



Book Review

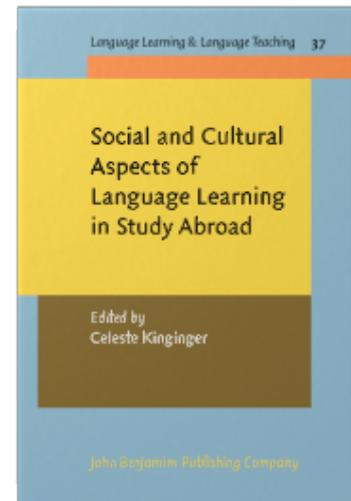
Social and Cultural Aspects of Language Learning in Study Abroad

Edited by Celeste Kinginger

[Language Learning & Language Teaching Series #37]

Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins (2013)

ISBN: 9789027213150 (Hrdbk.), 9789027213167 (Pbk.), 9789027271839 (Ebook)



As you might guess, this volume focuses on the social and cultural aspects of study abroad (SA). One of its goals is to explain the wide variation in study abroad results from poststructuralist perspectives; another is to showcase some of the ways SA outcomes can be studied. Hence this text is valuable to those seeking to understand how SA impacts identity construction, cross-cultural awareness, and linguistic skills. It is also potentially useful to those undertaking SA research. This 344-page book consists of twelve essays by a dozen authors covering four overlapping themes: identity issues, language learning, culture, and SA program designs. Let us take a brief look at each.

Identity Issues

James Coleman's essay sets a tone for much of this volume. He cautions against stereotyping SA and stresses that overseas sojourners need to be regarded as whole people rather than mere linguistic processors or translation machines. Instead of attempting to develop taxonomical classifications for SA, Coleman favors an "environmental approach" (van Lier, 2003) similar to Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's (2008) notion of *complex dynamic systems*. The experience of 47 British university students learning French in Senegal is then briefly highlighted. Based on email questionnaire responses and a small number of in-depth interviews, some ways that gender shapes SA experiences are outlined. Also, the importance of intimate contact in identity shaping is hinted.

Timothy Wolcott also considers identity issues in depth while describing a young American woman who spent a semester in Paris in an insulated "island" or "enclave" SA program (Goodwin & Nacht, 1988). Because this person's biological father was French, she had a powerful desire to reclaim an imagined "French" identity that became lost when her parents divorced soon after her birth and she moved to the United States. Wolcott points out how subjective myth is often a significant driving force in language learning, and myths are closely linked to imagined identities.

Janet Jackson also shares some insights into identity development. She describes the experiences of a student from Hong Kong who spent a year in Canada, followed by a semester-length post-return program. The student's narrative reveals how constructive engagement can foster the development of more cosmopolitan, global identities. The changes this informant underwent are interpreted in the light of Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity and Mezirow's (1994, 2000) transformational learning theory. The challenges of dealing with culture shock, homesickness, and L2 interactions are clearly outlined, and Jackson mentions how some SA students retreat into insulated communities to shield themselves from culture shock. Commenting on the frequently wide gap between students' idealized and actual selves, the need for guided, critical reflection to foster cross-cultural awareness is underscored.

Language Learning

Four studies in this volume focus on pragmatic issues. Pragmatic humor is described by Maria Shardakoova, who asserts that L2 humor is a means of identity construction. An interesting facet of her study was how it highlighted the gap between L2 sojourners' "intended identities" (the ways they wish to be perceived) and their "received identities" (the ways that L1 speakers positioned them). Shardakoova echoes Culpeper (2005) in affirming the close connection between humor and identity, suggesting that humor is actually a means of fostering both personal and group identity. Based on the email responses by 184 American university students of Russian to a series of different pragmatic prompts, native and non-native Russian users "constructed imagined identities of the emails' authors" (p. 219) in quite different ways. Whereas Russian speakers tended to value interpersonal skills, Americans focused on personal attributes. Though interpreting identity in terms of simple binary criteria is problematic, this study posits SA may help sojourners acquire better humor in a target language.

Pragmatic hedging by American JSL learners in Japan is then explored by Noriko Iwasaki, whose study indicates SA might help JSL students hedge more naturally. One interesting insight is how L2 learners create their own language systems based on their socio-cultural preconceptions of how interactions *should* occur - not what they perceive as the norm. A similar finding was reported by Lucien Brown, who explored the use of honorifics among four male English-speaking SA participants learning Korean in Seoul. Using discourse completion tasks, extensive tape-recorded conversations, and retrospective interviews, Brown observed a gap between the respondents' knowledge of how honorifics *should* be used and how they *actually* used them. In some cases, users consciously flaunted pragmatic norms since they felt the use of honorifics contravened their own L1 identity constructs and/or beliefs about egalitarianism.

Culture

Elizabeth Smolcic provides a fascinating case study of a U.S. public school teacher who learned Spanish and Quechua in Ecuador for 3.5 weeks to better deal with her increasingly multicultural, multilingual classrooms. Criticizing de Saussure's attempt to bifurcate language (*langue*) from culture (*parole*), Smolcic stresses the need to study "languaculture" (Agar, 1994; Risager, 2006, 2007) - a notion that includes not only semantics and pragmatics, but also poetics and facets pertaining to identity. Her experiences are framed in terms of Leont'ev's *activity theory* (1978, 1981) and Smolcic adds that "coursework and academic analysis alone are insufficient to bring about the affective and cognitive changes needed to develop intercultural competence" (p. 78). By putting "teachers-learners in direct contact with others' different cultural, linguistic, and racial or ethnic backgrounds" (p. 78), the hope is raised that learners "will move outside of the own culturing frames" - a process that Bryram (1997, p. 70) refers to as *decentering*. As a result of this teacher's experience, the informant came to better grasp "how vital language is" (p. 89) for learning and communication.

The politics of linguistic identification among students in Europe is explored in depth by Fred Dervin. He describes the interactions among speakers with diverse linguistic heritages as an "identity game" (p. 102) in which complex code switching frequently occurs. Nearly all SA informants Dervin surveyed reported acute feelings of deficiency regarding their L2 or L3 selves. They were also frustrated at their inability to realize their ideal foreign language personas. Pellegrino-Aveni's (2000, p. 55, cited on p. 119) statement, "Learner's sense of Self in social interactions is inextricably linked with the language they use" is aptly illustrated in this chapter. Dervin concludes by urging SA programs to teach participants about target language use before, during, and after SA experiences to challenge their self-images and stereotypes of others as language users.

Study Abroad Program Design

Gore's (2005, p. 32, cited on p. 129) caution that many college students study abroad, "not to gain purposeful knowledge so much as to gain social standing and enjoy private pleasure" is illustrated in Wolcott's case study, which provides a cautionary tale of what can happen if a mismatch between program goals and participant goals occurs. Wolcott encourages us to interpret the SA experiences of undergraduates in terms of Levin's (2000) coming-of-age model, during which some youthful certainties are destabilized. Wolcott adds that some SA programs can be conceptualized as a "conspicuously costly but practically superfluous" (p. 128) form of edu-tourism or way of reinforcing one's status as a member of a "cosmopolitan elite" (Skeggs, 2004). Mentioning how many students regard culture as a sort of commodity to be obtained by simply going to a specific geographical point of origin without much language/cultural learning, Wolcott nonetheless concedes that for the particular student described, the SA experience did help her mature. His essay shows how many SA program participants may start out seeking a "hassle free" touristic vacation and chance to earn graduation credits, but end up learning some valuable lessons.

In contrast to this, Tan and Kinginger describe the experiences of sixty American high school students in China. Their study suggests that high school SA programs with homestay components might have some advantages over university SA: high school students are often more flexible and willing to accept parental guidance. Conversely, host families are also more willing to serve as *in loco parentis*. Two things that appear to have made this high school homestay SA program successful were the degree of local engagement with the host communities, and the fact that it was reciprocal: American and Chinese students stayed in each others' homes, fostering long-term interactions.

Some Pros and Cons

One thing I particularly liked about this book was its solid grounding in theory. It introduces a wide range of post-modern socio-cultural theories. As such, this text is useful for researchers wishing to explore current social constructionist thought. Another nice feature was how it introduces a broad variety of research frameworks and approaches. This enables readers to reflect which framework(s) they wish to use for their own studies. Finally, I also appreciated the way this book pinpoints some under-researched areas in SA. Specifically, the influence of religion, sex, and social class on sojourns abroad need to be more documented, and there is also a need for more corpus-based research.

This book has perhaps three weaknesses. First, for those wanting to conduct SA research themselves, some of the studies lacked sufficient details to make this possible. In particular, if online appendices were added to Chapters 2, 4, 5, and 11, readers could take a better look "under the hood" and consider how the results were generated. Second, some of the essays in this book might be described as "Ameri-centric." However, since three of the studies were within Asian contexts, this criticism is not so serious. Finally, some readers might wish this book contained a glossary. Although many of its specialized terms are not explained in detail, it is not too much trouble to look outside of the text to cover any obscure points. In short, the advantages of this text far outweigh the limitations.

The Bottom Line

It is important to be clear about what this book is - and isn't. This is not an introductory book about study abroad or a practical guide for novice researchers seeking advice about how to do SA research. Rather, it is smorgasbord of studies representing diverse methodological procedures and theoretical orientations. For those with a basic grounding in social science research, at least some of the studies are likely to be appealing. If you enjoy comparing different ways that human behavior can be examined and are curious about under-researched aspects of study abroad, this book will be a welcome addition to your library.

- Reviewed by Tim Newfields

Works Cited

- Agar, M. (1994). *Language shock: Understanding the culture of conversation*. New York, NY: William Morrow.
- Bennett, M. J. (1993). Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. In R. M. Paige (Ed.) *Education for the intercultural experience* (pp. 21-71). Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.
- Bryram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Culpeper, J. (2005). Impoliteness and entertainment in a television quiz show: 'The Weakest Link'. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 1(1), 35-72. doi: 10.1515/jplr.2005.1.1.35
- de Saussure, F. (1983) *Course in General Linguistics*. [Trans. R. Harris]. La Salle, IL: Open Court.
- Goodwin, C. & Nacht, M. (1988). *Abroad and beyond: Patterns in American overseas expansion*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gore, J. E. (2005). *Dominant beliefs and alternative voices: Discourse, belief, and gender in American study abroad*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. & Cameron, L. (2008). *Complex systems and applied linguistics*. Oxford University Press.
- Leont'ev, A. N. (1978). *Activity, consciousness and personality*. [Trans. by M. J. Hall]. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Leont'ev, A. N. (1981). *Problems of the development of the mind*. [Trans. by M. Kopylova]. Moscow: Progress Press.
- Levin, D. M. (2001). *Language learners' social interaction in a study abroad context*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.
- Mezirow, J. (1994). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Pellegrino-Aveni, V. (2000). *Study abroad and second language use*. Cambridge University Press.
- Risager, K. (2006). *Language and culture: Global flows and local complexity*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Risager, K. (2007). *Language & culture pedagogy: From national to a transnational paradigm*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Skeggs, W. (2004). *Class, self, culture*. London: Routledge.
- van Lier, L. (2003). A table of two computer classrooms: The ecology of project-based learning. In J. Leather & J. van Dam (Eds.) *Ecology of language acquisition* (pp. 49 - 63). Dordrecht: Kluwer.