved must be committed to language learning in a profound and durable way.

Participants in the study were 24 undergraduate French majors and minors enrolled at a large, state university in the Northeastern United States. Because one of the aims of the study was to portray the full diversity of the SA experience, the study was open to all who would participate. Twenty-three of the students participated in various one-semester programs in France (Spring, 2003), including an array of different housing options (dormitory, apartment, or homestay) and 1 was enrolled in a full year homestay program. There were 19 female and 5 male participants, with the majority in their third year of university study. By virtue of their high grade point averages (all above 3.0 out of 4.0), all of the students qualified for their SA program; however, in terms of language preparation there was considerable variation within the group. Nineteen of the students agreed to participate in all aspects of the study, 4 participated in testing only, and one (the full year student) participated partially.

Data for the study include the results of various language assessments along with interviews, bi-weekly journal entries, language use logbooks, and on-site observation. Assessment for the study was designed to provide a comprehensive portrait of the students' academic and social / interpersonal language

development. The ability to perform well on academic tasks was represented by the *Test de Français International*, a standardized test of reading, listening, and grammatical knowledge. Pre- and post administrations of this test were accompanied by participation in a Language Awareness Interview in which students were asked to comment on their own knowledge of colloquial words and syntax, to state and explain their preference of address form (*tu* versus *vous*) for various hypothetical situations, and to match speech acts for leave taking to their proper context. Full participants in the study were interviewed a minimum of two times (before and immediately after their sojourn in France), and nine of these provided a third interview at the mid-term. Full participants also recorded their observations related to language learning in bi-weekly journal entries. At three week-long intervals during the semester, they also documented their choice of language throughout the day in a logbook. Data analysis include tabulation and interpretation of quantitative findings for the entire group, and detailed case histories of individual focal participants.

Assessment Results

The results of assessments carried out for this study mirror those of many other studies examining language learning abroad. They show that while SA appears to be a productive context for language learning, there is considerable variation in individual levels of achievement. As the group mean scores on the *Test de Français International* demonstrate, for example, the SA sojourn appears to have enhanced students' ability to perform well on an academic task, particularly in the area of listening.

Subtest / Time	Listening	Reading	Total
Pretest (mean)	261	288	549
Post-Test (mean)	322	306	628
Gain (mean)	61	18	79

Examination of the mean scores alone, however, does not reveal the significant variation in scores within the group. Results of the pre-Test de Français International ranged from a low score of 315 (Beginner) to a high score of 810 (Advanced Working Proficiency), while the post-test scores ranged from a low of 460 (Intermediate) to a high of 865 (Advanced Working Proficiency). When the gain scores are examined independently, we find that they range from a low of 20 points (including a 50 point gain in the listening score, and a 30 point drop in the reading score) to a high of 190 points.

Similarly, results for the various tasks included in the Language Awareness Interview show that these SA participants, as a group, gained in their ability to appreciate linguistic variability in French, but always with important exceptions. Most, but not all students developed greater precision and confidence in their manipulation of the French address form system (*tu*

versus *vous*). For the majority, but not for the entire group, SA proved to be a productive context for growth in awareness of everyday speech acts, colloquial vocabulary and syntax. Within each category, significant differences in individual achievement emerged.

Case studies

Whereas in many studies the reporting of assessment findings, perhaps correlated to indications of individual activity, constitutes the end of the story, the primary analytic effort of this research is devoted to understanding *why* some students succeed, as language learners while others do not. Six detailed case histories illustrate broad diversity in student experience abroad while also delving into a number of general themes relevant for the group as a whole. These themes are related to the contemporary SA experience for American students, showing the extent to which language immersion in SA today is a matter of choice, and perhaps of struggle.

First, today's SA experience is marked by the ongoing process of globalization, including enhanced access to mobility and to communications technology, the spread of English as an instrument of international business communication, and the commodification of such intangibles as global experience and language competence (Block & Cameron, 2002). Furthermore, in many countries globalization is viewed with deep suspicion, as an American project aimed at economic and military domination (Falk & Kanach, 2000). In the present case, the students were in France in the spring of 2003, during the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, a time when sociopolitical tension between the United States and Europe was at its highest point in the students' lifetimes.

The case histories for this project show that students going abroad today have experiences deeply influenced by the process of globalization. Via telecommunications technology, students' home social networks may remain perfectly intact and impervious to influence from the locale of their studies. Enhanced and affordable mobility makes travel readily accessible both to the students and to their friends and family, who may regularly visit the SA site. Students may find their own competence in English in high demand among potential second language interlocutors, and may struggle to locate informal contexts for second language use. They may find that aspects of their nationality are regularly challenged in unanticipated ways, both at home with their host families and in interactions with peers. These features taken together suggest that language immersion in SA is increasingly a matter of choice and of even at times of struggle, requiring a sincere and durable commitment to the development of language proficiency.

Secondly, American students tend to interpret their educational experiences abroad on a backdrop of dominant or alternative discourses of international education in the United States (Gore, 2005). According to Gore, the dominant discourses interpret SA as

parenthetical diversion from the business of academic achievement, analogous to the traditional Grand Tour, and appropriate mainly as a finishing touch on the decorative education of elite women. In the alternative interpretive framework, particularly visible since the tragic events of September 11, students express willingness to undergo hardship and face challenges in the interest of gaining intellectual perspectives and practical competence unavailable at home. Furthermore, they view SA as a personal investment in furthering peace, social justice, or national security.

The case histories for this project further show that interpretations of the dominant and alternative discourses of SA each come in an array of variations, and have consequences for the duration and quality of students' investments in language learning. The most successful language learners tend to be those who adopt an alternative interpretive approach, those who are actively seeking out worlds of difference and who are willing to suspend judgment in favor of gaining access to the perspectives of others. Among the highest achievers in the group are Bill, Liza, and Louis, each of whom adopted a unique approach to this quest for intercultural comprehension. Bill invested considerable effort toward enhancing the quality of his interpersonal relationships, Liza framed SA as a concrete step toward a career in international relations, and Louis immersed himself in the study of French literature and criticism as well as in his own French-mediated literary writing.

Students whose achievements tend to be more modest are those whose interpretation of SA leans toward the dominant discourses identified by Gore, those who find themselves unable or unwilling to surmount the difficulties posed by a globalized SA experience. Beatrice, for example, reacted to challenges based on her national identity with defensiveness, ultimately estranging herself from her host family and the only reliable context for language development presented to her in Paris. Lonely and alienated, Deirdre literally screened herself from engagement in local realities and social networks, preferring to spend all of her spare time in electronic interaction with friends and family at home. Ailis interpreted her semester abroad as a one-time opportunity for travel and consumption of high culture, all in the company of other Americans, and devoted very little time to study or exploration of her temporary home in France.

Implications

Language educators and policy makers alike regularly express great faith in the SA experience as a context for language learning, often based on successful, perhaps life-transforming experiences of their own. Perhaps the most important and compelling finding of this study is that SA is changing in an era of globalization, and in ways not easily recognizable by experienced educators. Statistics from the Institute for International Education's "Open Doors Report" reveal that while participation in SA is on the rise, students' sojourns are now typically of

one semester or less in length, and the students themselves tend to be majoring in social sciences or business-related fields rather than in foreign languages. The image of the foreign language major going abroad for a full year of study with the express purpose of enhancing language skills may now be tinged with anachronism. The typical American SA participant today may in fact view language competence as a useful if ultimately expendable add-on to an education in a field more readily perceived as practical. That student may arrive at a SA site equipped with iPod, cell phone, and laptop, and thereby prepared to remain quite self-sustaining as a social entity. He or she may or may not remain physically located in the SA locale, and/ or may entertain numerous visitors from home. In interaction with peers and host families, that student may encounter preference for the use of English, and may find his or her assumptions challenged in unfamiliar ways, particularly those assumptions related to national identity.

Although the quality of SA experiences is clearly as much a matter of students' chosen ways of life as it is subject to intervention by educators, there are clear implications to be taken from this and other research on language learning abroad. American students going abroad to learn languages today clearly need strategies (Paige et al., 2002), but they have greater, and perhaps more pressing needs as well. They need to understand that the development of advanced language competence requires a long-term investment of time and effort, and in light of this fact, they need to formulate realistic goals for the length of their sojourn abroad. They need to become aware of the role of language in shaping social reality, and learn to be astute observers of language in use. They need encouragement to choose an investment in the local context of their studies over the attractions of tourism or the safety of established online communities. Above all, they need to greet their interlocutors with an attitude of empathy, with sincere curiosity about the perspectives of others, and with willingness to suspend judgment in the interest of learning.

Works cited

Block, D. & Cameron, D. (Eds.) (2002). *Globalization and Language Teaching*. London: Routledge.

Brecht, R. Davidson, D. & Ginsburg, R. (1995). Predictors of foreign language gain during study abroad. In B. Freed (Ed.), *Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad Context* (pp. 37 - 66). Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Carroll, J. (1967). Foreign language proficiency levels attained by language majors near graduation from college. *Foreign Language Annals*, 1 : 131 - 151.

DeKeyser, R. (1991). Foreign language development during a semester abroad. In Freed, B.F. (Ed.), *Foreign Language Acquisition Research and the Classroom* (pp. 104 - 199). Lexington, MA; D.C. Heath.

DuFon, M. & Churchill, E. (Eds.) (2006). *Language Learners in Study Abroad Contexts*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Falk, R. & Kanach, N. (2000). Globalization and study abroad: An illusion of paradox. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 4: 155 - 168.

Freed, B. F. (Ed.) (1995). *Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad Context*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Freed, B. F., Segalowitz, N., & Dewey, D. (2004). Contexts of learning and second language fluency in French: Comparing regular classrooms, study abroad, and intensive domestic programs. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 26: 275 - 301.

Ginsburg, R. B. & Miller, L. (2000). What do they do? Activities of students during study abroad. In Lambert, R. D. & Shohamy, E. (eds.), *Language Policy and Pedagogy: Essays in Honor of A. Ronald Walton* (pp. 237 - 261). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins North America.

Gore, J. E. (2005). *Dominant Beliefs and Alternative Voices: Discourse, Belief, and Gender in American Study Abroad*. New York: Routledge.

Huebner, T. (1995). The effects of overseas language programs: Report on a case study of an intensive Japanese course. In Freed, B. (Ed.), *Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad Context* (pp. 171 - 193). Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Isabelli-Garcia, C.L. (2006). Study abroad social networks, motivation, and attitudes: Implications for SLA. In DuFon, M. & Churchill, E. (eds.), *Language Learners in Study Abroad Contexts* (pp. 231 - 258). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Kinginger, C. (2004). Alice doesn't live here anymore: Foreign language learning as identity (re)construction. In Pavlenko, A. & Blackledge, A. (eds.), *Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts* (pp. 219 - 242). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Lantolf, J.P. & Thorne, S. L. (2006). *Sociocultural Theory and the Genesis of Second Language Development*. London: Oxford University Press.

Levin, D. M. (2001). Language learners' sociocultural interaction in a study abroad context. PhD Thesis, Indiana University. Dissertation Abstracts International - A 62(2), 498.

Moore, D. (2004). *La représentation des langues et de leur apprentissage: Références, modèles, données et méthodes*. Paris: Didier Collection CREDIF Essais.

Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity, and Educational Change*. London: Longman.

Paige, R. M., Cohen, A.D., Kappler, B., Chi, J.C. & Lassegard, J. P. (2002). *Maximizing Study Abroad: A Student's Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use*. University of Minnesota: Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition.

Pellegrino Aveni, V. (2005). *Study Abroad and Second Language Use: Constructing the Self*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Talbur, S. & Stewart, M.A. (1999). What's the subject of study abroad? Race, gender and 'living culture.' *Modern Language Journal* 83: 163 -175.

Twombly, S. B. (1995). Piropos and friendship: Gender and culture clash in study abroad. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 1: 1 - 27.

Wertsch, J. (1998). *Mind as Action*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wilkinson, S. (1998). On the nature of immersion during study abroad: Some participants' perspectives. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 4: 121 -138.