

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF SPANISH, ITALIAN AND PORTUGUESE

THE DIFFICULTIES OF MEASURING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN A STUDY
ABROAD CONTEXT

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SPRING 2016

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees in Spanish, French and Francophone Studies and Communication Arts
and Sciences
with honors in Spanish

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ABSTRACT

This thesis poses the following questions: what is meant by proficiency in a second language, within study abroad contexts? What are some of the complications (both concept wise when measuring proficiency, and in terms of conducting research) when measuring proficiency and researching whether a semester of education abroad does in fact contribute to the improvement of language proficiency of a college student's second language? This thesis offers an overview of some of the difficulties of measuring language proficiency in a college student's L2 (second language) in study abroad contexts. The premise presented in this thesis is that there are some difficulties and limitations to researching and proving that proficiency is improved during a semester of a study abroad program. It is difficult to assess the degree to which study abroad may improve proficiency, due to certain criteria used to measure proficiency in some studies. Nonetheless, research does show that a semester of a study abroad program is advantageous, and will benefit a college student's language acquisition and proficiency of an L2 language. For instance, these findings can be applied to students' semesters abroad in Spain, and the impact of that experience on their Spanish (as an L2) proficiency.

The conclusion is that a semester long study abroad program may in fact have positive effects on a college student's language acquisition and proficiency, and is valuable in a cost-benefit analysis. Additionally, this thesis is intended to underscore that despite the numerous studies done in the field of education abroad, a lot more research remains to be done, particularly while considering some of the limiting factors. Lastly, this is a gateway to advocate for study abroad (given some of its advantages), through compiling and analyzing some qualitative data.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to Professor John Lipski (Professor of Spanish and Linguistics) and Dr. Celeste Kinginger (Professor of Applied Linguistics and French) at The Pennsylvania State University, without whom this honors thesis truly would not have been possible. It was a great privilege to work with such distinguished faculty members who are experts in their fields.

Furthermore, I would like to thank my friends and family for their continuous support and countless words of motivation during the entire process of my honors thesis.

Lastly, I would like to thank all of my Spanish professors, at home and abroad. Specifically, I would like to thank my freshman year Spanish III professor (Miguel Ramírez) for introducing the concept of study abroad to our class, thus awakening my curiosity and passion for traveling and learning about different cultures and languages. I would also like to thank the CIEE organization for offering amazing study abroad programs, presenting me with the opportunity to have a life-changing experience abroad in Seville, Spain. And of course, I would like to thank the city of Seville (and all of the people I met during my study abroad experience), for welcoming me into its warm and amazing culture, teaching me life lessons I will never forget, giving me memories I will always cherish, enabling me to advocate for study abroad, and being the inspiration for this thesis.

Chapter 1 : Introduction

Background information & literature review:

The purposes of this thesis are to examine what is meant by second language proficiency and then explore certain existing difficulties of measuring that proficiency, (which may or may not be attained) during a semester of study abroad. The question of proficiency in a foreign language has been researched for decades. While much research has been done and many studies conducted on acquiring language proficiency, the techniques, procedures, effects, and other intricacies of measuring and assessing language (L2) acquisition and proficiency remain to be further explored. Through ongoing research focusing on the subject of study abroad and college students' experiences and acquired proficiency during that time period, findings have generally indicated that education abroad does in fact contribute to improved language proficiency in an L2 (for the purpose of this thesis, results can also be applied to the Spanish language, during study abroad semesters in Spain). Many believe that it is essential for learners of a second language to be fully immersed in the foreign language community (their host country), in other words, study abroad for example, in order to achieve higher proficiency and language skills (Freed, 1995, p.123). In addition, being immersed in the host country would enable and practically push the students to be more willing to communicate. Nonetheless, there are some problems to be considered when researching the effects of a semester long study abroad program on a college students' language proficiency; these factors will be explored in this thesis.

The questions

The following questions are posed:

- What are the criteria for measuring/assessing proficiency in a second language, within study abroad contexts?
 - o In particular, what is the relevance of the terms: communication ability, cognitive capacity and language skills -oral and grammatical?
- What are some of the limiting factors and difficulties in measuring proficiency and researching whether a semester of study abroad does in fact contribute to the improvement of language proficiency of a college student's second language (in this case Spanish)?

Premise

The premise of this thesis is that there are certain limiting factors within the research conducted on the proficiency of college students' L2 Spanish language within the context of a semester of study abroad, which make it difficult to conclude that a semester of study abroad does in fact contribute to improved proficiency. Therefore, more extensive research remains to be done, all the while accounting for more and more variables that arise within studies, when gauging the improvement of the proficiency of a second language within study abroad contexts.

Chapter 2: Study Abroad

What does a semester of study abroad in Spain entail?

In general, a semester of study abroad is anywhere between three to four months of a college student's (usually a sophomore or a junior- but not limited to those ages) academic year, encompassing a standard semester. During their semester abroad, students will be involved in an academic program that is best fitted for their academic needs and/or interests. This can include classes that are purely in English (their native language), are in Spanish (full immersion- with local students or full immersion- with other English speaking students), or a combination of both. These classes may include language courses, general education courses, and elective courses. Furthermore, there is a variety of extra curricular options including: local tours, trips around the country and internationally, additional classes, and the list goes on. Another primary aspect is the living arrangements: living with a host family, in a residence hall (populated by local or international students), or in apartments with other English-speaking students. There are many study abroad organizations that cooperate with colleges and universities all over the world, to cater to the students' individual needs. Such programs vary based on the academic institution, but one such popular example is the CIEE study abroad organization (<https://www.ciee.org/study-abroad/>).

What have been some general reported benefits of a semester abroad?

In general, research has found that a college student's language proficiency will improve, after a semester of study abroad (Freed, 1995, p.173). However, this varies on a case-by-case basis. There are certain factors to consider when making the generalization that a semester abroad improves foreign language proficiency: the individuals' capacities and previous language exposure, the individuals' willingness and curiosity to immerse and apply themselves, and the individuals' circumstances while abroad (their living arrangements and exposure to the foreign language). Furthermore, it is essential to clarify what constitutes language proficiency, first and foremost, in terms of a foreign language. Lastly, it is necessary to account for certain inter-subject variability when conducting foreign language proficiency studies within study abroad contexts; since the subjects are humans, there must always be room for variation.

Chapter 3: Language Proficiency & its Measurements

What is an L2 language and what is L2 language proficiency?

An L2 is a language being learned past the hypothesized critical period (Purves, 2001, p.559), and most often during the late teenage years, into adulthood (past the critical point). The definition of language proficiency has been researched and debated, but one accepted and often used definition in academia is derived from the ACTFL guidelines, which are the basis for the ACTFL Proficiency Tests. Furthermore, according to Language Testing International (a leading language proficiency assessment organization), “Language proficiency refers to a person’s ability to use a language for a variety of purposes, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing” (<http://www.languagetesting.com/language-proficiency-assessments>).

What is the ACTFL proficiency test and other language proficiency scales?

The ACTFL Proficiency Tests reflect and measure the real world tasks and applications through which the proficiency of a language – and for the purpose of this thesis, a foreign language – is tested and measured. The ACTFL scale is the one that is used particularly in academia (<http://www.languagetesting.com/actfl-proficiency-scale>). More specifically, a proficiency test aims to measure what individuals can do in real life situations, with the information they already possess in terms of language (in other words, measuring their ability to communicate and use their language skills, as opposed to measuring the knowledge of specific information that they may hold). The ACTFL Proficiency Tests compare a person's natural (unrehearsed) language ability, against a set of language descriptors based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. These guidelines describe proficiency along a continuum (ranging from full professional proficiency to very little or no functional language ability). The ratings along the proficiency scale depend only on the speaker's demonstrated ability to use language in real life scenarios (as opposed to factors such as how many years that individual has been studying the language, or which textbooks were being used – which is a criterion used in achievement tests) (<http://www.languagetesting.com/understanding-proficiency>). While the ACTFL test is commonly used to define language proficiency there are other scales and tests that exist, as well. One such example is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Primarily used in Europe, this framework was designed to provide a broad and coherent basis for the elaboration of language syllabi and curriculum guidelines, as well as the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency (http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1_en.asp).

Other aspects of language proficiency

Overall, there are certain aspects that are necessary in order for an individual to possess language proficiency. One must know societal conventions, cultural aspects of a society, and possess language variability. Additionally, “essential skills for communication in foreign languages consist of the ability to understand spoken messages, to initiate, sustain and conclude conversations and to read, understand and produce texts appropriate to the individual's needs. [...] A positive attitude involves the appreciation of cultural diversity, and an interest and curiosity in languages and intercultural communication” (Fontelles, Enestam, 2006, p.15). For the purpose of this thesis, there will be three main aspects discussed particularly, based off of (and encompassing) the aforementioned attributes that define proficiency. They are: communication ability, cognitive capacity, and oral language skills.

What is meant by communication ability?

Communication ability, in both a native tongue, as well as a foreign language, refers to the “ability to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in an appropriate range of societal and cultural contexts (in education and training, work, home and leisure) according to one's wants or needs” (Fontelles, Enestam, 2006, p.14). However, communication in any language, and expressly in a foreign language, also requires skills like mediation and intercultural understanding. Moreover, the level of proficiency varies and is classified among four dimensions, as follows: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For every individual, these dimensions will vary between different languages and are based on that individual's social and cultural background, environment and needs/ interests.

What is meant by cognitive capacity?

Cognitive capacity refers to the total finite amount of information that the human brain is capable of retaining at any particular moment. Within the context of cognitive capacity, Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy of Educational Objectives can be referenced as a framework for categorizing educational goals for students (which can also be applied to language education). Among the three taxonomies (knowledge-based, skills-based, and affective goal) that exist as subcategories, the knowledge-based taxonomy applies most directly to cognitive capacity. The knowledge-based taxonomy focuses on the measurable student outcome of knowledge, comprehension, application analysis synthesis and evaluation, as educational objectives. (Bloom, 1956, p. 201-207). This knowledge-based taxonomy can be directly applied to language learning (in the aims of proficiency), as a result of cognitive capacity. Armstrong (2016) offers a revised taxonomy, in which knowledge is at the basis of cognitive processes. The following different types of knowledge are used in cognition, as an outcome of cognitive capacity: factual knowledge (such as knowledge of terminology, which directly employs language), conceptual knowledge, procedural knowledge, and metacognitive knowledge. The knowledge-based taxonomy as well as the different types of knowledge that are used in cognition are crucial when it comes to learning, in any capacity. Although a lot of research remains to be done in the field of language learning (and in this case, of second language learning and acquisition), the knowledge types used in cognition as a result of cognitive capacity apply to understanding second language learning, and how proficiency is potentially attained.

What is meant by oral language skills?

In terms of measuring language skills, there are multiple factors that come into play, such as literacy, pragmatics, fluency, and others. One salient component that is included in those measurements is the oral language skills (which includes grammatical capabilities).

Oral language is defined as the system through which individuals use spoken words to express knowledge, ideas, and feelings (Lesaux & Harris, n.d., p.1). It implies developing the skills and knowledge necessary to provide the foundation for listening, speaking and writing, for an individual. In general the oral language is made up of five essential components: vocabulary (which is understanding the meaning of words and phrases), syntax (which is understanding word order and grammar rules), morphological skills (which is understanding the meaning of word forms and parts), pragmatics (which is understanding the social rules of communication), and phonological skills (which is having an awareness of sounds, such as syllables and rhymes).

Within oral language skills, grammatical competence must be noted, as well. In order to have grammatical competence, knowledge of vocabulary and functional grammar, as well as an awareness of the main types of verbal interaction and registers of language, are required.

Chapter 4: Language Proficiency Measurements

How is proficiency usually measured and what are the shortcomings of such techniques?

It is essential to have valid and reliable language proficiency assessments. One proposed way of endeavoring to do so (by Language Testing International) is by meeting all of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) requirements, in order to determine true second language proficiency. Language Testing International attempts to accurately and effectively test proficiency, by adhering to the ACTFL requirements.

Furthermore, it has been providing proficiency assessments for testing over 100 languages, and is a leader in the field of language testing, today. According to Language Testing International (<http://www.languagetesting.com/language-proficiency-assessments>), it is not possible to measure proficiency (the effective use of a language in real world situations) based solely on a test measuring correct and incorrect answers. Language proficiency must therefore be based on proficiency skills (ability to apply language to real- life scenarios) rather than knowledge acquisition (knowing the right answers from the wrong). In other words, testing proficiency cannot simply be reduced to measuring an individual's grammar and vocabulary skills (for example), but must rather implement a way to test proficiency (in terms of the actual usage of language skills) in four separate areas: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Under these testing circumstances, the goal is to give an accurate measure of an individual's abilities in an actual-real world situation, using language within the four aforementioned areas. It is crucial to assess students' language proficiency, by evaluating their ability to engage in conversation,

understand written or spoken text, and present information orally or in writing. While not all students acquire proficiency in the same way (each individual is unique in his/her learning capacities and styles), each individual can be assessed on his/her proficiency regardless, and should be able to increase/improve that proficiency as long as he/she is immersed in a high quality language program, taught by a fluent and capable teacher. Proficiency assessment also allows for accurate feedback to the students themselves, on their performance.

Communicative competence

In addition to proficiency, the second language learning field includes a concept called communicative competence, used to determine how capable individuals are at using their language skills in real-life scenarios. Bagarić (2007, p.94) explains this as the competence of individuals to communicate. As such, “It should be clear, then, that the implications for language teaching that we can draw from the notions of communicative competence apply primarily to situations where the learners live in the country of the target language, whether they are second language speakers or foreign students”, states Paulston (1974, p.354).

According to The National Capitol Language Resource Center– which gives an introduction to the language teaching methods that are currently used in U.S. universities and is based on the material in Modules for the Professional Preparation of Teaching Assistants in Foreign Languages (Grace Stovall Burkart, ed.; Center for Applied Linguistics, 1998) (<http://www.nclrc.org/essentials/goalsmethods/goal.htm>)–communicative competence is made up of four competence areas: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic:

Linguistic competence demonstrates knowing how to use the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a language, properly. Sociolinguistic competence exhibits knowledge on how to use and respond to language appropriately, based on the setting, topic, and relationships among the people communicating within a given situation. Discourse competence displays the ability to interpret the larger context of the conversation, and how to construct longer parts of language so that those parts make up a coherent whole within the conversation. Strategic competence is possessing the ability to recognize and repair communication failures, knowing how to work around gaps in one’s knowledge of the language, and figuring out how to learn more about the language, within different contexts.

Chapter 5: Language Proficiency & Its Contributing Factors

As previously explained, there are many factors to be considered when measuring an individual's proficiency of a foreign language. However, for the purpose of this thesis, there are two main variables that will be examined within previously conducted studies and their conclusions. Additionally, those two variables will be analyzed, followed by a discussion as to why there are certain difficulties in making assertions and conclusions of accomplished proficiency, based on those variables. The two aforementioned variables are the environment and the motivation, within the study abroad context, and how they relate to attaining foreign language proficiency.

What is meant by the contributing factor of the environment to proficiency, within the study abroad context?

A major contributing factor to proficiency within a study abroad context is that of environment. Environment is the context within which the college student is learning the L2 in the host country, and has exposure to the language; in other words, has a lot of interaction in the second language. Primarily, this is seen through two main factors: the exposure to the second language in social settings (i.e.: in certain outings, while meeting local people, going on local trips, etc.), and the homestay factor (when students opt to stay with a local host family for the duration of their study abroad semester).

What is meant by the contributing factor of the motivation to proficiency, within the study abroad context?

Another major contributing factor to proficiency within a study abroad context is the factor of motivation. Motivation is reflected through intellectual curiosity and willingness to communicate in the L2 language, while abroad in the host country. More specifically, as Sklare (2007) explains, intellectual curiosity refers to “[...] one’s desire to invest time and energy into learning more about a person, place, thing or concept...” Additionally, willingness to communicate refers to the psychological preparedness to use the L2 (second language) when the opportunity presents itself. As MacIntyre (2007, p. 2) explains, “This requires a focus on the specific moment of decision where a L2 learner chooses to become a L2 speaker. It is suggested that the choice to initiate communication in a L2 is one of the primary facilitators of language use, and as such, may be an important predictor of language survival”. Furthermore, since languages are learned by individuals operating in social contexts, both psychological and sociopolitical processes are relevant to establishing the willingness to communicate. All of those factors depend on many circumstances such as the thoughts and feelings of individuals, the languages that are spoken locally, the minority languages, and the demographic of the host country.

Chapter 6: Studies & Proficiency Factors Within Study Abroad: Analysis

The difficulties in measuring proficiency within study abroad contexts

There are multiple difficulties when attempting to measure the proficiency acquired by college students within study abroad contexts. For one, there is the ongoing debate over the actual definition of the term ‘proficiency’ given the second language context (as discussed previously). Yet, even when using the ACTFL guidelines to define proficiency, the studies conducted to measure said proficiency face certain challenges. For example, the methods of conducting the research, analyzing the subjects of the studies, properly evaluating the results, and applying the results to broader contexts, present only some of the potential difficulties in coming up with concrete conclusions based on the studies conducted.

The four studies that will be presented and analyzed shortly exemplify some of the aforementioned difficulties found, when conducting research on proficiency within an education abroad context. These particular four studies were carefully chosen for analysis, as they represent the measurements of certain factors that contribute to proficiency: intellectual curiosity and willingness to communicate (both aspects of the motivation factor of proficiency), as well as a homestay experience (a popular study in this field) and interaction (both aspects of the environment factor of proficiency). One study was chosen per each of the two aspects within the two factors of proficiency (motivation and environment), to represent the difficulties (including some shortcomings and critiques) found in every study, in measuring for proficiency improvement within the context of education abroad.

Study #1: The Long-term Personal and Professional Impacts of Participating in a Study Abroad Program

In this study, DeGraaf, Slagter, Larsen & Ditta (2013) focused on the impact of education abroad on different aspects of civic engagements and the long-term impacts (personal and professional) on participants after studying abroad. There were different variables taken into account: gender (the authors do not comment on the potential importance of gender on the results, except to say that in general, more females tend to study abroad than males), the time elapsed since the participants' study abroad experience to when the study was done, and academic major concentration. For the purpose of this thesis, the intellectual curiosity measured and its results will be the focus of the analysis of this study. As mentioned beforehand, intellectual curiosity applies to the motivation factor of proficiency.

This study included 191 participants for the gender variable, 188 participants for the time elapsed variable, and 126 participants for the academic major concentration variable. Participants filled out surveys (post their study abroad programs) and some were interviewed about their study abroad experiences. The results show that among all three variables, there was an increase in intellectual curiosity. For both men and women (in the variable relating to gender within the study), research has shown that there was an increase in intellectual curiosity. 80.3% of males marked a 'strong influence' of their semester abroad on their increased intellectual curiosity, and 74.8% of females marked a 'strong influence' of their semester abroad on their increased intellectual curiosity (DeGraaf, Slagter, Larsen & Ditta, 2013, p.48).

This study further shows that there is an increased intellectual curiosity as an impact of study abroad, based on academic major concentration. The intellectual curiosity measured for this variable was on a scale of 1 (very little/ not at all) to 3 (to a large degree). For all of the majors studied (Spanish, Education, English, Soc./Soc. Work, Business), the Spanish major had the largest degree of increased intellectual curiosity. As the study explains, “[t]he real-world experience of Spanish majors in the college’s programs in Honduras and Spain gave them more opportunity to achieve fluency beyond the classroom, and these experiences yielded significant and obvious benefits upon their return” (DeGraaf, Slagter, Larsen & Ditta, 2013, p.50).

Lastly, this study measured the impact of studying abroad by the length of time since the participants’ experience abroad. In terms of measuring increased intellectual curiosity, the study showed that 76.2% of participants had marked that a semester of study abroad had a ‘strong influence’ on their increased intellectual curiosity, with a time span of less than 10 years since their experience abroad; whereas 78.2% was the case for the participants with a time span of 10 years or more (DeGraaf, Slagter, Larsen & Ditta, 2013, p.53).

The results of the study conclude that there are many positive impacts of study abroad. Specifically, a conclusion can be drawn, explaining that even with multiple differences among the participants (whether differences of gender, academic major concentration, or the time elapsed since the participants’ study abroad experience), the majority of participants had indicated that their study abroad experience had contributed to a significant increase in intellectual curiosity. As noted previously, intellectual curiosity refers to the desire to invest time and energy into learning more about a person, place, thing or concept. This is a partial

component of what is defined as proficiency, in terms of the factor of motivation within proficiency.

Nonetheless, even though this study shows that there is increased intellectual curiosity among participants after their study abroad experience, there are certain difficulties that exist in proving that this conclusion indicates improved proficiency. There are multiple other factors to consider (some that this study had not taken into account) when asserting that intellectual curiosity increases proficiency- which this study did not make, although it can be gathered that if intellectual curiosity is increased, then the students are more likely to be willing to engage in their surroundings and immerse themselves in the second language and their study abroad experiences. Yet, there are other limiting factors to measuring or judging intellectual curiosity. For example, perhaps the participants were all already very motivated individuals, who yearned to learn a second language (for instance, many participants within this study were Spanish majors, so they may have had a higher motivation to acquire proficiency in Spanish).

Study #2: The effects of intensive study abroad and at home language programs on second language acquisition of Spanish

A study by D'Amico (2010) concentrated in part on its participants' specific tendencies of willingness to communicate (WTC), and its impact on their fluency of Spanish (for the purpose of this study, let 'proficiency' and 'fluency'- the term used in the study- imply the same outcome, in terms of an improvement in oral language skills). The study employed questionnaires aimed at analyzing the speaking, reading, writing and comprehension abilities of the participants, both prior to the and post study. For the purpose of this study, only the speaking

portion of the questionnaire was evaluated (D'Amico, 2010, p.99), so as to look as oral fluency (which is most strongly linked to oral communication and willingness to communicate); oral fluency implying oral proficiency and language skills, both of which are components of second language proficiency.

There were two categories of participants in this study, those who participated in the study abroad environment (SA), and those who participated in the at home environment (AH). There was a total of 23 participants: 9 students in the SA group and 14 students in the AH group. All participants were full-time students, between the ages of 19 and 22, from the same large North American university. Furthermore, the data were collected from a variety of sources during the course of the programs (such as language background questionnaires, oral interviews, willingness to communicate questionnaires, language use questionnaires, etc.), either pre- and post-program, each week, or one time only.

Five common tendencies were found, as they relate to the willingness to communicate, and they are the following: WTC depends on the situation, WTC pertains to mood, WTC is need driven, WTC is higher when interlocutor does not speak English, and WTC is higher when there is a feeling of acceptance. There are two tendencies in particular that will be analyzed more thoroughly: the WTC is need driven and the WTC depends on the situation.

In the case of when the *WTC is need driven*, the willingness pertained to the students' specific needs, dealing with personal comfort or direct personal wishes (D'Amico, 2010, p.125). There was an assumption that the WTC would be higher when driven by a need, since need impacts the students' decision to use Spanish, which is one driving force of communication. In most cases, the students from both the SA and the AH groups indicated that their need to communicate came from social settings and interactions, meaning that they are

more likely to use Spanish in more public settings, without their English speaking friends.

Therefore, it would logically follow that the SA students would be more likely to have the WTC in this case, since they are surrounded primarily by non-native English speakers, whereas the AH students are not. This then leads into one of the other tendencies (the WTC is higher when interlocutor does not speak English), which is mentioned here to demonstrate the point that “[w]hen participants are around other speakers who only speak Spanish they report themselves to be more willing to communicate in Spanish than with interlocutors who know both English and Spanish” (D’Amico, 2010, p.125). This then shows that the students within the SA context would be more likely to engage in WTC.

In terms of the *WTC depends on the situation tendency*, research has found that there was not a large variety between the results of the two groups of participants, and that the willingness to communicate was rather very situational. Therefore, it was not evident that the SA participants necessarily were more prone to be willing to communicate, solely based on their surroundings (D’Amico, 2010, p.122). This already represents a critique of this factor within proficiency; it would logically follow that if students are immersed in a host country during study abroad, they would be more likely and more willing to communicate in that host country’s language- their second language. However, the results here do not demonstrate any such conclusion. This then poses the question: how accurate is the lack of higher willingness to communicate within the study abroad context (as opposed to the at home context) in demonstrating that proficiency does not improve within study abroad contexts? Or, are there perhaps other factors to be considered, such as the construct of the study, the methods of measuring the results, etc.?

Upon examining the five common tendencies, the focus is on these two in

particular, to highlight their great contrast: WTC depends on the situation and WTC is need driven. More specifically, when the WTC is need driven, it would appear as though the SA students would be more likely to be willing to communicate (based on their circumstances), whereas in the tendency of the WTC depending on the situation, there was no significant difference between the SA and the AH groups of students, since it was based on the situation. This shows that even within just a partial component of what is defined as proficiency (in other words, the willingness to communicate), there are subcategories of that component as well, which cannot all prove undeniably that proficiency does in fact improve within SA contexts.

Based on previous research, the students within the SA context should have demonstrated improved proficiency (as opposed to the AH students) throughout the study. However, based on the results of this study, while the SA students did demonstrate improved proficiency, their results did not vary considerably from the AH students' improved proficiency (D'Amico, 2010, p.163).

Study #3: The Relationship Among Motivation, Interaction, and the Development of Second Language Oral Proficiency in a Study-Abroad Context

In this study, Hernández (2010) set out to explore the relationship among motivation, interaction, and the development of second language oral proficiency within a study abroad context. In particular, the interactions of the students (in terms of how much exposure they have had to the Spanish language) within their study abroad context will be analyzed. This study involved a 2-part questionnaire, a language contact profile, and a pretest and posttest simulated oral proficiency interview. The subjects consisted of 20 students (4 male, 16 female) from Marquette University who participated in a one-semester study-abroad program in Madrid, Spain. Additionally, there were four criteria for the students' participation: they had to speak English as a native language, they had to have taken at least four semesters of formal instruction of Spanish as a second language, they did not speak Spanish at home, and they had to complete all of the pretest and posttest questionnaires and interviews.

Based on prior research, “results indicated a positive relationship between student interaction with NSs [native speakers] and the development of speaking proficiency after participation in the one-semester study-abroad program. Isabelli-García also found that motivation had a significant effect on student interaction with the L2 culture” (Hernández, 2010, p.602). This is relates to the previously discussed proficiency factor, motivation (as explained in part by intellectual curiosity and willingness to communicate).

To test interaction during the study, the following question was posed: Does the amount of student interaction with the L2 culture relate to gains in L2 oral proficiency after participating in a one-semester study abroad program? This portion of the study examined the relationship between student interaction with the L2 culture and the language gain from

preprogram to post program. As a result (through a regression analysis based on the gathered data), there was a significant relationship found between the amount of student contact with the Spanish language, and improvement on the pretest to posttest SOPI (the simulated oral proficiency interview). Furthermore, Kinginger (2008) found in her research, that the students in the present study who reported having the most contact with the L2 culture developed their speaking abilities more than those who did not have as much contact (Hernández, 2010, p.608). These results confirm the assumption that study-abroad participants can have significant contact with the L2 culture and that this contact, as a result, supports the development of oral proficiency, as Hernández analyzes (Hernández, 2010, p.608).

Nonetheless, Hernández explains an existing contradiction: despite the students having significant gains on a pretest to posttest OPI, the amount of out-of-class language contact did not have a significant effect on their speaking improvement. He explains that this may very well be due to the fact that some participants had as few as 18 hours of out-of-class participation (in language activities) per week, whereas others had as many as 60.68 hours of out-of-class participation (in language activities) per week. In other words, while research and studies have shown that more exposure and interaction in the second language does lead to improved proficiency (at least in the sense of oral skills), there are other factors to account for when evaluating the relationship between interaction in the second language and its improved proficiency (for example, some students immersed in study abroad spent less time interacting in their second language, and more time interacting in English with their native English speaking peers).

Study #4: Is being there enough? The effects of homestay placements on language gain during study abroad

A study regarding the effects of homestay placements on language gain during study abroad (Rivers, 1998) was conducted in the aims of trying to prove that during a semester abroad, a college student's language proficiency and skills will improve through the continuous immersion environment presumably provided by a homestay. Rivers explains that a homestay scenario would provide for a greater authentic Target Language input (in the case of this study, Russian, but this applies to any second language), thus improving the student's speaking listening and reading in the second language.

This study was conducted in Russia, and the American Council of Teachers of Russian Student Records Data Base now contains all of the proficiency collected data, on over 2500 students who studied abroad and participated in such studies, from 1976 through 1996 (Rivers, 1998, p. 493). According to those records, the following results were established: in general, the homestay students were slightly less likely to gain speaking proficiency, were likely to gain less in terms of listening proficiency, and were more likely to gain in reading proficiency, compared to the students who did not participate in a homestay (and rather lived in a dormitory for the duration of their study abroad experience).

These results are entirely counterintuitive, as Rivers notes. It was found that homestay was a negative predictor for speaking gain, had no apparent effect on listening, and was a positive predictor for reading gain (all of which are contrary to the expectation that listening and speaking gains would increase in the homestay environment and reading would be essentially unaffected). These unexpected results require further examination of the nature of the homestay experience, the characteristics of the homestay participants, and the study conducted.

Rivers discusses an ethnography (by Frank, 1997), in which results demonstrated that the quality of interaction with the native Russian hosts was often restricted to daily dialogue and watching television and spending time alone working on their homework (as opposed to having meaningful interactions with their host families). Furthermore, both participants and host families often expressed frustration due to the participants' inability to communicate well in Russian (Rivers, 1998, p.496). Here, it is important to note that the experience of the homestay was a somewhat negative one, and perhaps out of the norm. However, that does not necessarily indicate that all homestay experiences are similar in nature, which makes it rather difficult to determine whether or not homestay experiences can in fact improve proficiency.

Despite the results of this study, it can still be concluded that study abroad does in fact have definite benefits. While the homestay students' language proficiency skills did not improve as they were expected to have, the students who stayed in dormitories did improve their language skills more significantly, regardless.

Furthermore, the fact that the homestay students' level of proficiency did not improve might be attributed to a range of different factors. For example, the study was conducted almost 20 years (at its most recent); therefore, many aspects of homestays have undoubtedly changed since then. Additionally, the study was conducted during and post-cold war, which might have had some interference with the results of the studies (one cannot discount the political ramifications and cultural atmosphere within a host country, during these types of studies). Finally, it is important to note that even with a vast number of participants (2500 students), the conclusion that homestays do not positively impact language proficiency cannot be uncritically accepted, especially with all other external factors to be considered. Nevertheless, such findings underscore the difficulty of stating that certain factors (such as the environment of

study abroad- in this case, homestays, which intuitively would presumably increase proficiency) are beneficial to improving proficiency within a study abroad context.

Chapter 7: Discussion & Conclusion

Discussion

Throughout this thesis, the following questions were posed: What is meant by the proficiency criteria of a second language, within study abroad contexts? In particular, what is the definition of communication ability, cognitive capacity and language skills? And, what are some of the difficulties when measuring proficiency and researching whether a semester of study abroad does in fact contribute to the improvement of language proficiency of a college student's second language, which make it so hard to prove a positive relationship between proficiency improvement and a semester of study abroad? The purposes of this thesis were to examine what is meant by second language proficiency and ultimately explore the existing difficulties of measuring that proficiency within an education abroad program, by analyzing certain studies in the education abroad field.

This thesis was based on the premise that while there has been a lot of research done and many studies to support the benefits of a study abroad semester for enhancing second language proficiency, it remains difficult to accurately and validly prove that education abroad definitely improves the proficiency of a college student's second language (during that study abroad period).

Based on the 4 studies summarized above, the results showed that whether or not the factors measured (described above) demonstrated proficiency improvement (through study abroad for college students' second language) or not, study abroad is still found beneficial. Irrespective of the varying conclusions, every study analyzed demonstrated some shortcomings of both its study and its results, which makes it difficult to prove for certain that study abroad

does in fact, undoubtedly, improve college students' second language proficiency.

Analysis of studies

The first study presented (DeGraaf & Slagter & Larsen & Ditta, 2013) discussed intellectual curiosity. Based on the results, there was a significant increase in intellectual curiosity among the participants. This leads to the assumption that education abroad does in fact improve proficiency, by stimulating intellectual curiosity (a component of motivation), which in turn encourages proficiency. However, it is difficult to determine what exactly the causes for the intellectual curiosity were, within the study abroad context. Perhaps it was the setting and the circumstances of the study abroad program, or perhaps the participants were already very motivated individuals, or still, maybe there were external factors (independent of education abroad) that were influencing their intellectual curiosity.

The second study presented (D'Amico, 2010) explored the difference of the impact of the five tendencies of WTC (willingness to communicate) between two groups of students: SA (study abroad participants) and AH (at home students). Based on the results of this study, the SA students did demonstrate improved proficiency, but not significantly more so than the improved proficiency of the AH students. This demonstrates that there might be other factors that would contribute to the willingness to communicate, aside from just the setting of the students (SA versus AH). However, this study did not take into account all other potential factors that may have influenced its results, and thus is inconclusive in explaining whether education abroad does in fact improve proficiency. Such disregard of other factors that may alter the results

of the study is one of the difficulties in measuring proficiency improvement within education abroad contexts.

The third study presented (Hernández, 2010) reviewed how the amount of interaction that participants had with native speakers would affect their proficiency. While those participants who had more contact with the L2 culture did develop their speaking abilities (oral language skills) more than those who had significantly less contact, the amount of out-of-class language contact did not have a significant effect on their speaking improvement. It can thus be presumed that while added interaction further develops speaking abilities, there are other factors involved in improving oral language skills (not all of which were accounted for in this study). Therefore, it remains difficult to assert that additional interaction will increase proficiency in a second language.

The fourth study presented (Rivers, 1998) examined whether participants who opted for a homestay living option would gain more proficiency during their semester abroad. Findings showed that despite popular belief, such was not the case: in fact, those students who lived in dormitories had a slightly more improved proficiency than those who lived in a homestay setting. Nonetheless, this does confirm that education abroad is beneficial regardless, since the data was consistent in showing that the proficiency of a certain sample population was improved. However, due to the fact that the homestay experience documented in this study was quite atypical, it remains difficult to claim any concrete results about the effect that living arrangements (the environment factor of proficiency) might have on proficiency, based on this study.

As a general conclusion, research does indicate that study abroad is beneficial at least in some capacity, for those who experience it. Nevertheless, based on the analysis of the

aforementioned studies, it is difficult to claim any results when measuring proficiency within the context of education abroad, due to the vast number of factors affecting the participants' experience throughout the studies being conducted (that may or may not be interfering with their static or dynamic level of proficiency, during their semester abroad). These particular studies were chosen for their simultaneous commonality and juxtaposition. A commonality shared among all four studies was their shortcoming in successfully measuring a concrete, distinctive impact of education abroad on language proficiency improvement (due to certain difficulties and external factors within the studies, methods, and findings). In contrast, every study chosen and analyzed presented one distinctive aspect (intellectual curiosity, willingness to communicate, interaction, homestay experience, respectively) of a contributing factor (motivation and environment) to proficiency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the field of study abroad has been researched over the past few decades, and many studies have been conducted. The question of second language (L2) proficiency has been explored, yet undoubtedly remains to be investigated further. Moreover, it is essential to first understand what proficiency is and exactly how it is measured, and what some shortcomings of those methods might be (before conducting studies and analyzing the results produced).

Nonetheless, research has found that most studies do show a benefit to spending a semester of study abroad in a foreign country, even if it is not necessarily a significant benefit; although, in many cases, there have been conclusions of significant benefits to language

proficiency, improving language skills, and other aspects of second language education, as a result of a college student's semester abroad.

Unfortunately, due to many different aspects revolving around education abroad, it remains difficult to state that certain factors (for example, the living environment- homestay, exposure to language/interaction with native speakers, willingness to communicate, intellectual curiosity, etc.) have directly contributed to improving second language proficiency within education abroad contexts. While such assumptions are generally made, there remains a lot of research to be done. Furthermore, external and independent variables affecting education abroad should be accounted for. Lastly, modified methods of researching and conducting such studies, to ensure for more accurate results, should be considered.

The fact remains, nevertheless, that a semester of study abroad is certainly beneficial for a college student, whether or not it produces the desired outcomes, in regards to improving language proficiency. Studies conducted in this field concluded that education abroad does benefit a student, even if not necessarily in the ways that were set out to be proven. For instance, as discussed, research has shown that study abroad contributes to the increase of intellectual curiosity among college students (DeGraaf, Slagter, Larsen & Ditta, 2013), which leads to more successful careers and lifestyles, even though it did not necessarily prove that those students who participated in homestays had improved their second language speaking skills more so than those who did not (Rivers, 1998).

Chapter 8: My Personal Experience

My study abroad experience in Seville, Spain

As an incoming college freshman, I was unfamiliar with the concept of study abroad, and therefore had not planned on participating in such an opportunity. However, during

the spring semester of my freshman year, my Spanish III professor was presenting options for studying abroad to the class, which instantly peaked my interest and curiosity. Through further research, I decided that it was definitely an adventure I was going to embark upon!

During the spring semester of my sophomore year (I was one of the youngest among mostly all juniors), I ventured entirely out of my comfort zone, and decided to call Seville, Spain, my home for a duration of about four months (with the CIEE organization at Penn State). I opted to do a homestay during my education abroad experience, and was placed with a host mother and her adult daughter. As a result, not only did I have meaningful, enriching daily interactions with my host family, but I was also exposed to a lot of cultural experiences and anecdotes that I otherwise would not have been exposed to. I had a lot of experience with the locals all throughout Spain, during my travels, my social interactions, my daily walk to school, through shopping and going to explore new places, social settings (restaurants, bars, etc.) and museums. I was even stopped multiple times and asked for directions, by Spaniards visiting from elsewhere in the country, who believed I was a local! During my four months of study abroad, I had the opportunity to travel to about a dozen cities throughout Spain (Madrid, Barcelona, Malaga, Valencia, Córdoba, Granada, Cádiz, Ronda, etc.), as well as spend a few days in Lisbon, Portugal, and travel throughout some cities in Northern Morocco (with an interest group about Flamenco, provided by the CIEE organization). Luckily, since I was studying abroad during the spring semester, I witnessed the amazing transcendence of the city of Seville during both the *semana santa* (“Holy Week”) and the *feria de abril* (the April fair): two of the most culturally rich and captivating weeks of the year in the region of Andalucía, in southern Spain. I was able to take classes that interested me, and were all in Spanish, both at the Universidad de Sevilla, and the CIEE center. In January of 2013, I landed in Seville, Spain, barely able to ask for directions;

in May of 2013, I was departing from Seville, the amazing place I had called home for four months, and was practically fluent in Spanish.

During all of my travels, experiences, classes, explorations and interactions with the locals, I learned more about the Spanish culture, language, history, geography, lifestyle and people, than I even thought conceivable! I was able to learn valuable lessons that I will carry with me for life. My study abroad experience gave me the privilege to further discover diverse cultures, different dialects and accents within languages, meet amazing people, and learn about the world, life, and even myself!

Seville has a logo posted everywhere throughout the city (NO8DO), expressing “No me ha dejado” (it has not left me), that really resonated with me...because from my experience, you can take the college student out of Seville, but Seville will never leave me. Aside from just improved language skills and proficiency, I gained an amazing experience abroad, and countless opportunities to seize the world and discover new wonders. From my experience, personally, I would say that education abroad is definitely one of the most life-changing opportunities out there. For anyone who decides to invest his/her time and effort into a study abroad program will return with more experience, knowledge, memories, lessons, opportunities, and *joie de vivre* than they could have ever imagined...and that, well, that is priceless.

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ACADEMIC VITA

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Education:

- ➔ The Pennsylvania State University Graduate School **Master's Candidate for May 2016**
 - (IUG - integrated undergraduate/graduate Program); School of International Affairs
 - Dispute Resolution focus
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- ➔ The Pennsylvania State University & Schreyer Honors College
 - Liberal Arts Program; Paterno Fellow; expected graduation date: May 2016
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Work/Internship Experience:

- ➔ Congregation Britt Shalom-Hebrew School Teacher Fall 2015-Present
 - Teach 5th & 7th grade Hebrew and 3rd grade Jewish Studies
- ➔ **Internship**-Alternative Action Summer 2015
 - Peace activism (between Israelis & Palestinians)/Think Tank in Israel
 - Research/reports, consulting for website marketing & documentaries/interviews, service trip planning
- ➔ Resident Assistant Spring 2014-Present
 - Hold meetings; organize educational & large-scale programs; community building & conflict resolution
 - Interview potential professional staff & RA applicants
 - HIED (RA course) co-facilitator Fall 2014
- ➔ CLS Lab Research Assistant- Spanish linguistics research Fall 2013
- ➔ CAS 404 -Negotiation and Conflict Management: Teaching assistant (TA) Fall 2013
 - Graded papers, projects, exams; held review sessions and office hours
- ➔ Penn State Learning: Language Coordinator; French & Spanish Tutor Fall 2012-Present
- ➔ Note taker (Penn State Nittany Notes) Fall 2012-Spring 2014

Transferable Skills:

- ➔ Organized, responsible, fast learner, social, cooperative
- ➔ Excellent communication, relationship building and problem solving skills

Languages Spoken (and written/read): English, French, Spanish, Hebrew, Russian

Extracurricular Activities/Awards:

- ➔ Jewish/Arab Dialogue (dialogue scheduling; participant) Spring 2016-Present
- ➔ Israel Ambassador Spring 2016-Present
- ➔ East Halls Residence Association- THON chair (event fundraising & programming) Spring 2016-Present
- ➔ Model UN-Pennsylvania UN Conference Member Spring 2015
- ➔ Hillel Programming Committee & LEV (THON-fundraising for pediatric cancer) Spring 2015-Present
- ➔ Student Programming Association (Entertainment Committee) Fall 2013
- ➔ National French Contest winner 2009,2010,2011

Volunteer Experience:

- ➔ JDRC/Habitat for Humanity/ Nechama Spring 2014, 2015,2016
 - Spring Break trips to Oklahoma, Arkansas & Texas (trip leader) for natural disaster reconstruction
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