

Introduction

Special Issue: Language Learning in a Study Abroad Context

With each passing year the number of students worldwide who participate in overseas educational programs of study continues to increase. This number has recently approached 100 million students who have chosen to leave their homes to study in a country or province other than their own. These experiences, traditionally referred to by Americans as "study abroad," include a wide assortment of program options in which students are enrolled in a formal academic context at the same time that they have, at least in principle, the opportunity to participate in the daily experience of living in a culture other than their own. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of those who participate in education abroad programs are international students who come to study in the United States (Desruisseaux 1996: A64). However, within the European Union, some 80,000 students have taken part in exchanges of various types (see Coleman, this volume). At the same time, the number of American students who elect to include study abroad as an integral part of their undergraduate program is rapidly rising. While the total number of American students who participate in these programs still represents only 1% of the enrollment in higher education, the number who make study abroad a part of their college experience has increased in the course of the last decade. Recent figures indicate that in 1995-1996 (the last year for which reliable figures are currently available) that almost 90,000 American students participated in a wide variety of educational experiences throughout the world - an increase of almost 6% since the prior year. (Desruisseaux 1997: A42-46).

As all those who deal with study abroad programs know, there are numerous compelling reasons to encourage students to participate in a study abroad experience. The personal and academic benefits of these experiences have been dealt with in depth elsewhere (e.g., Baron and Smith 1987; Byram 1988; Coleman and Rouxville 1993; Carlson, Burn et al. 1990; Dalichow and Teichler 1986; Goodwin and Nacht 1988; Inkster 1993; Johnson and Edelstein 1993; Koester 1985; Laubscher, 1994; Teichler and Steube 1991) and will not be explored here. Rather, this volume of *Frontiers* will focus exclusively on one of the most pervasive arguments in favor of study abroad - the opportunity to acquire high levels of proficiency in a another language. As Goodwin and Nacht (1988:16) stated in their comprehensive review of education abroad programs "the mastery of a modern language has traditionally been perceived as the most direct educational benefit of study abroad." Indeed, with the exception of the approximately 20,000 American students who in the recent past have chosen to study in English-speaking countries (Desruisseaux. 1997, A45), those American students who elect to study in non-Anglophone countries (largely concentrated in Western Europe but including as well Japan, China, Russia, Latin America, various parts of Africa and the mid- and far East) do so for the opportunity to learn a language and culture other than their own. For these students, increased language and cultural proficiency become one of the paramount reasons for studying abroad.

It is the experiences of students such as these that constitute the basis for the seven articles which follow. Complementary but distinct, they fall naturally into several

different general categories. The introductory article, "Methodological Considerations in Data Collection for Language Learning in a Study Abroad Context," by Thom Huebner, discusses the wide array of variables and possible research approaches and techniques that need to be considered in conducting research that investigates the linguistic impact of study abroad experiences. Huebner offers not only a framework for evaluating, assessing and measuring the effectiveness of study abroad but also for integrating and interpreting the diversity of research which appears in this volume. The following two chapters, "An Overview of Issues and Research in Language Learning in a Study Abroad Setting" by Barbara F. Freed and "Sociolinguistics and Language Learning in a Study Abroad Context" by Vera Regan are examples of some of the research options outlined by Huebner. Freed offers a broad overview of much of the current literature which explores the growth of language proficiency among students who have spent a period of time abroad and includes a descriptive linguistic profile of students who have "studied abroad." In deference to the chapters which follow in this specially-edited volume, Freed tends to emphasize research conducted by American scholars and of those, research that is more quantitative in nature. Regan, by contrast, devotes her discussion to the growing body of literature which explores the development of sociolinguistic competence among students who have had out-of-country experiences.

The next series of three articles, "Student Perspectives on Language Learning in a Study Abroad Context" by Valerie Pellegrino, "On the Nature of Immersion During Study Abroad: Some Participant Perspectives" by Sharon Wilkinson and "Literacy and Language Learning in a Study Abroad Context" by Rebecca Kline address the topic from a different but related perspective. By contrast to the preceding two articles which focus on precise qualities and/or linguistic features in the language of students who have been abroad, these three authors address the topic of language learning by meticulously investigating the study abroad experience and setting themselves, portrayed primarily in the students' own voices and from their own perspectives. Their goal is to look closely at what actually happens during study abroad in an attempt to elucidate the types of social interactions students have in the study abroad setting, how students interpret these interactions and how they, in turn, may affect their learning. Pellegrino provides a comprehensive overview of qualitative and introspective research, emphasizing individual student perceptions of the value of "in-class" learning as compared to learning which takes place in the native speech community. The work she discusses, emerging from ethnographic, journal, diary and interview data, offers new insights which enriches the study abroad literature. Important among these, as Pellegrino is careful to emphasize, is the value derived from understanding student perceptions and the impact they ultimately have on the actual language learning experience. Wilkinson's approach, similar to Pellegrino's, results in unsuspected findings about the nature of the "immersion" experience itself and a related series of myths about study abroad to which many of us have innocently subscribed. Kline, utilizing a similar qualitative approach to gathering data, addresses a neglected area in the study abroad research-that of literacy. Rather than focusing on the "product" of reading as it has traditionally been understood within the formal language classroom, Kline expands our knowledge by urging an exploration of "literacy as social practice." In so doing, she reveals the benefits of looking at process rather than product as she explores the lives of readers.

The final article in this volume "Language Learning and Study Abroad: The European Perspective," by James Coleman, concentrates on the background and rapidly growing literature on exchanges within the European perspective. Coleman provides American readers with a rich and detailed discussion of the European context and a valuably different perspective on the general topic.

Not surprisingly, there are complementary overlaps within these chapters as individual authors provide background information and validate their research approaches. Such overlaps serve to highlight some of the crucial issues and contribute to a thematic unity to the volume. Among the recurrent themes that readers will encounter, the following might be listed:

1. a growing recognition of the highly complex nature of the study abroad experience, the significance of individual variables in each student's profile and the inherent risks in making unwarranted generalizations
2. the diversity of research approaches that range from strictly quantitative to richly qualitative and the benefits of combining both approaches in efforts to fully describe and understand language learning that occurs in a study abroad setting
3. the danger of relying on measurement devices that are holistic in nature, that include inherent ceiling effects, that are insufficiently refined to assess linguistic growth among more advanced students, resulting in inappropriate conclusions about the relationship between language learning and the study abroad experience
4. the responsibility of searching beyond long-standing but popular assumptions about the nature and value of residence abroad

As will be seen in exploring the articles included in this volume, each author has chosen to describe a slightly different aspect of the potential relationship between language learning and study abroad. Consequently, a variety of perspectives are offered on how best to access, assess and interpret the interlocking questions related to the linguistic impact of the experiences students encounter as part of a sojourn abroad. Read as a group, these seven articles provide the most current exploration of the topic, offering the reader an in-depth summary of the extant literature on the language learning that can and does occur in a study abroad context.

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