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The Lost 'C': The Communities Goal Area (plenary panel presentation)

Heather W. Allen, *University of Miami*



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Plenary: “The ‘Lost C’: The Communities Goal Area”

Introduction

Good morning. Following June’s presentation on the Standards’ influence in the profession, I will focus on the relation between the Communities Goal area and study abroad (SLIDE ONE). The primary question I want us to consider is this one – *Does a study abroad experience facilitate the Communities goal?* In other words, regarding Standard 5.1, what has research shown us about *students’ language use within and beyond the school setting* during study abroad? Does study abroad help students *come to realize the inherent advantages of communicating in more than one language?* In relation to Standard 5.2, what evidence do we have *of students becoming life-long learners by using the foreign language for personal enjoyment and enrichment* during study abroad? What do we know about students’ practices of *accessing entertainment and information resources related to the target culture* during study abroad?

Before highlighting some research related to these questions, I want to provide a few facts about study abroad today. Demographic data show that cross-border education is on the rise, as it has more than quadrupled worldwide over the past thirty years. In addition, U.S. undergrads study in more diverse destinations than ever before, with 15 of the top 25 outside Europe (Institute of International Education, 2010). Though these facts are encouraging, others are less so, particularly for foreign language educators.

For example, looking at *who* studies abroad ... (SLIDE TWO) although the Junior Year Abroad model dominated by language majors was once the norm, today language majors

account for just six percent of total study abroad enrollments. At the same time, the *duration* of study abroad is also changing (SLIDE THREE): Of American undergrads who study abroad, close to 60 percent participate in programs of eight weeks or less, and only four percent do so for an academic year (Institute of International Education, 2010). As this chart displays, a small yet continuing decrease in quarter-long, semester-long, and academic year participation has occurred over the past decade.

Why do these trends matter for us? Put simply, reduced time spent abroad and increased participation by non-language majors challenge our assumptions about the inevitability of students' *contact with target language communities* and *linguistic gain*. These trends also cause us to reflect on the motives of study abroad participants and to what extent they can truly be cast as language learners (Kinging, 2008).

Study Abroad & the Communities Goal Area

I want to return now to the question of whether study abroad facilitates the Communities goal area. On first consideration, it may seem evident that studying abroad represents the *sine qua non* for “participating in multilingual communities around the world.” In fact, many believe study abroad is the ideal learning environment, where students absorb language like sponges and form enduring relationships with native speakers. But does research support the notion that study abroad facilitates the Communities Goal area? A grossly generalized answer would be “yes ... and no ... and we don’t know.”

First the *yes* --since the 1960s, numerous quantitative investigations have supported the notion that study abroad is a productive context for linguistic gain

and *oral proficiency* in particular. After study abroad, students typically speak the target language more quickly and with less hesitation than at-home counterparts (Kinging, 2008).

Now, the *less* encouraging findings: Research has shown that students are often unsuccessful or unwilling in taking full advantage of opportunities for meaningful, sustained use of the target language abroad. For example, several studies found that host family members were the only native speakers with whom students had regular contact abroad (Allen, in press; Kaplan, 1989; Tanaka, 2007). In addition, two studies (Magnan & Back, 2007; Rivers, 1998) that compared language gain by study abroad participants living in homestay families versus residence halls contradicted the assumption of a homestay advantage.

The term “compatriot island” has been used to describe the frequently reported practice of students who spend time socializing with peers in their first language rather than attempting to access target community social networks abroad (Allen, 2010a; Allen, in press; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Miller & Ginsberg, 1995; Wilkinson, 2000). There is also evidence that most of study abroad participants' interactions in the target language are not sustained ones but “limited spurts to fulfill very specific functions” with interlocutors such as bus drivers, store clerks, travel agents, and waiters (Mendelson, 2004, p. 51). Even when sustained interactions do occur, they may not be as “natural” as assumed, since study abroad participants have been shown to rely heavily on classroom discourse norms and to cast interlocutors abroad in a teacher-like role (Miller & Ginsberg, 1995; Wilkinson, 2002). At the same time, native speakers have been found to limit

pragmatically appropriate language to be more readily understood by study abroad participants (Allen, in press; Iino, 2006; Siegal, 1995).

Adding to these challenges is the influence of readily available communication technologies. In essence, these tools can make the ideal of “total linguistic immersion” even less likely, since they often function as a sort of electronic umbilical cord between study abroad participants and their home communities (Kington, 2008).

Moving on to the “we don’t know”--much about language use during study abroad remains unexamined or under-examined. For example, the focus of Standard 5.2, *students’ accessing entertainment and information resources related to the target culture*, is practically absent from efforts to document students’ language use abroad. The few studies that address non-interactive language contact have tended to rely on self-report measures such as the Language Contact Profile. All in all, explorations of how students develop new forms of literacy abroad are lacking, and future research should delve deeper into areas such as the development of listening comprehension, reading and writing competence, and new media literacies. These areas are particularly relevant given the demonstrated limitations of students’ language use abroad and the need to find meaningful contexts for sustained language use with target community members.

Taken together, data and research that I have highlighted should motivate us to question the degree to which programs abroad afford students meaningful participation in multilingual communities around the world. Although study abroad may serve as a potential step to help students *come to realize the inherent advantages of communicating in more than one language*, we should not assume this

automatically. As Kinginger (2008) cautioned, study abroad “may serve either to raise students’ awareness of language learning as a serious, long-term and admirable accomplishment or it may turn students away from engagement in a pursuit deemed unnecessary” (p. 62).

Implications for Language Learning Within and Beyond the Classroom

I want to turn now to some pedagogical implications. The information that I have shared today may seem troubling, as it challenges widespread notions of the inevitability of sustained interaction by study abroad participants with target community members. We may be tempted to conclude that students themselves are to blame and that they lack the needed motivation to integrate into communities abroad.

However, my own research (Allen & Herron, 2003; Allen, 2010a; Allen 2010b; Allen, in press) leads me to a different conclusion—that we need to critically examine our own pedagogies, both before *and* during study abroad, to better understand how classroom learning equips students to navigate the linguistic and cultural demands of life in target language communities. We cannot expect our students to naturally possess the dispositions that we as language educators hold regarding opportunities for language contact and cultural tools and resources valued by target community members. Instead, *from the very start*, we should foster students’ agency as language users and stimulate their curiosity about music, literature, art, and information communication technologies related to the target culture or cultures. In lower-level language courses, such goals require going

beyond a focus on grammar and vocabulary, and in more advanced literary-cultural courses, they entail incorporating explicit attention to linguistic development. We need to reconsider the tools and activities that form our students' language-learning experiences. (And as a side note, I will be develop this idea more concretely in this afternoon's breakout session). To conclude, although our students bring their own motivations and dispositions to the language-learning table, we should not discount the crucial role we can play in shaping their capacity to fully participate in multilingual communities around the world. Thank you.

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