

Maximizing Study Abroad

Andrew D. Cohen explains how to make the most of immersion programs through strategizing about language and culture



What is likely to make the difference between a really

successful study abroad experience, a so-so one, and one that doesn't work for the student at all? It probably isn't going to be the extra orientation about the clothes to bring, how to deal with the local currency, or how to get your laptop connected to the internet. Even reading about the host culture and taking some extra language lessons may help some but may not make a real difference in the quality of the experience. Our experience at the University of Minnesota is that while information about the language and culture are helpful, the missing ingredient here is enhancing the study-abroad-bound students' ability to strategize about language and culture. This calls for providing the students what is being referred to as strategy instruction.

We all know that that good preparation for study abroad in a given host community includes learning about the cultural niceties of that community. The problem is that much of the material that is out there pays too little attention to what it is going to be like for the given student actually living in that language and cultural community. Those daily issues of interaction can make or break the experience. And it may be that there simply aren't materials available that explain just what it will be like for the given group of 19-to-21-year-old Americans living amongst their host-country peers, juniors, and elders.

When I was being prepared for my Peace Corps experience of two years doing rural community development with the Aymara Indians on the High Plains of Bolivia in 1964, I received a particularly heavy dose of information of an anthropological nature about this indigenous community. I received no information about what it would be like for an American to live amongst them (though such materials are becoming more available), and more importantly, no one provided me with handy strategies as to how to learn and use their language, Aymara, and how to come to better understand and live within their community without running water, electricity, paved roads, telephones, and the like - at an altitude of 14,000 feet on the High Plains, a five-hour truck ride from La Paz.

Times have changed! We now have resources that provide suggested strategies for functioning pragmatically within various language community. For example, a student going to Japan may wish to know how to apologize or refuse in Japanese. You need to know that it is usually done without fluency, by stuttering and stammering, and leaving your sentence incomplete — as a sign of proper humility. In fact, at the University of Minnesota, we have generated websites about pragmatics in both Japanese (www.iles.umn.edu/introtospeechacts/) and Spanish (www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/sp_pragmatics/home), expressly to provide users of these languages (such as students going abroad) with strategies for pragmatic performance in these two languages. We also have constructed a website replete with strategies for how to learn problematic grammar forms in Spanish (http://dev-carla.umn.edu/strategies/sp_grammar/). But equally as valuable as websites with strategies specific to a given language and culture are materials of a generic nature that can be applied to any language or cultural situation — materials that are intended to support the student going anywhere in the world.

Generic Materials

An interdisciplinary team of colleagues with good synergy

at the University of Minnesota have developed over the last decade a two-volume set of materials that are intended to do just this. The materials grew out of years of work on language learning strategies, and language and culture learning done at the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota. For the purposes of our work, we defined language and culture learning strategies as “the conscious and semi-conscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners to improve their knowledge and use of a target language on the one hand, and their understanding and use of all that is cultural on the other” (Cohen, Paige, Shively, Emmert, & Hoff, 2005, p. 103).

The first publication in the series, *Maximizing Study Abroad: A Students' Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use* (Paige, Cohen, Kappler Mikk, Chi, & Lassegard, 2006), is directed at students to use on their own, as part of a structured study abroad curriculum, or as supplementary materials in a language classroom. The new companion volume, *Maximizing Study Abroad: An Instructional Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use* (Kappler Mikk, Cohen, & Paige, 2009), can be used by teachers to facilitate the activities provided in the Students' Guide, or it can be used on its own to help you prepare a group of students for a study abroad experience (see <http://www.carla.umn.edu/maxsa/> for more on these guides and on how to order them).

A significant feature of these materials is that both the students' guide and the two other guides (for instructors and for program professionals) underwent field-testing in the form of a three-year research study funded by the Office of International Education (Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004). Rich feedback from users of the three guides led to extensive revisions, culminating in a new, more user-friendly version of the students' guide (with many more quotes from study abroaders) and this new instructional guide, which combines the best features of the two previous guides. For those who are interested, the full research report is available at www.carla.umn.edu/maxsa/documents/MAXSAResearchReport.pdf.

Language teachers know that students approach study abroad with different motivations and objectives. When left to their own devices, there are students who embrace language and culture learning with a passion, and manage to find the tools to do that. There are, however, students who are not likely to do it on their own. The Students' Guide was written expressly to provide students with tools that can enable them to navigate, interpret, and learn from their own intercultural encounters, and to take advantage of opportunities for improving their language skills. In essence, it teaches students how to learn about language and culture. It is our stance that if students learn strategies to achieve their learning goals, then their interest and motivation for language acquisition and culture learning will be enhanced. As Wendy Allen, professor of French at St. Olaf College, put it, “[The Students' Guide] helps students understand what study abroad is about —

understanding the other ‘from the inside’ — and provides them with the tools and strategies to maximize their experience.”

Research shows that it can be beneficial to have a balance between submersion in the host culture and guided reflection with home-culture peers and/or an instructor (Lou & Bosley, 2008). For our MAXSA study, the reflection was conducted between the student participants and one of the three graduate assistants by means of ongoing e-mail interactions.

Principles

■ **It can be beneficial for students** to use a strategies-based approach to the learning of language and culture, and the use of what is learned. The intention is to support students in maximizing their study abroad experience by being more strategic.

■ **There is value** in taking a process-oriented approach as opposed to the traditional outcomes-oriented approach to dealing with study abroad. Rather than waiting until the experience is over before determining whether the experience had a positive impact on language development and attitudes toward the target community, it pays to take an interventionist approach. The focus is on support for the learning and use of strategies for enhancing language development and cross-cultural adaptation throughout the duration of the experience.

■ **There is an advantage** in providing a theory- and research-based approach to the practice of language and culture teaching. The materials included in the guides are informed by thirty years of research on language and culture learning strategies.

Students

Students who want to make the most of their study abroad

experience need assistance to identify and use a wide variety of language- and culture-learning strategies. A good way to start is with an inventory designed to heighten students’ awareness as to how they currently learn and deal with language and culture. Then educators can provide students with tools and creative activities that they can use to enhance their favored learning strategies and try out unfamiliar ones. Students can use these activities both as they prepare for study abroad, while they are engaged in their study abroad experiences, and also once they have returned to maximize their experience.

The feedback we received from the field study prompted us to bolster the section of our guide on strategies for speaking while studying abroad, since students indicated that this was a major challenge for them. We also added a section on doing a term paper abroad. In addition, we made sure to add suggested activities for keeping the language and culture alive after returning home.

While studying abroad presents a profound opportunity for students to experience the world, evidence has shown that a fair number of students may fail to take full advantage of their time abroad. As Marshall noted, “Unfortunately, as thousands of Peace Corps volunteers, business people, government workers, and study abroad students can testify, living abroad merely provides an opportunity to learn. It does not guarantee language proficiency” (1990, p. 3). Living abroad also doesn’t guarantee cultural proficiency either.

Needless to say, it is possible to learn about a culture without learning the language and also possible to learn a language such as Spanish

without learning about the culture of a particular Spanish-speaking community. All the same, learning both the language and learning about the specific language community’s culture in the host country will help students make the most of their study abroad experiences.

Let me give just one example of how language and culture come together in the real world. I will use the simple matter of greetings because we learn about them early on in language classroom but also inadequately. In my example, an American approaches a man on the street in Martinique, as I did over a year ago, and launches directly into a request for help in interpreting a confusing parking slip issued by a machine and intended to be put on the dashboard of the car. Instead of responding to the American’s question (asked in fluent French), he says, “Bonjour.” An L2 speaker of French needs to know what that *bonjour* means, most likely “I was put off by your focusing immediately and exclusively on the parking slip, without going through the courtesy of extending a morning greeting.” Hence, a strategic approach to learning greetings is to get coached on the function of greetings in the given cultural context. It is not enough just to memorize the various greetings for different times of day. It is crucial to know the when, how, and why of using them (for more on this, see Cohen, 2009).

I was operating from a US-based pragmatics mode and simply transferring this approach to this parking slip situation, rather than asking myself how a native French speaker would do it, observing how they do it, or asking how to do it. Being strategic would mean observing how locals do it — if time permits and if there is accessibility to observing the given behavior in action. If not, then it may call for asking a native how to do it. And here you have to be careful to qualify the age, gender, and status issues related to the given situation. Otherwise you could be misled by the response you get and inappropriately overgeneralize this particular greeting to a situation where it is not usually applied.

This incident prompted me to start collecting information about the use of *bonjour* in Martinique. In the process, I learned that you start using it right after the lunch meal, or at about 2 pm, whereas in France you continue to use it until the early evening.

While differences in greetings between two languages and cultures may be very pronounced, as in the case of *bonjour* in Martinique (where there were few Americans and little English is spoken), they may be more subtle and even blurred in L2 situations, such as when French is spoken in a French-speaking community in the U.S. In this intercultural situation, perhaps the need for the greeting first is diminished given the influence of the mainstream language community where “we get down to business” right away. This leads us to the relevance of cultural training for those not going abroad.

What About Students Not Going Abroad?

We take a global view of study abroad, believing that teaching students strategies for language and culture learning and use will provide them with skills to help them be better world citizens — no matter where they go in life. We try to support study abroad in a “global” way to provide teachers and program professionals with the background information and tools to promote strategic learning of language and culture. Our intention is to encourage students to have significant

language and cultural learning experiences. For some, that significant experience will be study abroad and for others it may be working in a cross-cultural environment closer to home.

All the activities featured in both the Students' Guide and the Instructional Guide support a broad view of preparing students for a significant language and culture experience, with some activities needing an instructor's expertise in adapting them to fit the particular classroom context.

At a time when study abroad is on the increase, we would encourage students to enhance how they strategize when dealing with language and culture. **X**

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