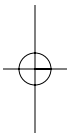
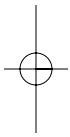




AAUSC Issues in Language Program Direction

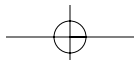
Insights from Study Abroad for Language Programs

Sharon Wilkinson
Editor



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Introduction:

The View from Abroad

Sharon Wilkinson

Editor

A friend of mine, who had studied abroad years ago in Edinburgh, Scotland, passed along to me a recent copy of the University of Edinburgh's alumni magazine because it featured an article that she thought I might find interesting. She was right. It was the award-winning essay of an ERASMUS participant from Edinburgh, who was reflecting on her year at the University of Aix-Marseille 3 in southern France. Her first lines already struck a chord with me:

I didn't know how to ask for a new light bulb in French. I knew the use of light and dark in *Pbèdre* reflect her character, the principles of Camus's existentialism, the use of irony and satire in *Candide*. (Knapman, 2005, p. 19)

This gap is a familiar one. It characterized my own experiences as a study abroad student; it has been a *leitmotiv* in the data I have collected as study abroad researcher; it has surfaced repeatedly in the articles I have read about study abroad, irrespective of host country and target language. In short, it is a variation on the familiar theme "I took X years of (fill in a language), and I can't say a thing."

The repercussions of this gap between what one knows from the classroom and what one needs to know in the immersion environment are not negligible, as Knapman further observes in her essay:

All conversations follow the same structure:

"Salut! Ça va?"

"Oui, ça va. Et toi?"

"Oui, ça va."

All other conversation attempts on my behalf do not seem to work. I do not have enough vocabulary. They do not want to talk about what they do in their "*temps libre*" or how many brothers and sisters they have.

They talk quickly. I pretend to know what they are saying. Six years of French—I should understand. There is silence—people try to talk to me in English. People comment on my "*petit*" accent, my mispronunciation, patronise me and talk about me like I am not there. I get used to the silence. Sometimes you just don't have any French words to say. (p. 19)

Indeed, the events and experiences that take place once students arrive with their classroom-acquired skills in a country that they have heretofore seen only

through the lens of instruction have a lot to tell us about that curricular preparation. The view from abroad can prompt us to reflect on classroom traditions that might otherwise go unquestioned. What kinds of knowledge and skills do students need to gain entry into a target-language community? What kinds of native-speaker reactions should students be prepared to encounter and interpret? How might these differ from typical textbook fare and curricular foci?

Not only can the perspective from overseas help us notice gaps that might otherwise remain invisible, but the prowess of the study abroad environment for helping students meet stateside linguistic and cultural learning goals can also give us new ideas for making our home-campus programs more effective. Toward the end of her essay, Knapman (2005) describes the effectiveness of her study abroad experience this way:

I don't work out pronoun orders and tenses in my head before I speak. . . . I "vous" and "tu" at appropriate moments; I know many ways of saying the same thing; I alternate. I dance with the language; it makes me laugh with pleasure; I can argue a point, ask for items in shops, for forms in offices. I can be funny, be a friend, be myself. I have woven something practical, something pretty with the multi-coloured threads I brought with me. (p. 21)

Investigating experiences such as the ones Knapman and so many other study abroad students describe can lead us to consider which aspects of in-country immersion might be replicable at home, such that more students can begin to "dance with the language" and culture whether or not they go overseas.

This volume of the AAUSC series *Issues in Language Program Direction* delves into the curricular questions raised by study abroad by starting from an overseas vantage point. Specifically, eight different researchers and research teams share their data with us with the aim of helping us see our own practices in a new light. The four projects that comprise Part 1 of the volume focus on the outcomes of study abroad and, in so doing, reflect on ways in which home practices might be better adapted to achieve immersion-like results. In Chapter 1, Dubiner, Freed, and Segalowitz consider the question of fluency, looking specifically at which characteristics of learners' speech cause native speakers to judge them as more or less fluent. Not only do their data confirm our intuitions that the study abroad environment is more effective than the stateside classroom in helping students improve their fluency, but their findings also give us insights into the specific aspects of oral language that contribute to fluent-sounding speech and prompt the researchers to propose techniques that we might use in the classroom to promote the development of fluency at home.

In Chapter 2, Magnan and Back investigate gains in pragmatic competence during study abroad, focusing on issues of register in the formulation of requests. They observe that semester-abroad students do progress toward more native-like ways of wording requests, but that the degree of improvement seems to be closely tied to overall proficiency gains. The patterns they find in their data give us food for thought on how we might prime students at lower levels for acquiring pragmatic

competence and how we can help returning study abroad participants to continue to make progress in this area.

Chapter 3 turns to grammatical language gains, as Duperron looks at the acquisition of tense and aspect in French in relation to length of stay. Comparing the accuracy of both semester- and year-abroad students in the interpretation and use of *passé composé* and *imparfait* verb forms, her study reveals that the crucial period for acquisition gains overseas occurs during the first four months of stay. Moreover, her data have much to tell us about the interlanguage development of tense and aspect, findings which Duperron applies to the classroom learning context as well.

Completing Part 1 on the outcomes of study abroad, Dewey examines reading and vocabulary learning gains in Chapter 4, focusing on the unique challenges presented by orthographically complex languages, such as Japanese. Recognizing that reading is not a skill typically associated with the most common by-products of overseas immersion, Dewey shows that the study abroad environment is superior to the stateside classroom in helping students develop receptive vocabulary knowledge and literacy skills. He also compares both home and abroad settings with the third option of intensive domestic immersion, arguing that elements of each of these environments could be effectively woven into the curriculum to maximize learning.

Following this exploration of the insights we can gain from examining various products of study abroad, Part 2 of this volume then focuses on what we can learn from the processes catalyzed by an overseas immersion experience. Chapter 5 sets the stage for this group of chapters through a discussion of one of the most fundamental processes of study abroad—the development of intercultural competence. Deardorff, an international programs administrator, shares with us her theory-building research on the definition of the construct of intercultural competence and on the complex, recursive nature of its development. Her model holds important implications for curricular design, both at home and abroad, and her work gives us a refreshing perspective from outside the foreign language teaching profession.

Many processes of study abroad, including the development of intercultural competence, take place at an individual level. In Chapter 6, Pellegrino Aveni examines how these processes affect identity and self-construction, which, in turn, influence language use. Her ethnographic data give us new insights into the complex issues surrounding learner choices about speaking in the foreign environment. They also prompt us to reflect on the relationship between language and identity, which, although salient in the overseas context, impacts learning in stateside classroom settings as well. Pellegrino Aveni poses a number of questions to help us analyze how we can more effectively incorporate awareness of identity and self-construction into the curriculum.

Like identity, motivation also plays an important role in language learning, particularly in the overseas context. In Chapter 7, Douglass tackles this complex issue through a case study of one semester-abroad student. As she tracks this learner's experiences and her interpretations of them over the course of the overseas program, Douglass reveals how motives, initially grounded in an individual's social history, are continually influenced by shifting circumstances, behaviors,

strategies, and reactions. This in-depth account gives us insight into the ways in which motivation can influence language and cultural learning not only during study abroad, but also in U.S. classrooms.

Although all of the chapters in the volume address how greater understanding of study abroad products and processes can inform stateside instructional practices, Chapter 8 considers in depth one option for the home campus curriculum. Beginning with an analysis of the aspects of study abroad that might be desirably replicated at home, Dupuy argues for the benefits of global simulation as a way to involve students in immersion-like experiences within the walls of the classroom. Through a detailed account of how global simulation can be implemented in an intermediate-level French course, Dupuy provides an example that is easily applicable to other languages and levels and, in so doing, helps us prioritize the dimensions of the study abroad experience that are most needed in our home curricula.

In sum, through both product and process vantage points, the chapters in this volume have much to tell language educators about study abroad and its potential role in the foreign language curriculum. They also give us new ideas for bridging the gaps between home and host environments, such that all readers, whether or not we are directly involved in organizing or leading study abroad programs, can benefit from their insights, as we reconsider our instructional practices from a new perspective.

References

- Knapman, C. (2005). Crossing borders and expanding boundaries. *Edit Magazine*, 4, 19-21.