

Editorial: The Culture of Study Abroad

John L. Plews
Saint Mary's University

The eight articles collected in this special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics/Revue canadienne de linguistique appliquée* are extended versions of original papers presented at the “Culture of Study Abroad for Second Languages” conference, held on July 14–17, 2015, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This conference was organized in association with the “Research Network on Study Abroad and Language Learning,” a special investigative sub-group of the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée, and financially supported by Saint Mary’s University and a Connection Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The conference brought together researchers and practitioners from across the world for presentations and discussions on various facets of residence and study abroad (SA) for second languages (L2).

The conference’s call for papers defined “culture” in the L2 SA context quite broadly in that it included:

a range of meanings from the language, customs, institutions, attitudes, and behaviours of a particular social group or group within a group, to the material products of the acts of imagination and human creativity such as literature, music, painting, film, and popular culture, to the appreciation and consumption of these forms either in formal educational practice or through personal inquiry and aspiration.

Gathered under this definition of “culture” in the L2 SA context were five specific sub-themes posed as questions:

1. What is the *culture of study abroad* and study abroad participants/stakeholders (teachers, hosts, organizers, etc.)?
2. What is *cultural learning on study abroad* and its relationship to language acquisition?
3. What is done with *culture after studying abroad*?
4. What are the *cultural implications* of French exchanges in or from Canada?
5. What are the *cultural interests and concerns* of language students moving from, to, and within Asia?

Each of these questions connect with both established and innovative directions in SA research. The first question focuses on aspects of community, individual and group behaviour, social networks, identity, values, and foundations, but also home/foreign culture, cultural translation, and generational, professional, social-economic, institutional, and classroom cultures (students, digital natives, instructors, host families, the host public, etc.). It draws attention to the ongoing need to understand how such groups and contexts emerge, function, and impact personal, linguistic, and intercultural development.

The second question attends to student, teacher, and host perceptions of material culture or behavioural culture to-be-learned as well as to pedagogy, curriculum, and extracurricular activities that lead to cultural and intercultural learning. A still under-explored area of research is the explicit or implicit relation between culture and linguistic development.

The third explores the afterlife of cultural, intercultural, and language learning on study abroad programming, when participants return to their domestic universities or workplaces. Here the focus is on how or whether participants maintain linguistic gains, different cultural and intercultural perspectives, and new subjectivities.

The fourth raises the issue of the perceived hierarchy of forms of French in study abroad choices, the cultural status of France in international French language education, and the specificity of Quebec, other French-speaking parts of Canada, and *la francophonie*.

The fifth inquires after trends, opportunities, and challenges in the mobility of students from or to Asia as well as in the under-researched area of between Asian countries. This area could be fertile ground for explorations of third language and culture learning in second language contexts, access to linguistic, cultural, and educational resources, and the explicit or tacit association of foreign language study abroad with both institutional and national development and immigration policies.

The articles gathered in this special issue collectively span all the aforementioned sub-themes and thus provide insight into the scope of the empirical research and critical scholarship both presented at the conference specifically as well as being undertaken currently in the growing field of L2 SA research more generally.¹ In the first article, Meike Wernicke of the University of British Columbia focuses on two K-12 French as a second language (FSL) teachers from western Canada during and after their 2-week professional development sojourn in France. Using an interactional perspective, she examines their “negotiated discourses of language subordination” between Canadian and European French as an element of their professional identity construction. Wernicke reveals how Canadian French is viewed as less authentic and inappropriate for classroom use in this SA setting, while European French is considered to be both prestigious and a way for FSL teachers to legitimize their language expertise.

In the second article, Roswita and Anja Dressler of the University of Calgary follow one teen’s—Anja’s—identity positioning on social media during two SA experiences in Germany; Anja’s co-authorship allows for the rare emic perspective of a sojourner-participant. Facebook posts from both sojourns, plus written reflections after the second sojourn, show the teen’s attempts to position herself as a bilingual within the German-English community, as well as her successes and challenges with language learning and her growing language awareness. Overall, the analysis reveals “dynamic and nonlinear” identity positioning. Dressler and Dressler call for more research on the effects of social media on the culture and outcomes of study abroad, drawing on other forms of social media and exploring more diverse sojourners.

¹ This special issue is one of four edited collections developed from academic work originally presented at the conference: see also Plews, 2016; Plews and Jackson, forthcoming; Plews and Misfeldt, forthcoming.

In the third article, Christina Keppie, Rachel Lindberg, and Sterling Thomason of Western Washington University explore the possible benefits of SA on L2 fluency by comparing the disfluencies of six undergraduate, intermediate French students from a U.S. liberal arts college. Based on post-sojourn interview data, Keppie et al. compare the filled pauses, silent pauses, and self-repairs of two SA participants with four non-participants. Keppie et al. conclude that sojourns of 6 months or longer decrease the use of disfluencies—especially grammatical self-corrections—among novice and intermediate French language learners.

In the fourth article, Aroline E. Seibert Hanson of Arcadia University and Melisa J. Dracos of Baylor University explore the relatively new topic of technology and study abroad, especially the use of technology in the first language (L1) and its relationship with linguistic gains and motivation while abroad. Based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of 15 U.S. university students studying Spanish in Argentina, they conclude that greater linguistic gains and higher motivation correlates with less L1 technology use. The article calls for further research into this area, including a more reliable measure of technology use (versus their post-SA questionnaire) while abroad.

In the fifth article, Karin Vogt of the Heidelberg University of Education examines the perspectives of 35 preservice German teachers of English as a foreign language who spent a 3-month teaching practice in Wales or the Republic of Ireland. Analyzing participants' reflective reports from their time abroad as well as focus group discussions 6 months after the sojourn, Vogt argues that while intercultural competence increased—albeit at differing levels—participants' primary focus was not on personal development but on interculturality for professional development.

In the sixth article, Abigail McMeekin of the University of Lethbridge analyzes the daily interactions of five high-intermediate L2 learners with their Japanese host families during short study abroad programs. McMeekin contributes to research on the benefits of non-classroom communicative settings for L2 acquisition and especially on how L2 speakers acquire language skills and appropriate socialization through interactions with mother-tongue speakers during SA. Based on conversation analysis of “remote observation” audio and video recordings taken at the beginning, middle, and end of sojourn, McMeekin concludes that multiple layers of socialization occur with host families, including “peripheral exposure to private assessments through modeling and direct participation in assessment routines with scaffolded help.”

In the seventh article, Marieke Müller of Virginia Commonwealth University and Barbara Schmenk of the University of Waterloo examine the complexities of cultural learning during SA through the experiences of two Canadian students of German who each spent a year in Germany. They argue that it is problematic to assume SA leads to increased intercultural competence and sensitivity and cultural knowledge. They suggest replacing the interculturality paradigm with a transculturality paradigm since it is more flexible in describing potential cultural learning during SA. Müller and Schmenk propose that the deconstruction of cultural stereotypes needs to begin before the sojourn abroad, with the responsibility on the instructor and curriculum.

In the eighth article, John W. Schwieter of Wilfrid Laurier University and Aline Ferreira of the University of California Santa Barbara explore the L2 interactions of 17 Canadian university students during a 5-week SA in Spain. Using the Language Contact Profile (LCP) and their own open-ended questions, Schwieter and Ferreira analyze the frequency of the L2 interactions and the choice of interlocutor. They emphasize the importance of host community interactions in increasing L2 confidence and proficiency as their participants relied on time with locals rather than on compulsory activities to understand the L2.

The present collection thus discusses the culture of L2 SA by exploring topics as diverse as identity, language status, technology use and social media, fluency, motivation, confidence, interaction, socialization, interculturality, and transculturality. It intends to inspire further inquiry into the nature and experience of L2 acquisition in SA in light of the sociocultural complexities of its contexts. There is much room for investigating which aspects of language are learned and used—or not—during or after immersion abroad, especially in relation to local customs (food, rituals and manners, service encounters, living and interacting with a host family, perceptions of strangers, institutional structures, etc.), but also in comparison with learning in domestic classrooms. A still under-explored area is what literary culture (as well as art, architecture, cultural and historical sites, historical narrative, pop culture, etc.) is learned on residence and SA and how this relates to the development of language ability and intercultural competence. How this connects with aspects of pre- or post-sojourn domestic Modern Languages curricula must also be explored further if we are to keep sight of the academic goals to which we wish our students to aspire. Naturally, cultural learning and intercultural perception lead to questions about the bounds of and the intersections between national, cultural, and linguistic identities for individuals and groups. Explorations of interculturality in L2 SA—that is, the development of cross-cultural knowledge, understanding, interpreting, doing, critical reflection, and suspension of prior (dis)belief (Byram, 1997) by being immersed in the L2 in situ—need to be attuned to participants' specific generational, ethnic, racial, gender, class, and popular subcultural identities. The theorization and practical consideration of transculturality is a crucial direction for sociocultural and applied research in L2 SA, which will require closer inspection of group culture such as participant sub-culture, intra-group cultures, the culture of hosting, institutional culture, and on-site and post-sojourn social networking.

References

- Byram, M. (1997). Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence. Clevedon, United Kingdom: Multilingual Matters.
- Plews, J. L. (Ed.). (2016). *Language and culture after study abroad*. [Special issue of] *Comparative and International Education* 45(2).
- Plews, J. L., & Jackson J. (Eds.). (forthcoming). *Study abroad to, from, and within Asia*. [Special issue of] *Study Abroad Research in Second Language Acquisition and International Education*.

Plews, J. L., & Misfeldt, K. (Eds.). (forthcoming). *Second language study abroad programming, pedagogy, and participant engagement*. Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.