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# Language and Personal Growth in Study Abroad

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LANGUAGE AND PERSONAL GROWTH IN STUDY ABROAD

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PIM 76

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International Education at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

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### **Abstract**

Language and Personal Growth in Study Abroad will explore student perceptions of the role language learning during study abroad played in four key areas of personal growth: self-confidence, ability to problem-solve, learning about their host culture, and learning about themselves. This study aims to highlight and increase understanding of the individual's study abroad experience. Eight students participated in this research. Data was collected from participants through an online survey and through individual semi-structured interviews. Student blogs written both pre-departure and during study abroad were also analyzed. Findings reveal a belief amongst participants that language learning helped them to become more confident interacting with native speakers and more adept at finding creative solutions to communicative problems. Findings also suggest that through the use of host languages, participants were able to understand more about cultural values of their host communities. Finally, participants described various lessons learned about themselves, including insights related to open-mindedness, independence, and negative attitudes and thought-patterns. Findings also revealed the perceptions that participants had about language learning in general, particularly the importance many of them placed on an immersion environment. This research will help international educators, language professors, and administrators understand the value of language learning in a study abroad context. In doing so, this research will provide a rationale for improved preparation and support for students going abroad. Future inquiry into how students form their perceptions about language learning will provide a greater understanding of the student experience abroad.

### **Introduction and Statement of Research Question**

Through this research, I seek to understand the relationship between second language (L2) learning during study abroad (SA) and students' perceived personal growth. As the topic of personal growth is vast, I narrowed my research to the exploration of student experiences in four particular categories: self-confidence, ability to problem solve, learning about one's host culture, and learning about oneself.

These categories are also broad enough to include other aspects of personal growth. For example, when choosing categories, I anticipated that independence is one area of growth that students might reference as highly connected to their self-confidence. I also thought that students might relate their newfound communication skills to their ability to problem-solve. In this way, these four categories serve as four umbrellas under which to place findings. They exist to narrow the scope of this research, but in a flexible way.

This study did not generate a wide enough breadth of survey responses to generalize findings to larger populations. Study abroad students' perceptions are formed according to their individual social and linguistic experiences, and introspective methods such as diaries and interviews cannot be thought to represent the experiences of all SA participants (Pellegrino, 1998). Pellegrino also specifies that "the goal of introspective research is not to gain breadth of applicability but rather depth of understanding, that is, not to generalize findings to a larger population at all, but rather to deepen the researcher's understanding of the individual's SA experience (p. 94)."

My interest in the individual's SA experience naturally stems from my own experiences with learning a second language. I have been passionate about language learning since my freshman year at Bryn Mawr College. Italian class quickly became my favorite part of each day,

and in sophomore year, I proudly declared Italian Language and Literature as my major. My sophomore year Intensive Intermediate Italian professor facilitated what I perceive as the greatest leap in my abilities through an incredible curriculum based on experiential learning. My classmates and I interviewed Italian immigrants, participated in competitions at the Italian Consulate of Philadelphia, had weekly Skype chats with Italian language partners, and more.

Simultaneously, I was taking Linguistics classes such as Syntax and Introduction to Linguistics and, for a brief period, declared a double major in Linguistics and Italian. I was initially attracted to Linguistics- the first major that I declared- because the phonetics, syntax, and mechanics of language fascinated me. However, I realized over time that what truly drove me and brought me joy was the pride I felt in mastering a language. More importantly, being able to connect with Italians on a deeper level through communication in their native tongue provided a strong sense of fulfillment.

To better understand both my personal growth and journey in language learning and that of my research participants, I will delve deeply into the closely interwoven fields of psychology and second language acquisition. In doing so, I will also review literature on the overall cultural adaptation process undergone by students during their study abroad experiences. In contributing to a better understanding of the student experience, it is my hope that this research will also provide a rationale for improved preparation and support for students going abroad.

In the case of my practicum site of Maryville College, the language offerings are limited to French, Spanish, Japanese, German, and American Sign Language. Furthermore, not all language departments have enough course offerings for students to be able to complete a minor. Part of the reason for this is these departments rely on adjunct professors (Kirsten Sheppard, personal communication, November 30, 2017). Many students who study these languages must

go abroad to get the coursework necessary to complete a minor. Given the limited language offerings at Maryville College, I believe that a study exploring students' perceived successes abroad could draw positive attention to the topic of language learning from a number of stakeholders. As Pellegrino (1998) states, "Viewing the perceptions learners have about themselves and about the study abroad enterprise, whether objectively factual or not, can enlighten researchers, pedagogues, and program administrators, as well as the students themselves, about the learning and language use behaviors and ultimate success of students during in-country study." An ideal goal of this research would be to support the case for a wider variety of language course offerings. As this study includes the stories of Maryville College students, it would give administrators a glimpse into direct results of language teaching on our students' real-life experiences.

### **Literature Review**

Much of the literature I reviewed consists of studies on student perception of language and language learning abroad. Studies like this have drawn attention to a number of factors that are relevant to my research. One of these is the way the individual defines success in a second language, whether that be in terms of grammatical perfection, communicative fluency, or something else. Another is the way that the individual views social interaction with native speakers (NSs) of their target language. Related to this last point, studies have shown that despite recognizing the significance of interacting with native speakers, some students reject opportunities for social interaction when they arise. One reason students may reject social interaction with natives, despite potentially believing it to be beneficial, is related to negative perceptions of the host culture.

Surtees (2016) observed that students tend to have idealistic expectations about what the



SA language learning environment will be like and can react negatively when their beliefs do not match reality. For example, a student may anticipate that native speakers will be sensitive to their struggles with learning the host language only to discover that this is not the case. Allen (2010) found that SA participants who are able to reconceptualize their experiences report higher degrees of satisfaction. Participants who are not able to do this report lower satisfaction.

In addition to studies on student perception, I reviewed studies that seek to define what exactly constitutes language learning. Just as some students feel that good grammar is an indicator of mastery of a second language (Miller and Ginsberg, 1995) and others feel that getting your point across is more important, researchers have put more or less emphasis on these different aspects of the language learning process.

First, I will go into more detail on studies on student perception of language learning abroad, starting with the concept of individual definitions of success in a target language. In a study of American students studying Russian abroad, Miller and Ginsberg (1995) analyzed students' introspective diaries in which participants were asked to recount instances where they used the language or learned something new. In the end, data suggested that participants believed there is only one correct way to say things in Russian, and that success in Russian means speaking with perfect grammar. Miller and Ginsberg go on to say that such beliefs limit the second language to its textbook form, ignoring the pragmatic uses and communicative flexibility that study abroad offers the opportunity to hone. These findings have important implications for my study- particularly with relation to the topic of self-confidence- because they suggest that different students will have differing personal definitions of what constitutes success in second language usage.

As mentioned above, idealistic expectations prior to departure can result in

disappointment upon return from study abroad and negative evaluation of one's own progress. In "Hindsight is 20/20: Student perceptions of language learning and the study abroad experience," Mendelson (2002) highlights the sense of "missed opportunities" that some SA returnees experience upon return. Mendelson first describes students' pre-sojourn beliefs, including that study abroad will provide "miraculous" linguistic gains and that interaction in the host language outside of class is "inevitable." The author found that students with these beliefs also experienced the post-sojourn feeling that they were deficient or had not devoted enough effort to improving their language skills. Mendelson went on to suggest that these feelings of inadequacy may be a result of overestimation of one's language skills before going abroad. In fact, he found that students self-rated their pre-departure proficiency one level higher than their corresponding test results on the Oral Proficiency Index.

Other studies on students' perceptions of language learning abroad focus specifically on their perceptions of their social environment and the importance of communicative interaction with NSs for their L2 development. Many studies indicate that students perceive social interaction to play a significant role in their L2 learning abroad. For instance, Campbell (1996), reflecting on her own personal journals, reported that frequent interaction with German NSs was the most important factor in her acquisition of the German language. In a study of 23 adult learners of Spanish, Keating (1994) found "the negative feedback inherent in social responses to one's failures to communicate increase motivation to be more attentive to native speakers" (p. 61).

Many theorists describe negative perceptions of host culture and host nationals as a natural part of the overall adjustment process. For example, Bennett (1993) created a Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity in which the second stage is titled "Defense

Against Difference” Another model to consider is that of Hanvey (1979) which includes a stage called “Deviance.” In a study that examined dialogue journals between study abroad participants and their instructors, Bacon (1995) found that all journals reflected at one point or another that students were in Hanvey’s “Deviance” stage, manifested as a sense of lost control over their immediate environments. This resulted in breakdowns in relationships with Spaniards, difficulty communicating in Spanish, negative attitudes toward NSs, and feelings of isolation, ultimately leading to reduced L2 use and diminished understanding of the host culture.

I would like to make a distinction here regarding the lens through which this research was conducted. Many researchers have looked at second language acquisition through a humanist lens, one that places students into one of two categories- motivated or unmotivated (Norton, 2010). My findings have instead been examined through a poststructuralist lens, one that views an individual’s identity as diverse, contradictory, dynamic, and changing over time and space (Norton, 2010). Therefore, students’ narratives will not be used to evaluate the correctness or the incorrectness of their views on language learning. Furthermore, their own actions with regards to learning a language will be viewed in relation to those of individuals encountered in their host environment.

While studies on student perceptions are important, it is also helpful to understand how researchers’ views on language and language learning abroad have evolved over time. Early research on language learning abroad largely focused on statistical studies based on proficiency outcomes such as grammatical development (Jackson, 2008). In these studies, academic proficiency was highly valued. Since the 1990s, several studies have expanded this view to include other factors like cognitive and social growth that one undergoes during language study while abroad. These studies look at language learning as part of a larger process of adaptation to

a new environment. The term “adaptation” is used in various fields such as psychology and intercultural studies. The definition that will guide my research is that of cross-cultural theorist Kim (2001). Kim (2001) defines adaptation as “a complex, dynamic, and evolutionary process an individual undergoes vis-à-vis a new and unfamiliar environment.” (p. xii).

Beyond the fields of psychology and intercultural studies, my research is naturally based heavily on research from the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Many studies, both older ones such as Lave and Wenger (1991) and newer ones such as Huhtala (2012), support the idea that learning a target language helps newcomers become a more integrated member of the community of practice. Ultimately, that is what the Center for International Education at Maryville College wants for its students. Study abroad supports the College’s overall mission to “build and strengthen the human community” (Maryville College, 2019).

Research has shown that growth in linguistic prowess is not the only kind of growth that occurs when one learns a new language. For example, Coleman (1997) views the language-learning process in a more holistic way, identifying several key factors- linguistic, biographical, cognitive, affective, and personality- that have relevance for student sojourners abroad. In a later study, Coleman (1998) argues against limiting research to linguistic gains. In addition to these linguistic gains, she supports the inclusion of sociocultural and intercultural competence as essential elements of the true linguistic proficiency that residence abroad is thought to enhance.

To understand the role that language learning plays in student development while abroad, it is important to first understand the process of adaptation. The field of psychology has identified three approaches that humans use to adapt to new circumstances- the ‘stress and coping’ approach, the ‘culture learning’ model, and the ‘social identification and cognition’ theory (Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016).

The ‘stress and coping’ approach was largely explored by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who defined psychological stress as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (p. 19). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argue that stress is not to be considered a single factor but instead a rubric consisting of many processes and variables. Coping is the process of creating strategies to deal with this stress.

The ‘cultural learning’ framework, on the other hand, holds that adaptation to a new culture consists of gradually developing the necessary skills to function within the unfamiliar social environment that characterizes that culture (Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016). Finally, ‘social identification and cognition’ includes research on perceived individual and group status differences and how these perceived differences influence participation in a host society (Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016).

Aveni (2005) used the insights of second language (L2) sojourners to shed light on the challenges they faced and the strategies they used to overcome those obstacles in their host environment. In this study, the author collected data from 76 U.S. American learners of Russian participating in SA programs in Russia (ranging from four to twelve months) with the stated goal of improving their Russian language skills. Despite their determination to learn the language, Aveni (2005) found that learners often chose to either reject or reduce their interactions in Russian to maintain and protect their self-image.

While this process is not easy for students, research has shown it provides them the opportunity to make great strides in personal growth. Huhtala (2012) describes L2 learning as “a complex project entailing constant identity formation as a plurilingual subject” (p. 5). Lave and

Wenger (1991) describe the language learning process as one of becoming a more integral part of the community of practice consisting of both fellow students and target language users.

Personal growth is relevant in this research because “in the recursive process of identity production, individuals are constituted ‘neither free agents nor completely socially determined products’” (Ahearn, 2000, p. 120). In other words, individual identity is not a precondition of social action, but instead comes as a result of social action. Students and people in general have the power to take actions in their life’s experiences to produce and transform their own social worlds (Norton, 2010). In this way, language learning is a challenging but fruitful means of pushing students to undergo personal growth and change.

### **Research Methodology**

My research followed in the tradition of more recent research in applied linguistics that has investigated language and cultural learning using introspective techniques like diaries, first-person narratives, focus groups, and interviews. Researchers like Murphy-LeJeune (2002) and Aveni (2005) value the voices of individual study abroad students and assert that an exploration of their ‘storied experiences’ can make an important contribution to our understanding of their sojourns abroad.

The student populations that were invited to participate in this study were Spring 2017, Summer 2017 and Fall 2017 study abroad returnees, as well as current Spring 2018 study abroad students. The combined universe of available subjects included over 20 students. As my practicum site is Maryville College (MC), all participants were MC students. In targeting these groups, this study utilized the method of purposive, non-probability sampling. The reason for utilizing this sample selection was to purposefully target individuals with the criterion of being MC students that have studied abroad for a summer, semester, or year in a location where

English is not the first language of host nationals. In total, eight students responded to my invitation to participate in the study. Three of these were summer study abroad students and five were semester-long study abroad students. Two were males and six were females.

Another population of study abroad students that was available to me, but which were not included in the study, are 2017 and 2018 travel-study returnees. Travel-study programs at Maryville College are short-term (typically two to three weeks in length) faculty-led courses abroad. Through this study, I sought to understand personal growth undergone by study abroad students and dedicated energy to data collection from participants who were able to articulate growth over a longer period of time (four weeks to several months).

Data was initially collected from these populations through an electronic survey (Appendix A) which asked students to articulate their overall personal growth in the categories of self-confidence, ability to problem solve, understanding of oneself, and intercultural competence. In addition to this, the survey elicited information about frequency and context of student use of host languages abroad. It also asked students to reflect on challenges and successes encountered through their use of said host language.

The survey consisted of ten total questions and only two of these were open-ended. My reason for creating a short survey that included only a limited number of open-ended questions is that descriptive questions can be “expensive” for participants (Dillman et al., 2014). In other words, open-ended questions require more time and effort to answer than do closed-ended questions. As a result, response quality for open-ended questions is often poor.

In addition to the two open-ended questions, there were four rating scale questions that included comment boxes labeled “Please elaborate.” These questions asked students to rate to what extent learning and practicing the host language abroad influenced their self-confidence,

problem-solving skills, understanding of themselves, and understanding of their host culture. I felt it best to simply ask what students had learned about their host culture rather than use the words “intercultural competence” directly in questions. This is because I was unsure of how familiar the average undergraduate student might be with this term.

After the first draft of the survey was designed, a volunteer gave it a “test-run,” answering the questions and providing feedback on their user experience. Initially, the survey provided a single-line text box for answers. The volunteer suggested that a comment box might encourage lengthier, richer answers. This viewpoint is supported by Christian and Dillman (2004), who found that respondents’ answers were two to six words longer and contained a wider variety of themes when the size of their survey’s comment boxes was doubled.

With each survey respondent, I conducted a 30 to 40-minute one-on-one semi-structured interview to dive more deeply into the topics included in the survey. These interviews were semi-structured to allow participants to shape the interview. The short list of guiding questions (Appendix B) allowed time and space to further explore various relevant topics that participants brought up in their responses. The bulk of each interview consisted of my asking participants to elaborate on four key questions in the survey. These were questions that asked participants to rate to what extent learning and practicing another language abroad helped them 1) learn more about the culture of their host countries, 2) learn more about themselves, 3) improve their overall self-confidence, and 4) improve their overall ability to problem-solve. While several participants had provided additional detail in the comment boxes of these four key survey questions, few had told stories. Therefore, during one-on-one interviews, I sought to elicit narrative storytelling.

Student blogs also provided data that contributed to the telling of their stories. This data was already readily available, as students are required to complete blogs before departure over



the course of eight weeks for their pre-departure course. Students who receive Maryville College study abroad scholarships are required to blog throughout the course of their sojourns abroad.

The majority of research participants were the recipients of Maryville College study abroad scholarships. Each of the five required blogs has a theme that students must write about, the first being about personal goals for maximizing the study abroad experience, the second about anticipated challenges of being a U.S. American abroad, the third about anticipated challenges of participating in a new academic system and environment, the fourth about strategies for living like a local abroad, and the fifth about study abroad and vocation.

To analyze the data collected, I coded survey responses, blogs, and interview transcripts. Given the limited breadth of the data, I coded manually rather than opting for the use of a software. First, I developed a system of codes or categories, which I then searched for in the written and transcribed data. The coding was based on the limited set of personal growth aspects identified above: learning about one's host culture, learning about oneself, self-confidence, and problem-solving ability. Certain data was related to language learning in general and was therefore indirectly linked to all four categories. Language learning codes included fear of making mistakes, comparison of own language skills to others, participant insistence on speaking host language, social life, challenges, and successes. After coding, I looked for patterns in where these codes appeared and found overarching themes.

Findings were presented under the four personal growth categories with data about language learning included and analyzed throughout. In the presentation of findings, I utilized direct block quotes from interview transcripts to present student narratives exactly as they had stated them. For the purpose of anonymity, I used pseudonyms to refer to participants.

A limitation to this research was time constraint. I began research in February and was required to complete it by April. Given more time, it would have been fascinating to conduct a longitudinal study that compared Spring 2018 student experiences at the beginning of the semester to those at the end. Another limitation was that my sample size was already quite small to begin with, and ultimately less than half of possible participants agreed to take part. I mitigated this issue by collecting a greater depth of data to make up for the lack of breadth. The lack of breadth was not necessarily a negative aspect of this study, as individual experiences of students are invaluable.

Given the limited timeframe in which this research needed to be completed, it is important to note once again that this study aimed to examine participants' perceptions of personal growth. The study was not designed to measure actual personal growth.

### **Findings**

In the online survey, participants were asked to rate to what extent language learning helped them in the following four areas: learning about one's host culture, learning about oneself, increasing self-confidence, and improving problem-solving ability. Survey results (Appendix C) indicate participants generally agreed that language learning helped them grow. The lowest rating that participants gave for any given question was "neither agree nor disagree" and these responses were always in the minority. Not one participant selected "completely disagree," "disagree," or "somewhat disagree" at any point in the survey.

I will now divide my findings into sections that go into detail regarding each of my eight participants: Mike, Carla, Melissa, Jay, Ana, Georgia, Halie, and Brittany. In presenting these findings, I will include data primarily from one-on-one interviews as well as data from blogs and the survey where relevant.

**Mike**

Mike studied abroad in Argentina for four weeks during the summer of 2017. He describes his experiences learning Spanish.

**learning about oneself**

In Pre-Departure Blog 1 entitled “Goals,” Mike stated:

The main thing I may struggle with is that as an American, I am a somewhat independent person as most Americans are. However, most Latin American countries including Argentina are very integrated. They do a lot of things as a whole... Moreover, after doing more stuff in groups in Argentina, I may begin to like it instead of being a more independent person or I could just adapt to it and go back to being more independent once I return to the US. Either way I feel this experience will teach me a lot about myself.

Mike did not provide any elaboration on the four key survey questions that focused on personal growth. He did, however, give very positive responses when asked to rate the degree to which language learning helped him grow in those four areas. He agreed that language learning abroad helped him understand the culture of his host country, himself, and improved his self-confidence. He completely agreed that it improved his ability to problem-solve.

In order to elicit more detailed, narrative responses from Mike, I read the above portion of his blog and asked him whether or not he perceived a change in his independence and desire to go out by himself as opposed to doing so in a group. With this question, I sought to understand whether Mike felt he had learned more about himself through language learning. Mike affirmed that he has now become more open to going out in groups as a result of his experiences abroad:

Over there, I never went out alone. Over here, I would go out all the time by myself, go eat by myself, but over there I never went out by myself and since I've been back I

rarely go out by myself so I feel like I brought that back from over there. Of course I didn't go out by myself over there because they told us "Don't ever go out by yourself." But at the same time I had way more fun not going out by myself so I kind of brought that back over here.

When asked why he agreed with the statement "Learning and practicing another language while abroad helped me to better understand myself.," Mike expressed perceived growth in his openness to new ideas and experiences. He also perceived growth in his ability to adapt to different environments and initiate conversations with strangers with ease. He explained that this was due to being in a situation in which communicating in a foreign language was the only way to navigate his host environment. When asked how open he was before studying abroad in Argentina, Mike responded:

Before I went I was...like I always have been outgoing but it would take me a minute to be outgoing like I would have to be around them at least like a day or something. But over there I didn't have a day. So since I've been back as soon as I meet you I can just talk to you about anything and be outgoing. Before I left, I was more of a- I don't want to say introvert-because I've always been able to make friends but they would have to come to me first. Now I can make friends on my own and just go over and talk to people.

In addition to being more outgoing in general, Mike stated that he is now more likely to express his opinions in classroom discussions as well. He described this outgoing character in both social and academic settings as a form of newly acquired leadership skills.

### **problem-solving**

Mike described a newfound ability to assess a situation using context clues. To illustrate this, he described an incident involving street performers on the subway. At first, Mike did not

understand that these individuals were actors and actresses and needed to look to those around him for help in reacting appropriately:

One time I was on the subway and you know people over there will do shows to try and make money. I was sitting by this lady who was a part of the show and there was a man standing up and they started arguing but I didn't know. I thought they were so serious but it was just part of the show. She was arguing and tapping me and kept asking "Am I right? Am I right?" At first I didn't understand what she was saying. Then the girl beside me was like "She's asking you is she right?" and I was like oh! Yeah, yeah, yeah. Instead of trying to understand like what the words were, I tried to understand context clues. And it helped me out where if I'm in a situation where I don't fully understand I can look around and try to understand.

He saw this as being very different from Spanish classes taken at Maryville College, where he was able to ask the professor what certain words meant. He went so far as to state that learning Spanish abroad was "easier" than in the classroom here at Maryville College because it forced him to use context clues to deduce the meaning of words and situations.

### **self-confidence**

Mike spoke about developing the confidence to try speaking Spanish, make mistakes, and be corrected rather than be "scared" to speak Spanish. During the interview, I asked how his experience would have been different if he had entered his study abroad experience with zero Spanish proficiency. Mike stated that he most likely would not have gone in the first place if he was "dead afraid of not knowing any Spanish." He mentioned the word "afraid" more than once during the interview, but his responses indicated that he had overcome his fears of speaking and developed more confidence.

**learning about host culture**

Through speaking with native speakers, Mike said he learned about the importance of learning English in Argentinian culture, expressing surprise at how well many Argentinians seemed to know English. He described typical interactions with Argentinians as follows:

Every time we went to a club, they would realize that we were American or at least guess that we were American. And they would automatically try to speak English to us, but they was actually not that bad at all. Like I could be here and I know so many people that don't know nothing about Spanish but over there I knew so many people who knew something about English. So we would be at clubs or something and people would just be coming up to us like "Hey man, hey man, you. Me. Friends." And it made me better understand how they probably learn a little bit more or hear more about the United States than we do about them. So it's probably a little bit more important for them to learn English than for us to know Spanish or at least they might think it is.

**Carla**

Carla studied abroad in Norway for a semester during the fall of 2017. She describes her experiences learning Norwegian.

**learning about oneself**

Carla spoke extensively about the realization that U.S. Americans and herself express more negativity than Norwegians in the way that they speak and the structure of their sentences. When asked to elaborate on how she learned that the structure of Norwegian sentences exuded positivity, Carla said:

I would just see when they would translate for me, that it was being extremely positive compared to being negative...It would be in positive language where I would put a

negative sentence in there and they're saying a positive one.... Like 'Oh yeah, well we did do bad on that, BUT we learned this out of it.' But we would just be like 'Oh my God, we did so bad on that.' and not putting anything positive.

Therefore, while Carla did not take a Norwegian course while abroad, she learned about the language through active inquiry with Norwegian peers. Thanks to these efforts, she made the above realization about her own level of positivity. However, she seemed hesitant to say that language learning abroad helped her learn more about herself. Instead, she said "I don't know if I learned enough of the language to help me understand anything specific about myself. More just that I prefer that type of, like it's more encouraging their language instead of like tearing down."

### **problem-solving**

While in Norway, Carla was often spoken to in Norwegian and needed to problem-solve in order to find an appropriate response. She expressed discomfort at the thought of simply responding with "I don't speak Norwegian." as she felt a certain obligation to show that she was making an effort to assimilate to their language and culture as best as she could. Through her efforts, she perceived a better ability to think "quicker on my feet" and an ability to "actually respond to what their sentence was...and so instead of being like 'No I don't speak Norwegian.,' I could be like 'No, sorry I don't know where that bus is.'"

### **self-confidence**

On this point, Carla's survey results indicated no perceived change. She neither agreed nor disagreed that language learning had improved her overall self-confidence. During our one-on-one interview, she confirmed that beyond getting a "little ego-boost" when she was able to give an appropriate answer, she saw little connection between language learning and her level of self-confidence.

**learning about host culture**

Carla felt that through language and her coursework, she learned a great deal about not only Norwegians but also the indigenous Sami people of Norway. During the interview, I brought up a concept she had described in a blog she wrote during her time in Norway titled “Friluftsliv: The Scandinavian Way.” When asked to elaborate on this, she brought up collectivist culture and Norwegians’ connection with nature and each other:

It’s a more collectivist country so there’s less individual words and there’s more collective community words. But for the friluftsliv that doesn’t translate to any other language...It’s about keeping things natural so if you go to the forest you’re not supposed to build a fire pit and not break it down because then you’ve touched that land and other people can see that you’ve touched it and you ruin their experience...Mainly in that friluftsliv concept is making sure that all people can enjoy it.

As for the Sami people, she mentioned that they have around 150 words for snow and this emphasized to her just how significant the livelihood of reindeer herding was for them, explaining that:

They are reindeer herders so the type of snow is important like ‘You can go up this mountain or no you can’t because this isn’t going to work with your skis.’ and the environment like knowing is this type of snow leading to spring or is this a wintery type of snow because the words are describing the types of snow like if it’s a powdery snow or a wet snow, a warmer snow, so all of these descriptions lead them to understand ‘We need to do this tonight or we need to do this in a few weeks or we need to move the reindeers from this part to another part.’ and so their livelihood is really important to them because that’s all they have because they still do that and it was more important but



there's a few that live the Norwegian lifestyle where they have a "proper job" but most of them still herd reindeer and live in specific houses.

Overall, Carla seemed to draw big-picture cultural learning through the handful of words that she did learn despite not learning Norwegian through a language course.

### **Melissa**

Melissa studied abroad in Japan for a semester in the fall of 2017. She describes her experiences learning Japanese.

#### **learning about oneself**

With regard to learning more about herself, Melissa said she mostly gained insight in "personality wise sort of stuff." To start, she gave an interesting example about her frequent use of the phrase "I'm sorry." When she attempted to continue this habit in the Japanese language, it angered her host mother. In her words:

I always struggled with some things...like I say 'I'm sorry' a lot and in Japan I'd always be like 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry' and my host mom got so mad at me one time. She was like 'Don't say sorry if you're not sorry!' And I feel like that's made me more aware kind of...It makes me wonder...am I really sorry? Or am I just saying it? Do I really care?

Melissa also noted that since her return, she feels she has become "ruder" in her role as hostess at a local restaurant. She implied that this was a result of being exposed to the polite behavior and language that Japanese patrons used with wait staff. For example, when referring to requests to alter items on the menu or make reservations 15 minutes in advance, she stated "That gets on my nerves now."

#### **problem-solving**

Melissa did not seem to feel like learning and practicing Japanese abroad did much to

improve her ability to problem solve, marking “somewhat agree” on the online survey. She also specified during her interview that more so than improving her problem-solving skills, learning Japanese abroad helped to change the perspective with which she views problems. She mentioned “There was this phrase ‘There’s nothing you can do about it.’ or ‘Well you can’t really do anything about it so just deal with it.’ That made me realize that there isn’t always a solution to problems. You can’t change everything.”

### **self-confidence**

Melissa described several instances in which her self-confidence was tested during study abroad particularly when she was corrected by native speakers. Pronunciation was a specified area that Melissa would “really worry about” because she would “always be corrected.” When asked how she felt when she was corrected, Melissa said “It made me feel like I didn’t understand it at all sometimes...because I’ve taken quite a few years of Japanese now.”

She also expressed frustration when she spoke Japanese to native speakers and they responded in English. When people did this, she stated “I’d usually switch back to English. Because I would be embarrassed that I messed up even though I’m pretty sure that sometimes I didn’t. But also I feel like maybe they wanted to try out English too.” Another observation that I made was that Melissa used the verb “force” several times when describing her use of Japanese, saying for example “Practice is the only way to get better so I had to force myself to talk to people even though I knew I’d be corrected.”

On her survey, Melissa only somewhat agreed that language learning had improved her self-confidence. When asked to elaborate on her answer, Melissa explained:

I’m not confident at all because the Japanese exchange students...it’s always just me and Sara and Niko (\*names changed to protect privacy of exchange students) and they can go

back and forth so quick and I can't keep up with their conversation. I don't think it's easy so I feel weird trying to speak Japanese with them.

Melissa feels that overall "I speak my mind more." and "I think I'm more honest about things now." She did not, however, articulate a correlation between these changes and her experience learning language abroad. She expressed this as more of a general product of studying abroad.

### **learning about host culture**

Melissa noted that the attention given to formality in the Japanese language taught her about the value that Japanese society puts on respect. To illustrate this, she mentioned that Japanese speakers are expected to put "san" after the name of a person to show respect.

### **Jay**

Jay studied abroad in Argentina for four weeks during the summer of 2017. He describes his experiences learning Spanish.

### **learning about oneself**

Jay was happy to report that study abroad had taught him to be more open-minded and willing to try new things. Before going abroad, Jay admitted that "If I didn't know how to say something, I just wouldn't say it at all or if I didn't know this was the right way to do something, I just wouldn't do it at all. But now I know it's better to at least try because there they'd say at least you tried." Another lesson that Jay learned from these experiences was that he is now more skilled at respecting other cultures.

In pre-departure blogs, Jay mentioned that one of his goals was to do something outside of his comfort zone every day while abroad. During the interview, he gave the example of "going up to someone and talking to them...Like go up to someone and say "My name's Jay. What's

you guys' names? What do you do?"" Jay gave the example of getting lost in the city, mentioning that before this experience he would not go somewhere if he was not sure how to get back. He seemed to recognize within himself a newfound ability to tolerate- and even enjoy- uncertainty.

### **problem-solving**

Using his Spanish to navigate public transportation was an important tool for Jay in terms of improving his ability to problem-solve. To illustrate this, he described the example of using Argentinian taxis, laughing he spoke about the following example:

I looked it up on my phone on Google and it tells the street name but taxi drivers they go off of intersections. They drop you off at street crossings which I didn't know. So when we first got in the taxi, we ended up getting out of the taxi because we told him the street and he was like 'No, no, no.' ...so we ended up getting out and we was like 'No, thank you.' ...The next day in class we brought it up to our teacher and they actually told us that when we give directions you have to give street crossings. So after that we tried again and it ended up working.

Jay also expressed pride in mastering the subway system, saying "I felt special." when other American students needed his help navigating it to travel to a field trip site. Evidently, he was one of the only people in his group to use public transport rather than ride-sharing applications like Uber.

### **self-confidence**

Jay started our interview with a story about ordering food for the first time in Argentina at a fast food restaurant. He said that he was the first one to step up and order and "I just felt good because I completed the order and that was like a big thing for me for my confidence." Moving forward, he said he feels as if he can travel to another Spanish-speaking country and have fun

without feeling quite as nervous as he did at the beginning of his experience in Argentina. He also mentioned now feeling able to go to a large city in the United States and feeling able to meet and connect with new people. On the topic of self-confidence, Jay said he felt able to “survive” in a Spanish-speaking country now. In the interview, Jay clarified that for him this means not being lonely, that “I can make friends. And I can get around on my own and I don’t need help like on transportation.” In this way, Jay expressed confidence in his ability to be independent.

### **learning about host culture**

I asked Jay how his experience may have been different if he had had zero Spanish proficiency to start with. His answer revolved mainly around differences in his social life abroad:

It would’ve been a rough time. Cause it’s fun when we would just go out and interact with people and understand what they was saying. And I had a couple friends that I met and we planned future stuff as well...like they would suggest places and if I didn’t understand what they was saying I would’ve missed out on a lot of things. Like they told us about this one club they went to and we ended up getting in for free and we got these little VIP passes and we were upstairs and it was crazy but I would’ve never went there because I didn’t understand what they were saying.

The Spanish language was what allowed Jay access to certain experiences. It also seems to have enriched extracurricular activities he took part in, like a soccer club and an English-Spanish language exchange.

### **Ana**

Ana studied abroad in France for a semester in the spring of 2017. She describes her experiences learning French.

**learning about oneself**

The way that Ana spoke about her findings showed a high level of self-awareness. She displayed this in her ability to describe the transformation in her thought process over time. The following quote shows how Ana was able to create new “categories” in her brain for her new linguistic knowledge:

I think in my own way I developed a box a category for miscellaneous things in my brain. So I think for me I ended up actually really enjoying the process...I was like ‘Hey there’s a way that it’ll work. I can get through this. I just gotta figure out how.’ And I like to predict what problems might arise so I can go ahead and address them but you can’t do that whenever it’s involving other people because potentially they’re unpredictable cause you don’t know that person so I had to stop analyzing every situation, trying to predict it before it happened. I would have conversations in my brain like ‘How is this gonna go down?’ Then I would try to prepare my responses but the person I’m talking to doesn’t have that same script. So...I ended up having meaningful conversations rather than drawing upon the knowledge that I had which was scripted.

**problem-solving**

During the interview, Ana referred to the example of navigating the tram system to illustrate the connection between language and problem-solving. In particular, she pointed to the necessity of being resourceful to get to your destination. She referred to the scrolling information on the electronic sign in the tram and fellow passengers as “resources” for finding a solution. Through reading the sign and asking for help, she was able to refine her problem-solving skills.

**self-confidence**

Like Melissa, Ana told several stories about instances in which she felt embarrassed about or “shamed” by her language abilities. For instance, she spoke about her anxiety in going to the grocery store, particularly with greeting the cashier with correct pronunciation and understanding the cashier when she said the total cost of the groceries. Her words on these topics include “I didn’t even want to say hello because I thought I was saying ‘hello’ wrong.” and- with reference to numbers- “In French, it doesn’t go up to 60, 70, 80, it’s like 40 PLUS 20 is 60. And 65 is 40 plus 20 and 5. And that’s just in cents. Not even the dollars. So then I started...I would just be silent.” The following interview excerpt describes a specific upsetting incident:

I set off a security alarm and the security officer came over and thought I was stealing something and he just kept talking to me and the only thing I was saying- in French- was ‘I don’t speak French, I don’t know what’s happening, I don’t know what you’re saying, I don’t understand.’ ... I almost started crying. He was really nice but it just shamed me because everyone is looking at you.

When asked how she overcame these insecurities, Ana stated that at first, she simply avoided grocery shopping. Over time, partly through interactions in French with other non-native speakers, Ana gained confidence. By the end of her time abroad, Ana felt comfortable going on a trip to Italy with no prior knowledge of the Italian language. Regarding this decision, she articulated the following connection to risk-taking:

I was like you know, I’m gonna do what I can and maybe these people will know some English and some French and between those two languages I would hope I could do well. And so I wasn’t as paralyzed with fear. So that’s me taking risks which I didn’t normally do before I went.

**learning about host culture**

Ana learned about the various forms- “academic language” and “social language” that French can take and in which situations it is appropriate to use which form.

In her survey, she also mentioned that sayings can give insight into the cultural values of a place. When asked to elaborate, she said that the French phrase for falling in love translates into “being struck by lightning” and that it conveys the idea that this process is “a good shock and a bad shock because ultimately you just don’t know what to do.” To Ana, this was different from the phrase “falling in love” in terms of emotions and meaning.

**Georgia**

Georgia studied abroad in Mexico for a semester in the fall of 2017. She describes her experiences learning Spanish.

**learning about oneself**

Georgia perceived a change in the way that she approaches uncertain situations. In the online survey, she said that with language learning one must “improvise a lot.” Although she used this phrase to describe improvements in her problem-solving abilities, she also expressed that getting creative in formulating sentences in Spanish- among other forms of improvisation- taught her to be “more adept at accepting something that wasn’t my original goal.”

**problem-solving**

During our interview, Georgia described her mental problem-solving process with the following example of ordering a drink at a café:

You have a sentence and you walk up to someone and you’re like I need to ask for a latte with caramel and you know zero of those words so you can’t construct the sentence as you would say it in English. And so suddenly you have to totally dissect the



sentence, use weird vocabulary, and know you're probably going to say it wrong and just smile and kind of end up with something at the end... I'm less anxious at the thought like that was my original plan and now I have to change it. It's like now I have all these other possibilities and before scheduling or making a plan, before doing that I actually think of all the other ways of kind of solving the problem at the end.

This example suggests that Georgia feels more flexible and able to consider various alternatives when approaching a problem.

### **self-confidence**

Georgia seemed to feel as if native speakers' reactions encouraged her to have more confidence. In her survey, she referred to the "little victories" that one can make when speaking another language and that these can boost confidence. During the interview, she further described this phenomenon as follows:

In another language people know that you're learning so they don't really have expectations for you so your little successes in talking are way better. They don't have expectations for you to be well spoken or convey ideas in a certain way or even respect them the way you speak because they're just like 'Good job! You asked if you could buy this!' Or something. So it gave me a new opportunity to redefine my speaking abilities.

This response indicated not only an increase in confidence, but an altered perception of what it means to be successful in speaking another language.

### **learning about host culture**

According to Georgia, "language *is* culture." To explain this, she gave the hypothetical example of what it would have been like to study abroad with a translator present with her at all times:

You're just expecting that person to translate both of those things- the culture and the language. But if it's you then you have to understand just the way that people communicate things. It's just completely different. Like the way you introduce yourself, the way you greet, in Mexico it's like a kiss and a hug. Every single person in the room you kiss and hug. And even though that's not something in a Spanish textbook that's something you learn that's also part of the language because it is part of the culture.

She also described language as "your entrance the culture." Overall, Georgia seemed to believe that language helped her become integrated more fully into the culture and the way of life in Mexico.

Georgia also spoke about personal connections that she made with host nationals, one of which was her relationship with her boyfriend. She described learning Spanish and learning about Mexican culture as "a part of our relationship that we were building together. He really enjoyed showing me his world and liked helping me learn Spanish." Through this relationship, Georgia was invited to her boyfriend's family's home and his friends' families' homes, which she felt taught her more about how Mexican families live.

## **Halie**

Halie studied abroad in the Netherlands for a semester in the fall of 2017. She describes her experiences learning Dutch. Halie made it clear at the beginning of our interview that language learning was not a significant element of her experience abroad. For this reason, she had less to say about this topic in blogs, survey and interview responses.

### **learning about oneself**

Halie did not feel that language learning taught her anything about herself. When asked if she wanted to add anything on this topic, she simply stated "It just wasn't a really significant part

of my experience abroad.”

### **problem-solving**

In the online survey, Halie neither agreed nor disagreed that language learning improved her ability to problem-solve. In the interview, she briefly elaborated that she needed to use context clues when she did not know what people were saying to her.

### **self-confidence**

Halie did not feel that language learning improved her self-confidence.

### **learning about host culture**

Halie did not feel that language learning taught her more about her host culture.

I asked Halie to describe the attitude of Dutch people towards the idea of foreigners learning their language and she responded that her Dutch orientation leaders told her “It’s really not that big of a deal if you learn Dutch or if you don’t. It could be fun maybe but. If I were one of you, I’d take a different language not Dutch.” Overall, as Halie said, language did not seem to be a very significant part of her experience.

## **Brittany**

Brittany studied abroad in Japan for eight weeks during the summer of 2017. She describes her experiences learning Japanese.

### **learning about oneself**

During our interview, Brittany spoke about her career aspirations. She has known for several years that she wants to teach English as a Second Language. Before her summer in Japan, Brittany was considering the option of teaching English abroad after graduation. Study abroad gave her the opportunity to “actually experience living there and interact with Japanese people. It helped me realize I would love to be in Japan and teach English.” In other words, being able to

interact with Japanese people in their language was a part of the overall experience which allowed Brittany to confirm her career goals.

### **problem-solving**

Brittany completely agreed that language learning abroad helped improve her ability to problem-solve but was unsure how to elaborate on this.

### **self-confidence**

Brittany's self-confidence was related to her ability to use Japanese as a tool for being fully independent abroad. She mentioned independence in her online survey and during our interview, giving her personal definition of what it means to be independent:

My definition of independent is completely being away from my family where my well-being completely depends on myself...where I have to take care of myself and no one is really there to help me. And granted there was the office itself that would help me if I needed help but I didn't really use their services. Like when I had a little medical emergency with my eye, I did everything myself.

### **learning about host culture**

Both in the online survey and in the interview, Brittany spoke about the different levels of formality in Japanese- "very formal, formal, and informal." She elaborated that this showed her that Japanese people very much value being respectful elders and people who are higher in status than you.

## **Discussion**

Upon analyzing data from these eight individuals, I noticed a number of themes that allow some insight into the individual study abroad experience.

The first theme was divergent views on the language learning process. Generally,

participants' narratives fell into one of two categories when it came to their confidence in speaking another language- those who felt successful in getting their point across and being flexible in the delivery of their message and those who felt successful in speaking "perfectly." Georgia, for example, fell into the former category. In the online survey, she described how "language cures any perfectionist by forcing you to make countless mistakes, be embarrassed, try again, and instead of perfection, you celebrate the human connections you make in the process."

Overall, there was evidence that six out of eight participants viewed language learning in this way: Georgia, Mike, Jay, Carla, Brittany, and Ana. Mike displayed this attitude when explaining his reaction to NSs' use of English with him. He assured them "...no you can say it in Spanish. I'll pick up on it eventually." Similarly, Jordan spoke of his new ability to take risks and "at least try" to speak Spanish, which seemed to be encouraged by NSs who lauded him for trying. Even Carla, who spoke very little Norwegian, seemed pleased to simply be able to understand the general topic of a NS's utterance and respond to that topic. She did not seem concerned with grammar, but with overall communication. Brittany was aware that her primary goal in being in Japan was to participate in a Japanese language and culture program and that this naturally meant speaking with NSs and improving through trial and error.

Ana spoke at length both about successes and challenges. While at times she seemed frustrated with NSs' seeming lack of sympathy for her status as a second language learner ("You know I don't understand French, you know that I'm not a good French speaker, and you're speaking to me like I'm native to this country... and then whenever I say I don't understand, you repeat yourself but using the same speed, using the same everything and not dumbing down any of the language."), she also said she made great progress in being able to view language learning mistakes positively, as something that ultimately helps one to learn.

Melissa, on the other hand, seemed to feel frustrated when corrected, especially considering the years of Japanese study she had completed. Halie did not speak much Dutch while abroad and thus did not reveal much about her opinions on the language learning process.

How are these discoveries relevant to personal growth abroad? Looking at the survey data, participants who spoke explicitly about the value of communicating effectively without speaking “perfectly” reported higher gains in self-confidence. Melissa did not, referring to her difficulties speaking Japanese with current exchange students as proof that she had not improved very much and thus did not feel more confident in herself as a result of language.

Problem-solving themed questions also revealed student perceptions about what constitutes language learning. For instance, Georgia described speaking Spanish as similar to “improvising.” Both Mike and Halie mentioned using a strategy of searching for context clues. Ana, after her initial frustrations, spoke of letting go of fear of not understanding and instead approaching language learning with an attitude of “There’s a way that it’ll work through. I can get through this. I’ve just got to figure out how.” She admitted that her initial attempts to predict or “script” conversations with NSs were problematic. She realized that it was best to let go of this tendency and have “meaningful conversations rather than drawing upon the knowledge that I had which was scripted.” Four participants completely agreed that language learning improved their overall ability to problem-solve. This was the highest response rate for “completely agree” of the four key survey questions related to personal growth.

Data collected in this study also provided evidence as to which stages of adjustment participants found themselves in. Carla related positive learnings about her host country with what she learned about herself. She spoke of taking away certain elements of Norwegian culture and collectivist culture in general and trying to apply them to her own life. One of these elements

was a tendency to be optimistic and positive when speaking as opposed to focusing on negative details. Like Carla, Melissa also related cultural learning to what she learned about herself. For example, she mentioned a preference for respectful language and interactions in Japan and expressed that she has less patience for rude customers at her job as a restaurant hostess. These comments suggest that perhaps Carla and Melissa found themselves between Bennett's Acceptance and Adaptation stages. Both showed interest and preference for certain elements of their host countries' cultural values. Carla even showed signs of attempting to incorporate these into her everyday life and actions, a characteristic of being in the Adaptation stage.

Overall, I noted that few participants used critical language when speaking about their host cultures. Most comments were positive. Several participants mentioned the importance their host cultures placed on greetings and respect, as well as host nationals' openness about practicing English. Many marveled at how well host nationals spoke English and expressed that they wished foreign language learning was a more prominent part of U.S. American culture. Few participants spoke about experiencing either Bennet's Defense Against Difference stage or Hanvey's Deviance stage. The scope of this study does not allow me to definitively place participants into stages of adaptation. However, it is important to consider that if participants had been in a more tumultuous stage of adaptation at the time of their interviews, their narratives and overall perceptions of what they gained from the experience might have been more negative.

During interviews, I also asked participants to describe their "social circles" and relationships with host nationals. Students who agreed or completely agreed that they had experienced personal growth abroad- particularly in their understanding of their host cultures- often spoke of friendships with host nationals. Mike and Jay spoke of their participation on a club soccer team and a weekly language exchange meeting. Jay mentioned that if he had not

known as much Spanish before going abroad, he “probably wouldn’t have had as much fun” and would have “missed out on a lot of things.” He spoke of getting recommendations from NSs for places to go and explanations of confusing aspects of the culture, such as how to speak with taxi drivers. Brittany spoke of the extended time she spent in the Japanese Plaza or “J Plaza,” a building on campus where students could go to speak Japanese with each other and with tutors. She mentioned that “that’s how I got the majority of my native-speaking friends.” Participants with host families also spoke positively about that experience. Georgia called her host mother “one of my best tools for learning.”

Overall, participants seemed to believe that an ability to speak the host language helped them to connect with their host culture and host nationals. Several participants stated that without some knowledge of the host language, they would have been “afraid” to embark on their study abroad experiences in the first place. Mike and Ana said that they likely would not have gone at all. Georgia imagined that she would have felt isolated without Spanish-speaking abilities.

One theme that was not included explicitly in interview questions, but which manifested itself organically in many interviews, was that of immersion. In particular, participants spoke of the nature of immersive experiences and finding oneself in situations in which speaking a foreign language was the only way to communicate. Many participants drew connections between having to use the language and seeing results in their personal growth.

Mike, for example, often used the phrase “had to” when discussing his use of Spanish in Argentina. The following are a selection of phrases Mike used in his interview: “After two or three days we *had to* start going out on our own, when we were out by ourselves then we *had to* speak Spanish, when we *had to* order for ourselves we *had to* speak Spanish a lot, anytime we left our room, we *had to* speak Spanish, anywhere we went we *had to* speak



Spanish, I *had to* learn a lot of new words, I feel like over there I was not afraid to talk to anybody because I *had to*.” Mike seemed to thrive in the full-immersion environment. As mentioned above, he stated that he found learning Spanish abroad to be easier than learning it in the classroom, as he “needed” to use context to understand and respond appropriately in different situations.

Melissa described her study abroad experience as one in which she needed to “force” herself to use the language. In the first blog post that she wrote while abroad, Melissa gave future study abroad participants the advice to “*force* yourself to interact with people.” During the interview, I read this quote to her and she confirmed that she had to constantly remind herself to do this while abroad. She had to introduce herself to people, to talk to people despite knowing that she would be corrected, to order food for her less confident friends when they were too nervous to do so themselves.

Ana described speaking French as a necessity. For instance, she spoke of coming to the realization that she could not simply use English with the international students that lived in her residence hall. She admitted to assuming that they knew English but then coming to realize that “I *needed* to use French.” Ana explained she had gone to France with the specific goal of learning the language and that “because I was living there for five months, I felt it was *necessary* to at least attempt to speak to the servers and people who worked in stores and even to make friends.” Like Mike, she also used the phrase “had to.” To focus better on what native speakers were saying, Ana mentioned that “I *had to* stop analyzing every situation, trying to predict it before it happened.”

Ana’s effort to change her thought patterns reflects a process of readjusting her expectations about language learning in this new environment. This piece of data inspired a

closer inspection of other participants' narratives to search for ways in which their expectations matched up with reality.

Melissa also reported struggling with readjusting her expectations. It is unclear from the data whether or not she was able to achieve this. Certain parts of Melissa's experience did not match expectations. For example, she expressed surprise that the Japanese Plaza- where students were expected to only speak in Japanese- was always crowded regardless of the time of day. She stated that this was not her ideal learning environment, as she prefers interaction in small groups. Melissa also reported that the amount of time that she spent on campus, and thus the time she had to access this resource in the first place, was more limited than initially expected. She explained that she took "more classes than I should have" and "was always trying to go places."

In her pre-departure blogs, Melissa did not articulate specific expectations related to the language learning environment abroad. However, she did express the general hope that study abroad would help her with Japanese. In her first pre-departure blog about goals, Melissa stated that "I want to greatly improve my Japanese language skills which are currently not up to par...While I really enjoy learning the language...I still have a long way to go." It seems as if Melissa hoped that she would improve, but did not necessarily have strong faith that this would actually occur. In the end, her survey and interview responses suggest that she did not perceive great amounts of linguistic and personal growth as a result of practicing Japanese abroad. Aronson (1995) found a trend in social psychology studies which indicates that individuals will behave according to the perceptions they have of themselves, other people, their environment, and the attitudes that others have toward them (Aronson 1995).

Other participants also made mention of areas in which their expectations were

challenged. Georgia's experience, for instance, seemed to defy expectations in a positive way. She mentioned having an initial fear of speaking with native speakers. However, upon encountering Mexicans who were highly encouraging and supportive of even her smallest successes, these fears dissipated quite quickly.

Mike said that he was "shocked" to discover that many people he encountered in Argentina knew "a lot of" English. Argentinians' desire to learn English was something Mike was able to capitalize on in order to also improve his Spanish. Both parties helped each other with language and this provided the opportunity for Mike to form connections with NSs.

As mentioned in the literature review, language learning is a complex social process involving multiple interlocutors. Norton and Toohey (2004), sustain that in this social practice, complex relations of power are at play. For example, when an NS is communicating with an SA student, the NS has a certain level of power. This individual may encourage the SA student, as Georgia describes when she speaks of Mexicans' celebrations of her uttering even the simplest of sentences. The NS also has the ability to silence the SA student. For instance, when Melissa was having difficulty communicating with a waiter, a Japanese bystander exclaimed "Oh! They're American. They can't speak Japanese." Similarly, Carla described Norwegians simply walking away from her in the middle of an interaction upon discovering she did not speak the language.

### **Conclusions**

Participants generally agreed that language learning abroad helped them grow in the areas of self-confidence, ability to problem-solve, learning about their host culture, and learning about themselves. Related to this, participants found that the necessity to use a foreign language in real life situations was an important element in pushing them to grow. While some expressed an initial fear of making mistakes or perhaps an aversion to being corrected, there was a general

sense that these challenges pushed participants to grow. Furthermore, participants who were able to form connections and friendships with native speakers felt that these connections were important tools for learning and growing.

In examining the stories that participants chose to tell in surveys and interviews, it became clear that personal growth correlated with putting oneself in challenging situations. Language learning provided various challenges for participants to face, from adding an additional layer of difficulty to navigating public transportation to figuring out how to make friends in a new place without knowing exactly how to start that first conversation.

Finally, the results of this study also suggest that there is a need for further inquiry into how students form their perceptions of language learning before going abroad. This is relevant because pre-sojourn expectations play a large role in how students perceive their language-learning experiences upon return (Mendelson, 2002). Students often see study abroad as an experience that will guarantee fluency in the host language. Another common misconception is that contact with native speakers will be frequent and effortless. When experiences do not match an established ideal, students can feel as if their own actions were insufficient and that their experience was somehow flawed (Mendelson, 2002). It is crucial that more research be done to examine the roles of study abroad programs and institutions in the reproduction of these and other beliefs on language learning.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Survey Questions

My survey is online at the following URL: <https://tinyurl.com/CapstoneSurveyColumbus>

Questions included in the survey are as follows:

- 1) What is your full name? (single text box for answer)
- 2) What was the duration of your study abroad program? (multiple choice for answer, plus a single text box labeled “other”)
- 3) With whom did you speak the host language OUTSIDE of class? (multiple choice for answer, plus a single text box labeled “Other (please specify):”)
- 4) How frequently did you speak the host language outside of class? (rating scale for answer, from “Never” to “Always”)
- 5) What improvements, if any, did you see in your ability to speak your host language? (comment box for answer)
- 6) What challenges, if any, did you encounter in speaking your host language outside of the classroom? (comment box for answer)
- 7) Learning and practicing another language while abroad helped me to better understand the culture of my host country. (rating scale for answer, from “Completely disagree” to “Completely agree,” plus a paragraph text box labeled “Please elaborate.”)
- 8) Learning and practicing another language while abroad helped me to better understand myself. (rating scale for answer, from “Completely disagree” to “Completely agree,” plus a paragraph text box labeled “Please elaborate.”)
- 9) Learning and practicing another language while abroad improved my overall self-confidence. (rating scale for answer, from “Completely disagree” to “Completely agree,” plus a paragraph text box labeled “Please elaborate.”)
10. Learning and practicing another language while abroad improved my overall ability to problem-solve. (rating scale for answer, from “Completely disagree” to “Completely agree,” plus a paragraph text box labeled “Please elaborate.”)



**Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions Outline**

Read participant their responses to the following survey question and ask them to elaborate:

Learning and practicing another language while abroad helped me to better understand the culture of my host country.

Also, clarify words and phrases that participant used in the survey.

Read participant their responses to the following survey question and ask them to elaborate:

Learning and practicing another language while abroad helped me to better understand myself.

Also, clarify words and phrases that participants used in the survey.

Read participant their responses to the following survey question and ask them to elaborate:

Learning and practicing another language while abroad improved my overall self-confidence.

Also, clarify words and phrases that participants used in the survey.

Read participant their responses to the following survey question and ask them to elaborate:

Learning and practicing another language while abroad improved my overall ability to problem-solve.

Also, clarify words and phrases that participants used in the survey.

Other questions:

Tell me about your social circle abroad.

What do you think your experience would have been like had you had no prior experience in the host language?

Appendix C: Survey Results

