



2014-06-16

Understanding the Experience of Successful Study Abroad Students in Russia

Olga Iongkhionovna Ookhara
Brigham Young University - Provo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Ookhara, Olga Iongkhionovna, "Understanding the Experience of Successful Study Abroad Students in Russia" (2014). *All Theses and Dissertations*. 4116.

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/4116>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Understanding the Experience of Successful Study Abroad Students in Russia

Olga Ookhara

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Grant H. Lundberg, Chair
Jennifer Bown
Blair E. Bateman

Center for Language Studies

Brigham Young University

June 2014

Copyright © 2014 Olga Ookhara

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

Understanding the Experience of Successful Study Abroad Students in Russia

Olga Ookhara
Center for Language Studies, BYU
Master of Arts

The present study was designed to understand the retrospective account of the learning experience of four successful learners of Russian who made substantial oral gains as measured by the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) during a semester study abroad (SA) program in Moscow, Russia. Each participant made as much as two sublevels' improvement on the ACTFL scale, even those who began with Advanced level proficiency. Specifically, the study examines what students believe, how they exercise their agency, cope with constraints, and take advantage of affordances in out-of-class contexts. The qualitative data includes semi-structured interviews while quantitative data consists of pre- and post-program OPI scores. This research addresses the question of second language learning in a foreign language immersion program through thick description and through cross-case analyses. Findings were interpreted in relation to van Lier's theory of the ecology of language learning (2004) and the notion of affordances which suggests that if learners are proactive and outgoing (or initiate interactions) they will perceive language affordances as valuable and will use them. This theoretical approach provides a means to understand how most students were able to improve in oral performance while lacking meaningful contact with native speakers (NSs) or struggling to make friends with them.

Regardless of the difficulties encountered during their time in Russia, students exercised their agency through participating in more self-initiated non-interactive activities without being directed by others. Each of the students perceived the meaning of his or her learning experience in a different way, demonstrating how the SA experience is highly individualized. This study argues that regardless of students' individual differences, they have one key principle in common: autonomous behavior. Further research is needed to investigate what fosters learners' autonomy and contributes to learners' self-efficacy.

Keywords: Oral Proficiency Interview, beliefs, agency, language contact, oral gains, Russian language learners

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank God, my Heavenly Father, for His guidance and inspiration throughout my thesis work. Also, this thesis could not have been completed without the support from a number of individuals. First of all, I wish to express deep gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Jennifer Bown, for her insightful comments, patience, and support. Her professionalism and enthusiasm for teaching and research let me know how to become a better language teacher. I would like to thank my committee members, Professor Blair E. Bateman and Professor Grant H. Lundberg for their insightful comments on this thesis. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Michael Bush for his help with formatting this thesis and for his valuable comments.

I also wish to thank students who generously agreed to participate in this study. I am thankful for their genuine interest in my study. They provided me with interesting stories about their Russian learning and helped me as a teacher better understand their immersion experience and what it takes to become an autonomous learner.

I would also like to express my particular thanks to my family and friends for their emotional support and encouragement, and advice about my thesis throughout the years.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem.....	3
Purpose and Research Question.....	3
Definition of Terms.....	4
Delimitations of the Study	5
Chapter 2: Literature Review	7
Introduction.....	7
Good Language Learners in the Classroom.....	7
Good Language Learners on Study Abroad.....	10
Beliefs and Good Language Learners.....	11
Language Contact	13
Agency	16
Theoretical Perspective of the Methodology	18
The Need for Current Research	19
Chapter 3: Methodology	21
Research Design: Type and Method.....	21
Gains in Oral Proficiency.....	21
Participants.....	22

Study Abroad Settings: Program Description.....	24
Sources of Information	26
Data Collection	27
Data Analysis	28
Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion	30
A Profile of Four Case Study Participants	31
Rachel (from Intermediate-Mid to Advanced-Mid)	31
Fredrick (from Advanced-Mid to Superior)	34
Jeremy (from Advanced-Mid to Superior)	35
Philip (from Advanced-Mid to Superior)	37
Summary of advanced level internship students.....	39
Summary of the Case Profiles.....	39
What are Common Characteristics of Study Abroad Students who Made Substantial Oral Gains?	40
Language learners' beliefs	41
Self-efficacy	41
Beliefs about language learning.....	46
Goal-setting.....	46
Language contact	49
Interactive language contact and social networks with NSs.....	49
Non-interactive language contact	52
L1 language contact	55
Individual agency.....	59

Learner autonomy	60
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations	63
Conclusions.....	63
Limitations of the Study.....	66
Implications.....	68
Recommendations for Future Research	68
References.....	72
Appendix A: Informed Consent Form	86
Appendix B: Interview Questions.....	88

Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent years, the number of American students studying abroad has tripled, growing from 71,000 in 1991-1992 to 283, 332 in 2010/2011. This statistic reflects that American students clearly recognize the significance of gaining an international experience. Moreover, in higher education today there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of study abroad in the new global economy. Further, much research has been conducted on the importance of the study abroad (SA) experience and its effects on participants. Findings suggest that international experiences can increase students' cultural understanding, levels of academic and personal development, and provide them with better job opportunities (Astin & Sax, 1998; Chieffo & Zipser, 2001; Kitsantas, 2004).

Studying abroad is also assumed to be the most efficient way to learn a second language. Indeed, most SA students view language development as their ultimate goal and they believe that an authentic language learning environment is a crucial factor in successful second language acquisition (SLA) (Carlson et al., 1990; Jackson, 2006; Kline, 1998). It is assumed that learners on study abroad have greater access to native speakers (NSs) and opportunities to use the target language (Brecht & Davidson, 1992; Freed, 1998). Indeed, a number of studies demonstrate that learners make significant gains in their language proficiency as a result of study abroad (Brecht et al., 1995; Carlson et al., 1990; Davidson, 2007, 2010; Freed, 1995; Lafford, 1995; Magnan & Black, 2007; Pellegrino, 1998; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Walsh, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998). For example, Segalowitz et al. (2004) shows that SA students made significant oral gains compared to students who studied language in a classroom-setting at home.

Though several studies have found that study abroad facilitates language learning, the research on study abroad is less consistent and more complex than previously thought. Freed,

Segalowitz and Dewey (2004) confirm that “interesting literature has emerged that explores various aspects of language learning abroad that offers a series of contradictory, sometimes surprising, and occasionally provocative findings about language gain for students who study abroad, as well as about the nature of the immersion experience itself” (p. 276). Thus, while there are some studies that have found significant proficiency gains for SA participants (Martinsen, Baker, Dewey, Brown, & Johnson, 2010), a number of researchers have cautioned that these studies cannot be generalized, as so many variables come into play (Davidson, 2010; Rees & Klapper, 2007; Segalowitz et al., 2004). Still other studies have shown no significant linguistic gains associated with study abroad, perhaps due to limited interactions with native speakers (NSs) or to insufficient duration (Cubillos, Chieffo, & Fan, 2008; DeKeyser, 1991). According to Wilkinson (1998), the linguistic and cultural assumptions that students hold when traveling to another country may lead to less interaction in the second language (L2) and negative experiences with NSs. Moreover, a number of factors may prevent students from using the target language, among them culture shock, foreign language anxiety and fear of embarrassment (MacIntyre, 1999; Pellegrino, 2005). In some cases, SA students use the L2 only for brief encounters while spending time speaking their first language (L1) with their fellow students (Allen, 2010).

Thus, being in a country where the target language is spoken is not enough in and of itself to lead to language gains; instead, students need to realize that they are personally responsible for their language learning and to take an active role in the learning process (Allen, 2010; Macaro, 2001). Moreover, many of the students’ experiences are determined by the adjustments they make to live in the target culture with a different value system. The prospect of interpreting the world from entirely different perspectives (Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, & Lassegard, 2002)

provides students with great opportunities for personal, social, and cultural development as they confirm, reject, or adopt their own beliefs with those of the target culture.

Statement of the Problem

Although the possible benefits of participation in a SA program are well accepted, the process of how students' beliefs influence their SA experience has not yet been fully explored. There is a need to examine individual learners and the unique differences they bring to the SA experience. Instead of comparing SA contexts with other learning environments and asking what students as a group gain from the SA experience, it is better to ask how the individual characteristics and behavior of the students interact with the context to affect language acquisition during the experience abroad.

Purpose and Research Question

Although empirical research on study abroad (Dewaele, 2004; Freed, 1995; Lafford, 1995; Mendelson, 2004) has reported positive evidence regarding gain in foreign language skills after participating in a SA program, there are still many questions regarding the language acquisition process of study abroad, and how students perceive themselves as language learners. With the aim of exploring these issues in the Russian context, the present qualitative study seeks to understand the semester-long SA experience of students who achieved substantial gains in their oral proficiency. Furthermore, it focuses on possible factors that contributed to their oral improvement and the individual factors that contributed to that improvement. In order to examine those factors, data from the summer 2010 and 2011 Russian SA and Internship programs in Moscow, Russia was analyzed. This study also provides suggestions for future SA students in order to help them to maximize oral proficiency gain during a semester-long Russian SA/Internship program. Specifically, the current study presents an opportunity for in-depth

description of students' experiences including their beliefs in themselves as learners, beliefs in language learning, and their SA goals.

The research question for this study is:

What are common characteristics of SA students who made substantial oral gains in Russia?

To answer this question, the study investigates factors that possibly led to students' success as they participated in a SA or Internship program. This study makes an important contribution to SA research because its main focus is on the experience of students and how they make sense of the meaning of their SA experience. The study provides data-rich description that is fundamental to the qualitative approach and that allows the researcher to present students' experiences in such completeness that allows for a deeper understanding of their study abroad experience. The research demonstrates how in many ways the experience of studying abroad is truly a personalized experience. Chapter 4 presents interview interpretations and examples of how students' experiences were significantly shaped by either their environment, past life experiences, or by their own beliefs about themselves and language learning.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the terms below are used as follows:

ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). The OPI is a live 30-minute interview conducted over the phone, between an ACTFL certified proficiency tester and the student. The procedure is based on national standards in which the tester elicits speech samples in the target language to assess overall speaking ability by determining patterns of strengths and weaknesses when measured against the ACTFL proficiency levels.

Native speaker (NS). A person who grew up with a particular language as their mother tongue.

First language (L1). Native language or the language that a person has learned from birth.

Second language (L2). Any language that one speaks other than one's first language, but for the purpose of this research, the language that SA students are learning.

Returned missionaries. Students who have completed two years of religious mission in a Russian- or Slavic-speaking country.

Study abroad. Formal academic study that takes place outside of a student's country of origin. For the purpose of this study, study abroad also includes internships.

Successful study abroad students. Students who improved by two sublevels on the ACTFL OPI.

Delimitations of the Study

The focus of this study is to understand the language learning experiences of successful students who made substantial oral gains while participating in a SA program and what factors or characteristics led to such success. This study did not seek to outline the benefits or disadvantages of participating in a SA program. The study population is delimited to undergraduate students who participated in a semester-long study abroad program in Moscow, Russia who were selected purposefully—not randomly—at a private university in the Intermountain West. The criteria for their participation in this study are indicated in Chapter 3. As a consequence, the experiences that students in this study shared should not be considered representative of range of experiences of American SA students in higher education. Moreover, since the research is focused on individual experiences of SA students, there may be other perspectives regarding learning in such programs that are not incorporated into analysis of this

research. While this study is inclusive of the entire context of the SA experience as the students reported it, it aims to provide a deeper understanding of a particular part of language learning experience and the impact of that experience on students' learning.

Discussion in the next chapter (Chapter 2, Literature Review) shows why the assumption of language learning in study abroad is problematic and why this study adds an important element to understanding the SA experiences of foreign language learners.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The main goal of this study is to attain a deeper understanding of the unique experiences of successful SA students, and to determine what factors help learners contribute to their success. This chapter examines existing research on what it is that makes language learners successful in the classroom. If we better understand what makes a good language learner in the classroom, perhaps, it will provide us with helpful insights that lead to good language learning in a SA context. Next, it investigates current research of various factors that have been found to affect language gain, specifically in oral proficiency. Finally, it presents relevant studies which investigated good language learners in a SA context and their perceptions on what factors affected their oral performance during study abroad. While much has been written and researched in the SLA on study abroad and on what makes a good language learner in the classroom, few qualitative studies have investigated successful SA students' beliefs about language learning and the ways in which they learn to take an increasingly active role in language learning (Allen, 2010; Isabelli-García, 2003). As Allen (2010) notes, successful classroom language learners do not necessarily become successful learners outside the classroom during study abroad. Thus, examining students' experiences interacting within the L2 community without teacher's guidance can bring critical knowledge to inform the SA and undergraduate foreign language curricula.

Good Language Learners in the Classroom

One of the key questions guiding research in the field of L2 learning concerns why some language learners achieve a high degree of expertise in a target language, while others do not (Cook, 2002). Much research has explored the role of the language learner in the learning

process and countless numbers of variables have been proposed--variables which might affect student's ability to learn a language (Freed, 1998; Griffiths, 2008). In addition to individual variables such as gender, age, culture, and prior learning experience, these factors include language learning strategies, aptitude, motivation, personality, beliefs, autonomy, and the features of the specific language to be learned (Cotterall, 2008; Freed, 1998; Ushioda, 2008; White, 2008). When taken together, the enormous variety of possible factors generates an extremely complicated picture of the language learning process. Even though different researchers over the years have investigated how some individuals achieve success in language learning while others do not, many questions remain unanswered.

The earliest studies on the role of the learner in the SLA process mostly attempt to identify and list characteristics and behaviors of good language learners. For instance, Rubin's article (1975) "What the Good Language Learner Can Teach Us," reports that expert language learners are good at guessing when unsure of meaning, pay attention to form and meaning in their language, are not afraid to appear foolish or make mistakes, have a strong desire to communicate, and are willing to try out what was learned previously by creating new sentences (pp. 45-47). In other words, good language learners look for and create opportunities to practice their target language. In addition, they monitor their language and learn from their mistakes. However, as Rubin notes, the use of those strategies depends on language proficiency, culture, age, and situational context. Stern (1975) also investigated what people who are known to be good at languages have in common by creating an inventory of ten language learning strategies. He reports that the successful language learner takes an active approach to the learning task, is willing to practice and use the target language in real life situations, and monitors use of the language. Similar characteristics of good language learners were found by Naiman et al. (1978).

Their study concludes that language learners have high tolerance of ambiguity, actively participate in learning and practicing the target language, monitor their errors, are able to adapt learning styles to suit themselves, and are mindful of the difficulties of learning a language (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978). In addition, successful language learners also have the ability to adapt their learning style to a given situation (Chappelle & Roberts, 1986; Reid, 1987). Cotterall (2008) suggests that good language learners are autonomous, which means they are less dependent on others or on the changes of the learning situation; they indeed are in charge of their learning. Thus, successful classroom learners are self-motivated, adaptive, self-regulated, have particular individual characteristics, and learning behaviors and tactics all of which influence their language learning.

In early research, research questions often focused on how good language learners approach language learning compared to poor learners, what language learning strategies they employ, and what characteristics of those learners attribute to their success. However, recent literature on good language learners demonstrates that the process of becoming a good language learner may be far more complex than was assumed previously (Norton, 1997; Norton & Toohey, 2001). Researchers are less interested in the internal characteristics of the learners and what they did individually, but more on the environment in which learners are situated and how learners cope with the constraints and opportunities that their environment offers them. Good language learning “requires attention to social practices in the contexts in which individuals learn L2” (Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 318). Focusing on the learning context in addition to the students’ agency may provide researchers with new insights into a complex interplay, such as foreign language learning serving as important complement to previous research on good language learning. The majority of studies on good language learners have been conducted in the

classroom where students can easily rely on teachers' support. Miller and Ginsberg (1995) affirmed that "in the classroom, of course, the instructor to a large extent calls the tune. But outside the classroom, during study abroad in particular, it is the learner's views that matter, for they shape the learning opportunities that arise and the learning strategies that will be employed" (p. 293). I expect that good language learners on study abroad share many behaviors and characteristics that have been found in "good language learners" in other studies. By looking at SA students' experiences and their perceptions of language learning in the immersion environment, researchers can gain valuable insight that will help future SA students succeed.

Good Language Learners on Study Abroad

For the past two decades, there has been an increased interest in the SLA field on better understanding the framework in which foreign language learning takes place in a SA context. A wide body of qualitative and quantitative SA research has explored various aspects of language learning, including comparing students in SA contexts with at-home contexts, predicting and measuring language related outcomes, examining students' perspectives on L2 learning and identifying factors that may affect learners within the same context in a variety of unpredictable ways (Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1993; Collentine & Freed, 2004; Fraser, 2002; Freed, Segalowitz & Dewey, 2004; Golonka, 2006; Huebner, 1998; Lafford, 2004; Mendelson, 2004; Whitworth, 2006; Wilkinson, 1998). The studies mentioned above provide valuable findings and help us better understand the language benefits that come from study abroad or what factors possibly contribute to L2 acquisition. However, they reveal little in regard to how these factors affect certain learners and how these factors interact with the lived experience of study abroad or in which contexts these variables might either impede or help language learners the most.

While this study focuses on particular factors that affect language gain, it is important to remember that the SA experience results from a complex interplay of factors. That complexity explains why researchers and educators have not reached consensus about predictors of linguistic gains during SA experience. This section describes several studies on factors thought to contribute to oral gains such as language contact, beliefs, initial L2 proficiency, and learner agency. While it is recognized that good language learners have a different approach, persistence, and language behavior than less successful learners (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975), the relationship between language outcomes and students' language behavior may shed light on what it is that makes one a highly effective language learner. Given the fact that how learners interpret their experiences may influence their behavior, and therefore, outcomes, I will look into students' beliefs in the next section.

Beliefs and Good Language Learners

Foreign language learners develop many beliefs, opinions, values, perceptions, and preconceived ideas about language learning based on their own personal and academic experiences (Horwitz, 1987; Wenden, 1987). Given the fact that many L2 learners have had experience in a classroom environment, they are most likely to form certain beliefs about what effective learning is. According to Richards and Lockhart (1995), "Learners, too, bring to their learning their own beliefs, goals, attitudes and decisions, which in turn influence how they approach their learning" (p. 52). Furthermore, beliefs can be of vital importance in the learning process as beliefs are inevitably intertwined with one's knowledge in general and shaped through experience.

Since the late 1980s, interest in learners' beliefs about language learning has been increasing, as evidenced not only by the number of studies conducted, but by the variety of

approaches and definitions used by these researchers. It is becoming more and more evident that it is important to know what learners think about language learning, what they believe about themselves as language learners and how their beliefs impact their behavior or general approach to learning. Ultimately, SLA researchers agree that language learners approach tasks with preconceptions that influence their behavior and eventually their outcomes. (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Riley, 1997; Wenden, 1986; Yang, 1992). For example, learners who believe they can only learn under a teacher's guidance may struggle in any self-directed context.

More recently, due to the complex nature of belief system, beliefs are viewed and examined from a different perspective. Both normative and metacognitive studies about beliefs consider learners' beliefs about SLA as a mental and stable characteristic, eliminating the social aspect of beliefs. Such studies have examined what learners think about their language learning, their role in the language-learning process, and the best approach to language learning (Wenden, 1986). However, in these studies learners' conceptions are measured out of context; they do not consider how students' environment can influence their behavior (Barcelos, 2003). In other words, the relationship between what a context offers and the nature of what an individual brings to the learning situation is both crucial and complex. It is crucial to investigate students' beliefs within particular contexts, keeping in mind what opportunities are available to them and what is required of them in a particular situation (Barcelos; 2003). The basic purpose of the contextual approach is to better understand the context in which learners interact and to recognize "beliefs [...] as part of students' experiences [...] interrelated with their environment" (Barcelos, 2003, p. 21).

White (1999) finds that not only are students' beliefs thought to drive actions, but their experiences help to shape their initial beliefs and actions that may lead to change or creation of other beliefs. In her longitudinal study, she interviewed and administered questionnaires to better understand 23 novice Japanese and Spanish learners' experiences in self-directed learning contexts. The results of the study reveal that some novice distance learners developed particular expectations about self-instruction that they further revised as they gained experience in the new context. Miller and Ginsberg (1995) conducted a qualitative study to examine students' folklinguistic theories or preconceptions about language learning. Their study shows that students believe in the importance of interacting with NSs, but as soon as they have the opportunity, they expect NSs to act as teachers. They conclude that students' folklinguistic theories about their language learning approach impacts how they approach language learning.

As most SA research has focused on investigating students' language outcomes rather than investigating what students do during study abroad to promote language acquisition, this study focuses on understanding successful learners' experiences in the immersion setting and what they found to be effective to achieve language success.

Language Contact

One of the main reasons for students to participate in a SA experience is to increase their oral proficiency in a foreign language (Freed, 1998; Kinginger, 2008; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001). In addition, it is often assumed that the primary benefit of a SA context is an increase in L2 oral performance beyond what is normally achieved in a home context (Ginsberg & Miller, 2000; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). Mendelson (2004) concludes, "Out of class contact, both interactive and noninteractive, is often lauded but rarely put to serious investigation" (p. 44). The inclusion of an assessment of oral skills in multiple SA studies demonstrates that it is generally assumed

that study abroad students who take advantage of language learning opportunities in immersion settings will make the most progress (Allen, 2010; Whitworth, 2006). Many studies that investigate an increase in oral performance have used the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) to measure gains before and after the SA experience (Freed, 1998; Davidson, 2010; Magnan & Black, 2007; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004).

A number of recent studies argue the notion that study abroad is an “ideal context for acquiring language,” demonstrating that students often spend most of their time interacting with other L1 speakers rather than taking full advantage of opportunities to interact with local members (Allen, 2010; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Miller & Ginsberg, 1995; Wilkinson, 2000). Additionally, other studies have shown that students who make an effort to form strong social networks along with establishing meaningful interaction with NSs improve in L2 (Isabelli-García, 2006; Dewey, Ring, Gardner, & Belnap, 2013). In order to explain the results regarding language proficiency gain during study abroad, specifically in oral proficiency, many studies focus on language contact, social networks, or the amount and type of students’ interaction with NSs while on study abroad and their effect on language gain.

In fact, a number of studies demonstrate that SA participants often spend the majority of their time with their compatriots. For instance, only three of 31 students studying in Salamanca and two of 10 studying in Granada in Mendelson’s (2004) study mention interacting with NS friends. Although, the Granada students express regret about their lack of efforts for interaction, most of them do not consider those interactions as important. While some students in Fraser’s (2002) study made friends with German locals, others spent time mostly with other Americans. Allen and Herron’s (2003) study findings echo students’ complaints raised by other research concerning difficulty gaining access to NSs and using L2. Their findings show that regardless of

students' belief in the importance of language contact, students often do not make great efforts to establish contacts with NSs, or they find it difficult to do so (Bataller, 2010). The latter reports that some students find this inability to form social networks frustrating, but others accept that obstacle as something not worth overcoming. Other studies demonstrate similar findings where some students easily build social networks with NSs, whereas others report that it is challenging to gain access to NSs or they are not able to make NSs friends at all (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Fraser, 2002; Isabelli-García, 2006; Mendelson, 2004; Twombly, 1995; Wilkinson, 1998). The inability to establish contacts with NSs may hurt opportunities for language gain.

Some other studies, however, show that when students do interact in prolonged conversations with NSs outside the classroom, those conversations are not always as effective as one might believe since students expect interlocutors to behave as their teachers--making interaction unnatural-- or because their conversations are often short and superficial (Miller & Ginsberg, 1995; Wilkinson, 2002; Yager, 1998). For example, students in Mendelson's (2004) study mostly interacted with waiters, bus drivers, customer service representatives and the nature of those interactions was "limited spurts to fulfill very specific functions" (p. 51).

Fraser (2002) reports that SA learners who look for opportunities to successfully form social networks through active participation in community events have more language gains than those who do not. Isabelli-García's (2006) study examines the correlation between strong social networks formed by Spanish SA students and language gains. Her study finds that students who build strong social networks gain more language skills.

On the other hand, Freed (1995) notes that the positive correlation between language contact and language learning is complex and often contradictory. For example, when Ginsberg and Miller (2000) examined the social interactions of 85 SA students in Russia and their

language proficiency, they found that although some students increased their proficiency, “[t]here is no association between gains in language proficiency and the amount of time the students expose themselves to the native culture and engage in linguistic interactions with native speakers” (p. 256). Similarly, Mendelson (2004) does not find a relationship between the amount of language contact (interactive or non- interactive) and oral skills improvement for SA students. Freed (1995) concludes that the quality of language contact may be more important for language gain than mere quantity.

Thus, even though many educators and researchers recognize the value of a SA experience, much research has consistently shown that many students do not make gains at all (Collentine & Freed, 2004; Kinginger, 2008; Simoes, 1996; Wilkinson, 1998). Furthermore, if students do make oral gains, there is little consensus as to how they improve their overall oral proficiency during study abroad. Therefore, further investigation into the role of intended language learning effort in SA contexts is needed.

Kinginger (2008) states that, “linguistic immersion is increasingly a matter of choice and of even at times of struggle, requiring a sincere and durable commitment than has been needed in the past” (p. 105, 108). In other words, students once in a while may find that interaction with NSs is not readily accessible or their commitment for L2 use may be challenged by their peers.

Agency

Allen (2010) defines agency in relation to language learning as “learners’ contextually dependent initiative or responsibility for learning” (p. 3). Considering the limited language contact that it is possible to have during the SA experience, many SLA studies focus on students’ efforts to gain access to the social networks of their local community and interact with them in the L2, demonstrating how establishing contacts with members of the local L2 community can

be particularly difficult. Kinginger (2004) claims, “access to language is shaped not only by learners’ own intentions, but also by those of the others with whom they interact—people who may view learners as embodiments of identities shaped by gender, race, and social class” (p. 221). In other words, independent learners act as agents of their learning, but that agency depends on how they are accepted by NSs. Norton (1997) notes, “the conditions under which language learners speak are often highly challenging, engaging their identities in complex and often contradictory ways” (p. 312).

Given the mixed results for language gain and language contact and the relationship between them, one theoretical framework that may provide greater understanding of that relationship is the concept of affordance. The concept of *affordances*, as developed by van Lier (2007) based on Gibson (1979), refers to “what is available to the person to do something with” (van Lier, 2007, p. 91). In other words, an environment provides one with both good and ill opportunities adapted to that individual (i.e. language proficiency, age, gender, etc.). As an illustration of affordances, van Lier uses the example of a rock in a stream. To an adult, the rock serves as a stepping stone to cross the river, whereas the same rock would be too far out of reach for a child. The environment is the same, but it affords various opportunities and, therefore, brings different meaning to different persons. Similarly, in a SA environment, although the environment itself is the same, conditions in which students learn are different for each student and, hence, it affords different opportunities for language learning. Therefore, emphasis should be placed not only on the learner or the environment, but on the interplay between both. For example, Kinginger (2008) finds that even when SA students were able to meet French speakers, their efforts to speak the L2 were limited by interlocutors who wanted to interact in English. However, those students continued to actively form social networks with NSs, even when they

were rejected. Moreover, they distanced themselves from other L1 speakers to avoid an English-speaking environment. Similarly, in Allen's (2010) study, French learners who sought to regulate their own learning had more successful experiences than those who took less responsibility for their learning and made others responsible for their limited interactions with NSs. Roswell and Libben (1994), in a study of independent language learners, find that successful language learners do not necessarily do more than unsuccessful learners in terms of language learning, but rather they use language creatively in context. For example, in their study successful learners created imaginary partners in imaginary settings to converse with and treat language as a medium to be used creatively. In other words, even though most students in their study did not have access to NSs they found ways to create their own input through inner dialogue. That is, students practiced the L2 by talking and writing to others or themselves. According to Pellegrino (1998), students who do not exercise their agency are often considered to be indifferent or lacking discipline. Nevertheless, she notes that "there are numerous social, cultural, and psychological factors that may cause learners to avoid using the target language and reject opportunities to speak" (p. 96). Macaro (2001) claims that "one thing [about language learners] seems to be increasingly clear and that is that, across learning contexts, those learners who are proactive in their pursuit of language learning appear to learn best" (p. 264). In summary, successful learners are proactive, initiative and actively seek or create language learning experiences and use learning opportunities that are available to them in a particular situation.

Theoretical Perspective of the Methodology

The majority of studies investigating the study abroad context are "highly product-oriented" (Pellegrino, 1998, p. 91), focusing on the measurable gains students make in language proficiency (Brecht et al., 1993; Freed, 1995). However, fewer research studies focus on

investigating the actual experiences of the students while studying abroad. Brecht and Robinson note (1993) that "it is precisely in the study of such complex processes as SLA during abroad that a qualitative approach is most appropriate and effective" (p.1). Indeed, in a SA context it is almost impossible to conduct experimental research where researchers are looking at cause and effect, because there are too many variables for researchers to control.

Qualitative researchers usually work more intensively with fewer participants, and are less concerned with external validity. Although there are obvious scientific limitations to qualitative data collection, some researchers in SLA have gradually recognized the unique insights such techniques can provide regarding students' language learning experience (Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Wilkinson, 1998). For instance, the quantitative data from Brecht and Robinson's study (1993) showed that both males and females spend their free time in the same way. However, only narrative data identified that being a woman is an important factor in students' language learning experiences.

In this study, because the goal is to understand students' experiences in study abroad or how they "make sense of their experience" (Merriam, 2002, p. 5), the qualitative research was most suitable.

Thus, although conclusions of qualitative studies may be based on researchers' intuitive subjectivity and are not generalizable, examining the unique experiences of the study abroad participants not only provides rich description of the specific language learning processes but it also helps to enhance our understanding of what makes a learner a successful one.

The Need for Current Research

The development of language proficiency regardless of context is one of the more complex aspects of language acquisition in which different factors play a role in the variability of

a learner. As shown above, numerous studies provide promising various language benefits for students. Researchers have long studied the effects of study abroad; however, some studies show a more multifaceted nature of a SA context and that language outcomes are not always positive. To better understand the experience of students abroad, it is important to consider what students do while abroad, but also what language learning opportunities are offered.

The present study focuses on the perceptions of Russian learners who made substantial oral gains during their immersion experience. The following chapter describes the study's methodology, participants, research method, and procedures for data collection and analysis.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study is to determine the students' perceptions of their SA experience in Russia. To achieve this purpose, I focused my study on four Russian learners who made substantial oral gains as a result of their immersion in Russia.

This chapter explores the methodology used to answer the following research question: What are common characteristics of study abroad students who made substantial oral gains?

The first section of this chapter describes the participants, while the second section of this chapter discusses the procedures and instruments that were used to carry out the research.

Research Design: Type and Method

Previous research has laid the foundation for detailed examination of the effects of SA experiences on the language proficiency of those who participate in these programs. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, it is obvious that numerous questions remain about SA context and its effect on students' experiences.

Since the research focuses on the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of students who participate in a SA program in Russia, case studies were used to help encapsulate the individual's approach to language learning. As Patton (1990) pointed out, the usefulness of case studies comes "if one needs to understand some special people in great depth, and where one can identify cases rich in information – rich in the sense that a great deal can be learned from a few exemplars of the phenomenon in question" (p. 54).

Gains in Oral Proficiency

According to Brecht, Davidson and Ginsberg (1995), pre-program proficiency is a strong predictor of language gain. In other words, students at a higher level or advanced level make fewer measurable gains compared to students who begin at the lower levels. However, Freed

(1995) suggests that educators and researchers “should approach with caution any conclusion suggesting limitations on the potential growth of more advanced students in a study abroad setting” (p. 51). Further instruments and ways to measure oral skills need to be developed, especially for students who begin at the advanced level of proficiency before going abroad.

From the 2010 SA/Internship program only three of the 20 students made gains of two sublevels on the OPI, while seven students made gains by one sublevel, and eight students did not make any gains, or did poorly compare to their pre-OPI. Two students did not take either pre- or post- OPI. On the pre-OPI test one student began at the Novice level, nine began at the Intermediate level and eight started at the Advanced level. In 2011 SA/Internship program enrolled eighteen students in total. Eight students did not take the post-OPI, two students performed on the post-OPI more poorly than on the pre-OPI and one did not make any gains. Meanwhile, four students made gains of one sublevel, and three students increased their oral proficiency by two sublevels.

Participants

Though improving by one sublevel during study abroad is considered a substantial gain at the advanced level, for the purposes of this study, only those who improved by two sublevels during the 2010/2011 SA/Internship program, as measured by pre and post OPI scores, were considered successful learners. These high gainers were the only participants included in the study.

In order to determine proficiency gains, pre- and post-OPI scores were collected from university SA programs during the 2010-2011 year. Program directors also shared the names of those students who made gains equivalent to two sublevels on the ACTFL proficiency scale. Eight such students were identified as successful language learners. Of the eight, a total of five

agreed to participate: four from the university's SA/Internship program in Moscow, Russia and one from a SA program in Cairo, Egypt. The student from the Arabic program was not included in the study due to differences between the Russian and Arabic programs. Students from both the 2010 and 2011 SA/Internship programs agreed to participate in the study.

All four participants were undergraduate students at a private US university, three males and one female. The female student was a SA student and the three males were interns. Their age ranged from 20 to 25 years old and all four participated in a combined semester SA and Internship programs during 2010-2011 in Moscow, Russia. All subjects were from the United States and English NSs. All of the students were also enrolled in a mandatory university preparation course prior to their departure. Their pre-program language proficiency ranged from Intermediate-Mid to Advanced-Mid on the ACTFL scale.

Of the subjects who participated in the Russia SA/Internship program, all had completed at least the equivalent of two years (four semesters) of Russian language study. Two of the students had spent two years in Russian-speaking country volunteering for religious mission prior to their Internship programs. Another had completed similar religious mission for two years in a Slavic-speaking country. Only one of the students, the female student, had never been to a Slavic-speaking country prior to the SA program. She had, however, participated in an intensive immersion program the summer prior to study abroad.

Participants cited various reasons for their participation in the program, including the fulfillment of general education requirements, a desire to increase Russian fluency, and/or experience another culture. In order to protect students' privacy, the names used in this study have been changed. Table 1 lists each of the participants, the program they participated in, and their pre- and post-program OPI scores. Each participant is described in more detail in Chapter 4.

Table 1

Performance of Russian Language Students on the OPI

Participants	Program	Pre-departure OPI	Post-program OPI
Rachel Lewis	Russian SA	Intermediate Mid	Advanced Mid
Jeremy Jones	Russian Internship	Advanced Mid	Superior
Fredrick Mills	Russian Internship	Advanced Mid	Superior
Philip Petersen	Russian Internship	Advanced Mid	Superior

Study Abroad Settings: Program Description

From mid-May to mid-August of 2010 and 2011, groups of 20 (2010) and 18 (2011) students traveled to Moscow Russia as part of a SA or internship experience. The 2010 group consisted of eleven interns and nine SA students, whereas the 2011 group held eight SA students and ten interns. The SA students and interns shared the same faculty director, who remained with them in Moscow for approximately half of the program. They also attended classes at the same institution, the Academy of the National Economy. However, interns had fewer classes and were also placed in Russian organizations for work-related internships. Those students who had served Russian- or Slavic-speaking missions were placed in internships, while students with no prior experience in Russian-speaking country, and thus lower proficiency levels, comprised the SA group.

Both students and interns were housed with Russian host families. Host families provided students with meals, during which they were to interact with the learners in the target language. Housing included two meals a day (breakfast and dinner), seven days a week. The students were assigned to families based on their personal preferences (e.g. food allergies)

Prior to the internship experience, each potential intern submitted a resume and a statement of purpose. Based on the students' indicated job preferences, as well as their prior work experience, the Academy for the National Economy assigned students to various Russian organizations, including a youth drug and alcohol rehabilitation center and human rights organizations. Interns were required to work four or five days a week and approximately 40 hours per week.

In addition to their internships, learners also attended two classes at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration and at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow. Classes included third-year grammar and composition, taught by faculty of the host institution. In addition, students also attended a weekly course on contemporary Russian political and economic issues. The course primarily focused on specific language forms or expressions encountered in the current economic and political issues.

As mentioned above, SA students had no prior experience living in a Russian- or Slavic-speaking country. Most had completed two years of prior Russian language courses, with the exception of two students who accompanied their spouses on the 2011 program. These two students had no prior experience with Russian and were expected to take first-year Russian while abroad. The remaining students took language courses four days a week at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow and taught by HSE faculty. Although communicative skills were the target, courses also focused on enhancing students' vocabulary, cultural knowledge, and pronunciation.

The next chapter presents the results of the analysis and discussion of students' experiences abroad and explains how they interpreted their SA experience and what factors

contributed to their oral skills development. However, as discussed in Chapter 1, these study findings and implications are specific to the participants of this study and generalizing or transferring these finding and implications to other populations, particularly for SA programs of different durations and locations, may not be appropriate.

Sources of Information

To investigate participants' perceptions of the Russian language learning during study abroad, interviews were used. Interviews allow researchers to obtain more than a surface understanding of phenomena that may not be directly observable, such as learners' perceptions, beliefs, or attitudes. Moreover, due to the interactive nature of interviews, researchers can obtain additional data if original answers are incomplete or too vague. According to Mackey and Gass (2005), conducting an interview is a skill not all researchers possess. Researchers have to be careful when formulating interview questions and ensure that interviewees' answers are not influenced by researchers' biases.

Interviews conducted in this study included information about the students that was both personal and detailed. This information helped the researcher to see every student's experience as a whole, record students' perceptions, understand the meaning of learning experiences from their perspective, and interpret how those experiences related to their role as agents of their learning during study abroad and what types of contact were most significant for them. The interview was constructed in such a way as to move learners from general questions to more specific ones. Some of the questions explored students' goals and expectations, their demographic background, daily activities, their perceptions of their scores, and techniques they used to facilitate gains in oral proficiency. The appendix contains a copy of the interview guide (see Appendix B). In addition to interviews with the participants, interviews with the faculty

directors of each of the programs were also conducted. The interviews with faculty directors helped the researcher to better understand the learning context and to gain insights into individual students.

In order to evaluate students' oral proficiency levels, ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPI) were conducted prior to their departure and after their arrival back in the US. The interview was administered by an ACTFL certified interviewer via telephone. The OPI is widely known among instructors and used by various educational institutions in order to measure a person's overall speaking ability. The OPI is a 30-minute interview between a test-taker and a certified ACTFL tester. It evaluates oral language proficiency holistically by identifying speaker's strengths and weaknesses. The main focus of the OPI is to clearly determine the speaker's highest level of sustained performance, the level at which the speaker shows consistent functional ability. The OPI, which is based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (1999) for speaking, is limited by its complex nature. According to Freed (1998), "the OPI presents one global holistic score for many components of language use and, because of its non-linear construction, is often unable to discriminate progress made by students at the upper levels of the proficiency scale" (p. 35). However, the OPI is the best assessment tool available for measuring oral proficiency. Hopefully, SLA researchers will continue to search for better methods to describe and measure oral proficiency and widen current data collection instruments in the area.

Data Collection

After I received approval to conduct the study from the University's Institutional Review Board, I started scheduling interviews with the participants. I explained to them what was expected from them during the interview and how long it would take to complete it. A copy of

the consent form was given to all participants (See Appendix A). Each participant signed the form allowing me to use the results in the study.

Each interview required 45 to 60 minutes to complete and included eighteen questions about the participant's language learning experiences. For those students who were still enrolled at the private university, interviews were conducted face-to-face. Students who had graduated by the time of the interview were interviewed via Skype. Each interview was audiorecorded and transcribed and the transcripts were checked against the audiofiles several times.

Data Analysis

Due to the fact that there was only one researcher to collect data and analyze it, investigator triangulation--as a means to ensure descriptive validity--was not ensured. Interpretive validity was supported through member checks, in which researcher's tentative interpretations were sent to the participants. The participants were then asked to confirm the accuracy of those interpretations to the researchers via e-mail. External validity was achieved by describing students' unique perspectives in sufficient detail in Chapter 4 and 5.

The data analysis in this study started after the first interview was conducted. I wrote notes following each interview reflecting on each interview and beginning to develop initial ideas about where the research was heading (Merriam, 1995). I started the more formal data analysis with open coding (Esterberg, 2002) by looking intensively at my data and identifying themes that seemed interesting. According to Esterberg (2002), researchers should remain open to whatever they see in the data (p. 158). In order to do this, I transcribed the interview recordings and read through the transcripts several times and looked for "indigenous concepts and practices" (Patton, 2002, p. 454) which refer to indigenous terms that participants have created and expressed to describe their life experiences. Analysis of indigenous concepts should

begin by understanding it from perspective of its practitioners within their worldview. For instance, the term *language contact* had special meaning to the participants in this study.

In addition, I used Coffey and Atkinson's (1996) thematic analysis guidelines to perform a number of procedures on the data. According to their guidelines, thematic analysis usually starts with generating one or several initial codes, looking for themes among those codes, which is then followed by an inductive process of comparing code frequencies within and across cases in order to define themes. Then, data were organized into categories based on the interview questions for a more efficient analysis. While reviewing the entire database of information, notes were made underlining the main themes that emerged from the data. Using the online program Saturate App, I used the constant comparative method of Glaser (1964) to continually compare themes, to connect instances of particular experience, and to collapse categories of information until each category was mutually exclusive. Due to the fact that certain information was missing from some participants, follow-up e-mail correspondence between participants and the researcher was included. Throughout this recursive process, themes were looked at in relation to the data as a whole as well as to particular case experiences. When each theme was defined, I proceeded to analyze the recurring themes in search of all possible meanings (Creswell, 1998). After analyzing all the themes, general descriptions of the different aspects of students' experiences were written. These descriptions were included, along with personal quotes from each participant, in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

This chapter includes the results from the study outlined in Chapter 3. The study was conducted to understand the experiences of successful SA students as well as to understand the factors that contribute to their language improvement.

The main purpose of this chapter is to address the following research question for the study:

What are common characteristics of study abroad students who made substantial oral gains?

In order to answer the question, this chapter is divided into two sections. The first section of the chapter provides a snapshot of the experiences of four students who participated in a SA or Internship program in Moscow, Russia. The second section of the chapter includes a comparative analysis of students' interview responses and is arranged by the themes that emerged from the data analysis. The case profiles are comprised of the context of each student's experience, allowing greater insight into students' perceptions on the meaning of their abroad experience-- particularly their language learning. Interestingly, each student had a different understanding of the experience which shows that each student's language learning experience is unique.

Students' responses included in this chapter are coded using pseudonyms for the protection of students' identities. The comparative analysis provided in the second part of the chapter identifies common patterns of students' responses that may have played a significant role in their language acquisition success. In many ways, the findings of this study are surprising and unexpected, although this kind of flexibility of research is the hallmark of qualitative interpretive research.

A Profile of Four Case Study Participants

I provided in-depth information on students' perceptions on their SA experience and created a profile of each participant in order to gain a better understanding of their experiences.

Rachel (from Intermediate-Mid to Advanced-Mid)

At the time of the SA program, Rachel was a 20-year old student from a southern state majoring in Russian and European Studies. As far as her personality, she reported that it changes depending on whom she is with. For instance, if she is comfortable with a person, she is more outgoing, "even a little bit obnoxious," but she was more hesitant to speak to people on the streets. At the time of the program, she had completed two years of undergraduate study.

Rachel chose to study Russian because she always wanted to understand Russian culture, a culture she found so different from her own. "I could not understand it completely. And as I studied Russian I understood that there is absolutely no way to understand Russian culture completely, you know, or any culture completely. That's why I kind of wanted to just pick a language."

Rachel's first experience with Russian occurred before she came to college. She read some Russian literature while in high school. Then she enrolled in an intensive Russian class in a language school for a summer semester, which was supposed to be the equivalent of taking years' of Russian classes. Her class was four hours, five days a week, and there was also a cultural class two hours a week, twice a week. After that, she took two first-year Russian classes at the university. Her initial plan after the summer program was to take the second year of Russian, but when she got to the university as a freshman and went to class, she was too intimidated by it. Interestingly, she noticed that she did not understand what she was learning during her time at the language school. "So I retook 101 and I think that was really crucial because the things I got

out of the very first experience with Russian, I did not really understand what I was learning. I compared things, but I did not really get it, so going back through with another professor over a longer time that was probably the biggest asset, just being able to understand, at that point I could say here are the grammatical quirks that I'd like to be explained. Things like that.”

However, Rachel skipped the second year Russian courses and, after her freshman year, studied Russian in a different language school for nine weeks. It was a summer program where she spoke only Russian for the duration of the program. Finally, she took three semesters of upper-division courses of advanced Russian grammar at her university. She had not had any other language experiences except for learning Spanish in high school for a couple of semesters.

Rachel's schedule comprised classes at the university twice a week for three or four hours. The classes were conducted almost entirely in Russian, except for occasions when they were required to translate. The instructor was a NS of Russian. Rachel also worked five days a week at the Human Rights Memorial after classes. Her responsibilities were to translate documents from Russian to English.

Referring to her SA experience, Rachel reported that when she lived with her host family, she found that she did not speak as much Russian as she initially wanted to. She expressed disappointment about her host situation, citing as her main concern that she did not get along with her host mother, causing her to avoid spending time at home. However, she did report meeting many NSs through a local church, but was unable to make friends with them. She recognized the importance of speaking more with NSs and making friends with them in order to acquire L2, but reported it was difficult to interact with NSs at work or outside the classroom. Nonetheless, she did not express much concern about her missed opportunities to interact with L2 speakers, reporting that the only chances she had to speak L2 were in the classroom and on

homestay. One of the challenges in speaking Russian during her time in Russia was that her SA program was combined with the Internship program and it was really easy to speak English with the other interns in the group. According to Rachel, one thing that helped her to improve her language skills was that she had constant non-interactive contact with Russian. The other thing that helped her was being forced, or having a desire to create with the language, to speak. Finally, she stated that the class structure significantly facilitated her learning because she was reminded of the principles of grammar she needed to remember when speaking. She stated that overall her SA experience was positive.

Rachel was different from other participants for two reasons. She had never been to a Russian- or Slavic-speaking country. During the first month of her SA, she experienced culture shock, which was not an issue for her fellow participants. Moreover, she reported that she was younger than everyone else. She had fears about Russia before leaving for Moscow due to what she was taught in her study abroad preparation class. Her fear of Russia changed over time as she realized it was not as scary as she had thought it was. However, she believed that she had an advantage over most of the returned missionaries in terms of basic grammar knowledge:

Sometimes it's just seems like returned missionaries know why things work the way they work. I feel like I had an advantage but I had not put it into practice enough. I recognized I needed to work even harder to really get the kind of results I really wanted. It takes outgoingness.

Rachel emphasized two things when speaking about her study abroad experience: that it was difficult to have meaningful conversations with the NSs she met in Russia and that the homestay with a host family did not provide many authentic interactions.

Regardless of the paucity of meaningful communication with NSs and using L1 with her peers, Rachel did have non-interactive contact with L2 through reading, listening, and viewing authentic texts which might explain her linguistic progress by two sublevels. She was an autonomous learner, and made efforts in finding other opportunities to improve.

Fredrick (from Advanced-Mid to Superior)

At the time of the internship Fredrick was a 23-year old double major in Public Health and Russian. He was in his junior year of his Bachelor's degree program at the time of the Internship program. He took Spanish in high school and at a community college in the Midwestern United States. Fredrick studied Russian for two years at the university level by taking several upper-level Russian classes. His university study was interrupted by two-year religious mission in Russia. Two years after he returned from Russia, he decided to do an internship in Moscow.

His reason for going to Russia was his desire to gain more professional and academic competency in the language, as his vocabulary primarily focused on religious topics. Fredrick spent most of his internship time working in the Youth Center. Coworkers at the Youth Center were both native speaker adults and teenagers, but his interaction with them was superficial. However, he interacted frequently with his host mother and participated in different activities with NSs, such as playing basketball. That said, the nature of conversations was not in-depth. He enjoyed his interaction with his host mother which he found to be more effective for his listening comprehension-- as she was the one who primarily spoke. That said, he found her a valuable resource when he had questions.

Fredrick's schedule also included classes and work at a youth drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. He had Russian classes twice a week for three hours. In class, they mostly

discussed various political topics, and worked on vocabulary and different grammar principles. His experience with the formal classroom instruction was very positive. He enjoyed the instructor and liked the fact that she constantly pushed them in the language. He actively participated in classes, was willing to make mistakes, and was not afraid to appear foolish.

He described himself as a shy person, whose shyness made it difficult for him to get out and be socially active. Most of the interactions he had were not extended conversations. He reported spending at least four days a week with his fellow students, but they mostly spoke in English. From his interview, it was clear that his understanding improved a lot just from hearing NSs talk --whether at work, at home or in class. He reported speaking Russian about 60% of the day.

Jeremy (from Advanced-Mid to Superior)

Jeremy was a 22-year student at the time of the internship, double majoring in International Relations and Russian. He was a junior working and had studied Russian for a year in a college before he served a two-year church mission in Ukraine, where he mostly spoke Russian. After his church mission, he took upper-level grammar and literature classes required for a Russian major. A year after his experience in Ukraine, he decided to do an internship in Moscow.

Jeremy had been studying Russian for at least five years. Jeremy studied Spanish for two years in high school, but chose to study Russian later on in college. He began learning Ukrainian while on his mission in Ukraine, three years prior to the internship, but his knowledge of Ukrainian primarily came from self-study of grammar and from absorbing the language while in Ukraine by reading and listening to Ukrainian-language materials, such as books, news, and movies. He began learning Belarusian during his internship in Russia because he started dating a

Belarusian. He reported that his Belorussian proficiency was at the novice level and Ukrainian at the intermediate.

Having lived in Ukraine for two years, he believed that Ukraine and Russia are different in terms of culture. His goals were to gain in-country experience in Russia and, because most of his friends had been to Russia, he wanted to see what Russia was like. However, his main reason for going to Russia was to gain professional language and work experience.

Jeremy had classes three times a week. He found reviewing some basic grammatical principles was useful and that the classes helped to reinforce the vocabulary he learned in Russian classes prior to study abroad. However, he felt that class homework was repetitive and felt like busy work, rather than being helpful.

His typical day consisted of brief morning conversations with his host mother, if she was around. Jeremy had a very positive experience with his host mother, but their interactions did not have a substantial effect on his oral proficiency. He said, “Conversations would last anywhere from 15 minutes to a half hour at most, occasionally maybe longer. The conversations, however, did help me increase certain areas of my vocabulary.”

He tried to interact with members of a local church, but found the people were not very friendly. He attended various activities, but felt that his efforts were limited by NSs who perceived him as another foreigner. He made some acquaintances, but did not form close relationships with them. However, he reported he was in a long distance relationship with a Belorussian girl during his internship and they had frequent interactions online in Russian. He suggested his improvement was due to his constant interaction with his Russian-speaking girlfriend, as well as listening to and reading Russian authentic materials. He read news, articles, books, and listened to Russian and Ukrainian music. Jeremy considers himself shy around

strangers or new acquaintances; however, while on the internship in Russia he reported that he was a bit more outgoing than usual.

When reporting his interaction with his fellow students, he said that he spoke English because it was convenient. “I mean there were points when we would all speak Russian, but ... it would depend on who I was talking to. Some people wanted to speak Russian and so we would speak Russian, but other people were fine, just wanted to speak English.”

Jeremy felt that his internship did not turn out well. As part of his internship, he was supposed to write a paper in English for a Russian professor. However, his professor went on a vacation at the end of the internship, so he put was disappointed that put work into it, but it did not go anywhere. He also wished he had more interaction with the professor he worked with.

Philip (from Advanced-Mid to Superior)

Philip was a 24-year old university student majoring in Russian and History at the time of the internship. He studied French in junior high and high school for six years and served a two-year religious mission in Serbia. At the time of the interview he reported that he spoke Serbian well. It should be noted that Serbian, like Russian, is a Slavic language and they are closely related. He mentioned that knowing Serbian somewhat helped him to progress in Russian more successfully because Serbian and Russian share many similarities, among which are the alphabet, cognates, and grammar principles. After his mission in Serbia he took two beginning Russian classes, but he skipped first-year Russian part one and second-year Russian part one. Afterwards, Philip took upper-division classes, completing all his coursework required for the Russian major. He left for his internship four years after living as a missionary in Serbia. At the time of the internship he had not finished his bachelor's degree, but graduated two days after he came back from Russia.

Philip had several goals for the internship program. His main goal for the internship was to take classes that were offered only on a study abroad in order to graduate with a Russian major. He also realized that even though he had studied French and Serbian, it would be difficult to learn Russian without living in a country where the language is spoken. After his stay in Russia, he felt like he could use his Russian language skills to find a job and make a career of Russian. He expressed a desire to work for the government, possibly as a diplomat.

Philip's internship started in the beginning of May and ended in the end of August. He had two different jobs: working for a human rights organization and a law firm. His tasks at the internships consisted primarily of translating various documents from Russian to English. He felt it was difficult sometimes to translate and often used an online dictionary to help him. However, his primary resource was the NS coworkers. He also had classes twice a week with a NS instructor. The class consisted of extensive grammar practice and reading homework, but there was no assignment to speak Russian outside of classroom. In class students discussed political topics, environmental issues and learned the vocabulary for those topics.

Philip described his living situation in his homestay as not being very memorable. He stayed with a host family in the center of Moscow. He had dinner and breakfast most days with his host mother and that was extent of his interaction.

He took advantage of as many opportunities as possible to talk to NSs and make friends with them. He described himself as a competitive student with a natural desire to excel and was very determined to improve in the language. He challenged himself to only speak Russian and to speak frequently. Philip reported speaking Russian 100% of the day and when Russians addressed him in English, he responded in Russian. He actively looked for people to speak Russian with and avoided people who wanted to speak English with him. He never complained

about the difficulty of meeting with NSs and reported that he made about seven Russian friends during his internship program, most of which he met through attending a local church. As far as his fellow students, he spent little or no time with them--only during class, twice a week, and sometimes at church. All these efforts were reflected in his improvement in proficiency and interaction.

Summary of advanced level internship students

The comments made by most Advanced students about their immersion experiences were different from those of Philip. Philip was the only student who reported having no difficulty meeting or interacting with NSs and using L2 at all times. Additionally, what made the case of Philip special was that he spoke a Slavic language for two years, having served a mission in Serbia. He did not have the same opportunities as Jeremy and Fredrick had to live for two years in country where the L2 was spoken prior to the internship. The explanation for other Advanced students could be the fact that they spent half of their time with English-speaking peers and their efforts to form extensive social networks at times were limited by unfriendliness of NSs.

Summary of the Case Profiles

When looking at the whole picture of all SA and Internship students, we see that all students had strong language backgrounds and resided with host families. Philip was the only student who reported having no difficulty meeting or interacting with NSs and using L2 at all times. Additionally, what made the case of Philip special was that he spoke a Slavic language for two years, having served a mission in Serbia. However, he did not have the same opportunities as Jeremy and Fredrick had to live for two years in country where the L2 was spoken prior to the internship. The explanation for other Advanced students could be the fact that they spent half of

their time with English-speaking peers and their efforts to form extensive social networks at times were limited by unfriendliness of NSs.

What are Common Characteristics of Study Abroad Students who Made Substantial Oral Gains?

Thirty years ago researchers attempted to identify characteristics of the successful language learners in the language classroom and came up with a list of those characteristics to be compared with less successful learners (Naiman, Frohlich, & Todesco, 1975; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975). For example, according to Stern's (1975) list of strategies, good language learners are willing to practice the target language and learn how to think in the target language. However, according to recent research on good language learners, there is no one perfect formula for success in learning languages or a single set of characteristics possessed by good language learners, and possible transferability to less effective learners. Instead, researchers suggested that different kinds of good language learners behave differently in a wide range of context (Griffiths, 2008; Ushioda, 2008). In other words, a notion of who good language learners are is a much more complex interplay that is comprised of different variables such as gender, age, target culture, motivation, goals, personality, beliefs, and strategies (Griffiths, 2008).

While results from this study show that there are certain characteristics and techniques that successful language learners employ, each individual learning situation illustrates its complexity and individuality. Each student has his or her own conception of *how* to learn a language, what it takes to learn a language, and each acts according to his or her own beliefs about acquisition. It is becoming more and more evident that it is important to learners' language learning success to know what they think about language learning, what they believe about themselves as language learners and how their beliefs impact their behavior (Barcelos, 2003; Dörnyei, 1994; Yang, 1999).

The comparative following analysis looks across all of the participant cases and is based on the process of data analysis, in order to find common themes and overall patterns in the data. The main themes related to students' successful language acquisition during study abroad are students' beliefs about themselves as language learners, beliefs about language learning, and students' agency. I decided to focus on these particular characteristics due to the fact that they were common among all the four participants.

This study offers the positive result that students improved their oral Russian skills during a semester-long SA program, as well as some unexpected results that will be demonstrated later. The purpose of the current section is to examine students' beliefs about language, about themselves as language learners, and their beliefs about language learning and how those beliefs influenced students' behavior in a specific situation.

Language learners' beliefs

Foreign language learners develop many beliefs, attitudes and preconceived notions that influence their behavior on the basis of their own learning experiences and what they have been exposed to in formal and informal learning environments (Horwitz, 1988). Moreover, learners' beliefs either contribute to or impede the development of their potential for autonomous language learning behavior (Cotterall, 1995). Thus, it is crucial to investigate students' beliefs within particular contexts, keeping in mind what opportunities are available to them and what is required of them in a particular learning situation (Barcelos, 2003). One of the key factors of learners' beliefs is learners' self-efficacy or beliefs about self as a language learner.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is proven to be critically important to academic achievement, including foreign language learning achievement in a SA abroad context (Bandura, 1997; Cubillos &

Ilvento, 2012; Dörnyei, 1994; Graham, 2006). It refers to a person's belief that they possess the ability to complete a process of action that leads to a preferred result (Bandura, 1997) and appears to be central to social cognitive theory, which proposes that achievement depends on the interaction between personal characteristics and environmental settings (Bandura, 1986). In other words, Bandura's theory suggests that self-efficacy beliefs make a difference in how people think, feel, and act. Students with high self-efficacy choose to perform more difficult tasks, cope well with challenges in their environment, set higher goals, and see those tasks through to completion which in turn increases self-efficacy (Juhasz & Walker, 1988). They are also able to persevere when obstacles are encountered through the use of self-regulatory skills and greater effort, while those with low self-efficacy let negative thoughts affect their functioning and they tend to stop trying to succeed in the face of difficulty.

More specifically, self-efficacy leads to confidence, which in turn leads to persistence, resulting in higher achievement (Pajares & Schunk, 2002). Self-efficacy is also related to expectancy beliefs; if students feel self-efficacious about learning, they are more likely to work harder and participate more readily (Pajares & Schunk, 2002). Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992) suggest that higher self-efficacy better motivates students' self-regulating behaviors such as academic goal setting. Therefore, more challenging goals are attempted by those who demonstrate higher self-efficacy.

Students in this study combined information from several sources to construct beliefs about their own self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1989), students' self-efficacy may be influenced by various sources including past performances, encouragement from others, or emotional states. Neither the interviewer nor the students used the term "self-efficacy" during the

interviews, but they did mention some sources of self-efficacy beliefs, in particular social persuasion and past performance.

Most of the participants expressed confidence in their abilities to make progress during their time in Russia. The students' self-efficacy was largely based on their past performances. In particular, the participants with previous experience in Russian- or Slavic-speaking country drew on those experiences in shaping their beliefs. For example, Jeremy demonstrated his confidence, calling himself a "superior language learner." He noted: "I think my Russian is very fluent, I have a really high degree of understanding. I had this idea that my Russian was already there, I just needed to actually go back to the country and put it into use." He continued: "On my mission I would take a book, read it and pull out the vocabulary I did not know and then bring it to my speaking skills. On my study abroad I tried to do the same thing."

Philip likewise reported high confidence in his success in his internship in Russia, having an extremely strong desire to "master Russian" and "beat other students' scores" on the post-OPI. He added that two years in a Slavic-speaking country helped him realize he is capable of learning foreign languages. "And on my mission I learned I actually can do languages, so I came home and I was doing Russian."

Past performance influenced the participants who had lived for two years in Russian- or Slavic-speaking country. They described their SA experience as "going home." They all knew what to expect, believed in their success, and exercised their agency.

Another source of self-efficacy that was mentioned along with the past performance, by one participant was positive words of encouragement received both from his Russian acquaintances and host family. Fredrick reported: "I've always been told from outside sources that I speak well. I think I have a feel for the language as to what they say it and how they say it

and then try to copy that. I am good at creating Russian and so my feel for the language, I feel, is superior. And maybe that just reflects in a way I speak sometimes because I've heard people say that I am good at just conversing." Fredrick's confidence helped him to overcome his natural feeling of shyness, which he reported to be an obstacle interacting with NSs. "I am kind of a shy person, so it is harder for me to get out and be very active, but I have friends in Moscow that I already knew from before when I served, so I got to chat with them. I did a lot of chatting, especially with younger people. When I was in a classroom setting, I answered questions, I was involved, and so I was not trying to hide or anything sometimes because I messed up."

Unlike Jeremy, Philip, and Frederick, Rachel reported an initial lack of self-efficacy in her ability to interact with NSs, largely as a result of the anxiety and stress engendered by her early experiences in Moscow (Bandura, 1989). Moreover, she did not have the past experience in a Russian-speaking country to draw on, and found her first month in Russia challenging. She reported feeling extremely nervous and fearful. "I was kind of overwhelmed by some things, because I'd never been there before and most of the people there were RMs [returned missionaries] and they weren't worried about that kind of stuff, because they were like 'I already know what is going on', so for the first month I was petrified and then I realized it is not how it really works." In addition, she felt frustrated with her living situation, specifically with her relationship with a host mother which made her feel even more stressed:

Early up I tend to stereotype. I think it's kind of a defense. To be more like Americans are like this, and Russians like this. I didn't really want to think like that. I saw myself thinking like that and I am like there is gotta be a better way to do this. I had kind of a difficult relationship with my host mother and what I took out from it is that she is not the

only Russian and she does not stand for all Russians. By the end I think I realized I need to take a step back and realize this is not all Russians.

Lacking previous experience, Rachel felt that she was in a less advantageous position than other students. Whereas other study participants had confidence that they could talk to people, Rachel did not, because she lacked previous experience to teach her how to do so. This lack of experience contributed to lower self-efficacy in regards to speaking. “I had friends there who would just go up and talk to everyone on the street. I mean they were returned missionaries that is what they knew. I was always a little bit ... actually not; I was *way* more resistant to talk to people. I’d rather not ask for directions but use Google maps.” Nevertheless, over time she overcame her fears, felt more confident and demonstrated persistence in language approach. She worked through her fears by forcing herself to be more proactive:

I think a lot of that fear was that I had heard a lot of horror stories about how scary Russia was before I left for Moscow, and I sort of kept those stories in the back of my mind. Plus, it was the first time I’d spent any significant amount of time on my own while abroad, and living so independently is something that you have to learn eventually, whether you’re in Russia or any other country. And I was only 19, and very sheltered in a lot of ways. For that first month, I felt very young, very inexperienced, and very insecure. I think at some point I realized that I was there for a whole three months, and jumping every time someone opened a door was no way to live, so I got over myself and my fears and forced myself to be more confident.

Rachel gradually realized that she must overcome her anxiety if she was to live in Russia for another two months, and pushed towards being more confident.

In summary, some students' self-efficacy beliefs came from external sources like past performances and words of encouragement (e.g. Philip, Jeremy, Fredrick) and others from an internal source such as self-reflection (Rachel). The "good" language learners in this study had high self-efficacy that allowed them to overcome challenges. Though Rachel did not initially have such high self-efficacy related to her Russian speaking abilities, she was able to develop it. The context provided some of the participants with opportunities to apply what they had learned previously and to interact with sympathetic NSs that perhaps encouraged learners to persevere in their language learning efforts.

Beliefs about language learning.

The learners' perspective on beliefs and the way they structure those beliefs are highly important (White, 1999) to researchers and educators because learners act upon those beliefs with learning activities that work best for them. This section discusses what beliefs students in this study held in terms language learning, how several of those beliefs were not acted upon due to constraints in learners' environment, and how students adopted those beliefs according to available learning opportunities.

Goal-setting

Having language learning goals is one of the key strategies that successful language learners have in common and it also is a fundamental feature of L2 motivation research (Dörnyei & Csizer, 1998; Gillette, 1994; McClelland, 2000; Rubin, 1975; Rubin, Thompson, & Sun, 1982). According to Allen (2010) and Gillette (1994), students' goals and reasons for learning a language may influence their L2 use, language learning strategies, and linguistic achievements. Not setting more specific language learning goals is thought to negatively impact students' linguistic development (Allen, 2010). In addition, general goals are too vague to be an incentive

for guided performance (Bandura, 1986). Thus, to motivate, goals must be challenging so short-term sub-goals provide more regulating power for current actions.

All participants in this study had goals about what they what they wanted to accomplish in terms of language or culture development, but the majority of them set vague and not clear goals. However, while three of the four students reported not setting specific and measurable goals, all of them had high initial levels of motivation to increase their oral fluency and made significant progress in their oral performance. Moreover, Fredrick explicitly stated that he did not set any goals for study abroad, but rather had expectations based on previous successes. “I didn’t have a goal but I did have an expectation to improve in my fluency, comprehension of native speech, and vocabulary. I didn’t set specific goals because I had previously [on my mission] found much success in acquiring language through active participation in real-life situations, rather than by studying words and reading grammar books.” While he claimed not to have specific goals, he had a set of beliefs about how to learn a language—through interactions with NSs—and he acted upon his beliefs.

Other SA students made similar comments, indicating high motivation to improve their fluency, but often eschewing short-term measurable goals. For example, Rachel’s interview responses did not have any indication of breaking her linguistic goals up into intermediate goals. Her main goal for going to Russia was to improve oral fluency. “I just wanted to improve drastically, which I probably did but I could have done better.” Similarly, Jeremy, when articulating his goals, vaguely described them by using words such as “improve” and “gain” without specifying them: “My goals were to gain in-country experience in Russia, gain greater perspective on what direction to take career-wise, and increase my fluency in Russian.”

Only one of the four students, Philip, reported having specific language goals well aligned with general goals and pursued them throughout his whole SA experience. His specific goals include not speaking L1, avoiding L1 speakers, and memorizing Russian poems twice a week. Philip noted, “I didn’t want to go all way to Russia, pay all that money and sit around and speak English. You know what I mean? I wanted to get something out. I wanted to try to master Russian or at least start that journey.” He believed that he had to set concrete goals and regulate his language learning through participation in his new community of practice, whether with his Russians friends or through memorization:

You have to challenge yourself or extend yourself beyond what you think you are capable of. I mean, it is very general advice. I can only give you advice based on my experience, so I would say: try not speaking in English for a whole day. And if you do that, try not speaking in English for two days. You know if that works, try not to speak in English for a week. And so just constantly push yourself to work harder and challenge yourself. But that general principle you can apply to not just speaking, but then also have specific goals. You know you have a goal to learn 5 words. You know... gradually increase... So you have five... and for the next week you can learn ten new words a day or something like that, so just constantly challenging yourself, pushing yourself.

Philip’s comments illustrate that lack of concrete and measurable language goals does not necessarily lead to language failure or less motivation. It seems clear that most students in this study did not feel that setting specific goals was important. Nevertheless, as will be shown below, each student had a set of own beliefs about language learning and was willing to act on those beliefs to create or avoid the necessary conditions to realize self-defined language learning.

Language contact

Many research studies have tried to determine the connection between improvement of oral proficiency of SA students and their out- of-classroom language use, as study abroad offers many opportunities for informal contact with L2 in addition to formal language instruction (Collentine & Freed, 2004; Davidson, 2010). Some of those opportunities are interactive (direct communication with NSs), and others non-interactive, such as reading authentic texts, watching and listening to authentic materials (Yager, 1998).

In this study, one belief common to all four case studies was that outside of classroom contact with the language is a critical component of language learning. However, how language contact was envisioned differed from case to case.

Interactive language contact and social networks with NSs

Research confirms that SA students who successfully form extensive social networks show significant gains in oral performance (Dewey, Belnap, & Hillstrom, 2013; Isabelli-García, 2006; Pellegrino, 1998). However, the literature also shows that the relationship between strong social networks and oral proficiency is not so clear (Freed & Segalowitz, 2004; Magnan & Black, 2007; Mendelson; 2004; Wilkinson, 1998). Perhaps, forming quality relationships with fewer NSs, as mentioned by Ginsburg and Miller (2002), is more important than spending a considerable amount of time speaking the L2 outside of classroom with NSs.

Three of the four students in this study reported that they had not made as many NSs friends as they had hoped. Reasons for the lack of connection with NSs included fear of socializing with Russians, the greater need for emotional support from fellow students, or lack of opportunity to get to know NSs better. In addition, interactions they had with friends they made were far from being “quality relationships.” Although all of them believed in the importance of

socializing with Russians, only one student actually created strong social networks with NSs. Even so, all of them still made substantial gains in overall oral proficiency.

Philip's case stands out from other participants stories. He strongly believed in the importance of interacting with NSs:

I think the most important aspect of language acquisition would be to practice... practice spoken Russian. He [a language learner] just needs to find or she just to find a native speaker and spend a lot of time practicing, so speaking and listening to spoken Russian. Listening to new words and the way a native speaker would construct a sentence.

Philip not only believed in the effectiveness of interaction with NSs, but acted upon his beliefs. He stated that he made six close friends at a local church with whom he spent 15-20 hours a week on average. "I made a lot of friends. I interacted with Russians who I consider friends on a daily basis probably. I mean in social setting, also after work." In addition, his interactions with NS co-workers were deep and meaningful. He stated that he interacted with them hourly, working on average six to seven hours a day, Monday through Friday, even though his internship primarily consisted of translating various documents from Russian to English. Not only did he exercise his agency to practice oral skills, but he avoided speaking L1 at all costs, even when it meant distancing himself from his peers, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

On the other hand, although Rachel believed that speaking Russian with NSs was vital for improving oral proficiency, she reported failing to form meaningful relationships with NSs, making acquaintances rather than friends:

I didn't have a lot of interaction with the same people over and over. Like I would go out do things and meet new people but it was not like I made a best friend who is a native

speaker. There were people, just a few, church members that you would see around.

There were activities that they had and after church you go for walks. But it was always a big group. Even though I was not always just having long discussions with native speakers, I'd be good friends with one person for a while and then make friends with another person for a while. I had some good friends but probably not over the whole time and I didn't have one friend who stayed continuously in such a constant presence.

At the end she wished she had spent more time conversing in the L2 and had made more NS friends. However, the culture shock she experienced the first month influenced her approach in language learning. "If I could go back, I would make more Russian friends. I know those things are crucial, but it was just like I had a tough time for a while. By the end it was OK. The first little while was tough." However, as will be shown below, Rachel found ways to make up for her lack of contact with NSs.

Similarly, Jeremy's efforts to interact with NSs were not always successful, but in his case his attempts to make NS friends were limited by his interlocutors. He said, "I always went to church, I tried to interact with members there, but my ward [local church unit] was not necessarily the friendly ward. I spent time with young single adults, I went to Institute, and I went to family home evening [church activities]. I was only there for three months, so they were like, oh more foreigners." Although, Jeremy did not form extensive social networks, he had a regular interactive contact with his Russian-speaking girlfriend at least three times a week for an hour. "Oksana was one of the primary reasons my Russian improved due to our constant interaction. We spoke mostly Russian, whether communicating over the internet or in person in Moscow. Occasionally, I would explain something in English, but Russian was our main common language." Although, Jeremy's social network consisted of only one NS, it was a

productive and constant interaction. Regardless of the lack of meaningful speaking opportunities and unwillingness of NSs to interact with them, Rachel, Fredrick, and Jeremy found other ways to approach their language learning that did not require a NS.

This study confirms that SA learners may express the desire to meet and spend time with NSs, but those motivations do not always result in active participation on the part of students for various reasons. In other words, students do not automatically have access to social networks that facilitate learning. Regardless of limited access to NSs, three students found different ways to approach their language learning exercising their agency and taking responsibility for their learning. The implication of this for SA participants is that how learners engage in a language-learning activity with those around them generates the context, rather than the context generating learning (Allen, 2010). For some students in this study, higher quality interactions were better, but for others, it was a matter of non-interactive contact.

Non-interactive language contact

Yager (1998) concludes that greater interactive contact is related to greater L2 oral gains, while greater non-interactive contact is related to less progress in oral proficiency for advanced students. In other words, participants who successfully form more extensive social networks and have greater direct contact with NSs are able to have greater language success. On the other hand, several other studies suggest that exploring print and non-print authentic materials may have a positive effect on learners' communicative competence (Hwang, 2005; Maxim, 2002, Weyers, 1999). For example, Weyers (1999) states that exposure to authentic videos can affect some components of communicative competence such as confidence and ability to narrate in great detail. Students in his study who were watched authentic videos were more comfortable listening to L2 spoken by NSs and were not afraid to make mistakes in order to communicate their

message. These results are comparable to those of Hwang (2005). She concludes that learners use the vocabulary they learn when reading authentic texts in their speech because “output-based tasks can activate the input stored in receptive memory and thus transform knowledge into skills” (p. 4-5).

One finding of this research is that non-interactive contact may lead to oral gains. This study also shows that receptive communication may contribute to the development of communicative competence along with receptive skills such as reading, listening, and viewing.

Rachel and Fredrick mainly experienced non-interactive contact and had mostly superficial contact with NSs, but they successfully improved their oral skills as measured by the post- OPI. For example, Rachel’s contact was largely limited to receptive contact through reading, listening, and viewing. She bought Russian books and movies, read and watched them in Russian, took notes when in class and reviewed them regularly. When answering what it takes to improve in speaking, Rachel said:

I’d say number one was constant contact with the language. Number two was being forced or having a desire to create language -- to speak. I read more of it. It’s part of the contact. I think the most important thing was to keep a constant focus on improving my Russian, and not necessarily just in a formal classroom environment. As it got easier for me to watch Russian movies without subtitles, I did that more. As it got easier to read Russian literature in Russian, I did that more. Keeping up the momentum, I guess, was the key for me.

Additionally, she reported reading a lot of poetry in Russian. “I had a poetry album on my iPod; my iPod was really like my life line. I just could get Internet; I didn’t have my

computer with me. And so I would read poems and come across 10 words and I would write them down, and look them up later. That definitely helped.”

Similarly, Fredrick’s contact with L2 was primarily receptive as well. He interacted with NSs, but his interaction was often limited and conversations were not prolonged. For example, he played basketball two or three times a week with Russians. “I did not personally have any close relationship with them, some of the people that I played with had closer relationship with others, but I was just another player for them.” The character of his interaction was receptive communication, and he attributed his improvement to active listening to NSs. “My main tool for learning Russian has been active listening in an immersion environment. I just copied what I heard, and that always improved my ability to communicate.”

Although Jeremy believed interactive contact (e.g. speaking with NS) to be important, he also believed that non-interactive contact was of equal. “Try to immerse yourself as much as possible by using different means of communication. You have to talk to people. You have to listen. Read. Watch something. I’d listen to a lot of Russian music.” He reported reading in Russian every day at least an hour:

Part of my Russian-language reading was for my internship: Ukrainian news, a book about Ukrainian-Russian cultural relations. Some of the reading was for our Russian class (just a textbook). However, most of it was for my own enjoyment. I read the 7th Harry Potter book in Russian, scriptures, news articles, and other random online content.

He also spent time listening to Russian music. “In Moscow I listened to music at least 1-2 hours a day while doing something else, like travelling in the metro and reading for my internship. I should say that there was a lot of Ukrainian music mixed in there too.”

Although Philip perceived speaking as the most crucial factor in his language development, he also had spent time using a non-interactive approach. “I usually watched news every morning and maybe a movie in Russian at night two or three times a week.” Moreover, he read Russian literature and memorized poems. “Oh, I read a lot of literature. I had a goal to memorize a poem like Pushkin or Lermontov. I probably memorized a poem a week... maybe two poems a week, and I recited them to native speakers. That helped with pronunciation, not so much with vocabulary because the words were a little bit archaic.”

For Rachel, Fredrick and Jeremy, access to peers was important for social affiliation. Remarkably, in most cases, even though their attempts for social interaction were constrained by NSs, they gradually made changes to their approach for language learning according to the possibilities their various environments offered them. Rather than focusing on the limited opportunities for verbal interaction, students sought to gain access to different language contact.

Despite the conviction among researchers and students in support of direct oral communication with NSs, students in this study who spent more time viewing, reading and listening to authentic texts may achieve communicative competence similar to students who follow a more traditional way of improving oral skills.

L1 language contact.

Recent SA research argues that SA participants face great obstacles in using their L2 during study abroad (Wilkinson, 2005). One of these obstacles is forming social networks with fellow students that make extensive L2 use challenging. The majority of SA programs often assign students to spend time with fellow students from their native country or who share an L1. Wilkinson (2005) indicates that such students tend to form “compatriot islands” where they decide that it is often easier to deal with the new context as a group. It is evident that SA

participants who spend a lot of time interacting with their fellow students may find less time to form meaningful relationships with native target language speakers that allow them meaningful interaction in the L2 (Rivers, 1998).

Rachel, Jeremy, and Frederick reported that it was the formation of “compatriot islands” that limited their contact with NSs. All of the participants in this study believed in the importance of using L2 as much as possible, but most of them spent significant time with their fellow students and this perhaps limited their opportunities to form social networks with NSs and use the L2. Each chose to stick with their group as described by Wilkinson (2005), but for different reasons. Rachel spent time with the group because she initially faced culture shock. She explained that it would probably have been easier to speak more Russian with her fellow students, but would have been more alienating. “The problem is how often should I speak English, but you want to be friends with your study abroad group, you want to have a good relationship with them.” Two other participants stayed with their fellow students because of how the group was structured, feeling it was a matter of convenience. According to the Advanced level students, they “could have done [spoken] in Russian the whole summer,” but more than half of their group was comprised of students with lower proficiency. Some SA students did not speak Russian at all. The internship students in the Advanced group translated Russian during the group activities so that the lower level students would not feel too uncomfortable. Jeremy noted:

I think that almost every day there was at least one point when I wanted a break from Russian – generally in the evenings when I was tired. Also, speaking in Russian with Americans learning Russian is not always very pleasant, especially when they do not speak or understand Russian at your level. For convenience's sake, I would mostly speak

English with the other Americans. I interacted with Americans every day for several hours. They were always around. They were my fellow students.

Fredrick also expressed his regret for using L1 with his peers:

Unfortunately, we spoke more English than I feel like we should have. So I feel like when I was with the students that we went with, we spoke mostly in English which is unfortunate, except for classes because we always spoke Russian in class. But when I was not with the students, it was always in Russian. I'd say 40% English and 60% Russian. I wish I could do more Russian.

While some of the students recognized that they should have used individual agency to break away from their group, they felt that it was difficult emphasizing their desire to fit in with their peers. For example, Rachel noted:

My goal was just to speak as much as I could. That's not really how it turned out. On a study abroad experience... it was an internship but it was kind of a combination study abroad, it was really easy to speak English with other people in the group and it was kind of hard to meet people out of group if you were with the group speaking English. It's very difficult break away from all of that when I got there. I was in such culture shock, for the first month at least, that I felt it would be better stick with the group.

Students also felt that their attempts to use L2 were limited by NSs who addressed them in English. Rachel explained: "My work was, I translated press releases from Russian to English. I learned some vocabulary but it's kind of passively. I worked with native speakers, but mainly they spoke to me in English."

Thus, Philip was the only internship student who consistently used the L2 as much as possible, eschewing English at nearly any cost. He said:

When you are just learning the language in another country where you don't speak it all the time, you turn it off and on. So maybe you have an hour when you are learning Russian, but then the rest of the time you are awake you are speaking in English. I think to really progress in the language you have to spend every available hour speaking. When you are speaking with people, you hear new vocabulary words. You hear the grammar being used. It is as if you have the verbal practice and the textbook at the same time, all of the time.

Not only did he believe in L2 use, but spent little time with his fellow students, only during class, twice a week and sometimes at church. "I promised myself that I would only speak Russian. So I decided the only way to really progress was to try to forget English, and only speak in Russian. So that was my main goal. I think I was really successful. I don't think I spoke in English until August."

He not only willingly maintained his L2 use, but voluntarily avoided L1 speakers and L2 speakers who wanted to communicate in L1. He was very determined to speak only Russian even if it meant alienating himself from his group. Therefore, he was the only one who successfully formed close relationships with his NS friends. Nevertheless, despite spending time interacting in L1 with their fellow students, the other research participants improved in their general oral proficiency, in addition to forming strong social bonds with their group.

An encouraging and intriguing finding of this study is that successful language learners are those who adapt their beliefs to the opportunities available to them, aligning those opportunities with their needs (White, 2008). In other words, good language learners on study abroad are not only limited to those who form strong social networks, have sufficient speaking practice with NSs, but to those who are capable of adjusting their language approaches according

to a particular learning environment. Although most students of this study believed in the importance of interaction with NSs, they were unsuccessful in forming strong social networks due to the fact that circumstances did not allow for the type of contact they hoped for. Nevertheless, they found that in this case they needed to change their course of action, adapt their beliefs to current situation and approach the language learning differently.

Individual agency

Closely related to social cognitive theory and self-efficacy is the notion of agency (Bandura, 1997; Norton & Toohey, 2001). Individual agency refers to individuals having the capacity to exercise control over their decisions and, therefore, they are agents of adjustment in themselves and in their environment (Bandura, 1989). According to Norton and Toohey (2001), there is always a conflict between the constraints and opportunities offered by the learners' environments and their agency as learners. Successful language learning depends crucially on the activity and initiative of the learner (van Lier, 2008, p. 163).

With reference to the good language learners and their beliefs about language learning, we examined how good language learners in this study exercised agency to set personal goals, gain access to the social networks of their communities, and use L1 and L2.

Students in the present study believed they were capable of producing desired outcomes and had an incentive to act according their beliefs. In addition, as agents, they chose to be autonomous and proactive regardless of situational constraints. They selected an appropriate course of action and employed their own motivation through interactive or non-interactive language contact depending on the opportunities available to them.

Learner autonomy

Closely tied to the notion of individual agency is that of learner autonomy. Autonomous learners are individuals who take over their learning in the classroom and outside of it and over the purposes for which they learn languages and the ways in which they go about learning the language (Benson, 2006). Moreover, according to Macaro (1997), autonomous learners view themselves as being as producers in the society rather than products of it. In other words, autonomous learners are capable of taking responsibility for what they learn and how they learn L2.

Learner autonomy played a major role in language learning of students of this study. They did not place the responsibility solely on their classes, instructors, host families, but realized that it was necessary for them to take more responsibility for their own learning and fully exercise their agency to learn. To varying degrees, students exercised their learner autonomy, although they were not yet fully autonomous in all learning contexts (Benson, 2010; Little, 1991). One student who was initially autonomous in some contexts but not others was Rachel. Even though her initial investment was limited to selective in out-of-class interactive contexts, she later recognized the need to become more autonomous and more devoted to developing her Russian language proficiency through self-initiated, non-interactive activities.

Rachel encouraged future SA students to make full use of every learning opportunity and engage into more proactive behavior:

One thing is to definitely don't just sit at home. I had friends on a study abroad, they were always at home, and I did not understand, there is so much to do, just take advantage of every opportunity you have because when are you going to be in Moscow again? And then don't be afraid to leave your group and do your own thing.

In addition, when asked what she would do differently, if she could go again, she responded, “I would be more independent and I would not be as worried about am I going to be safe in a city because I already know all that sort of thing. So if I went again, I would take more advantage of opportunities to speak more Russian.” By the end of the SA program, Rachel’s self-initiated activities brought her a stronger sense of autonomy and developed better control of her learning (Little, 2008).

A few study participants whose self-efficacy and reflectivity were more developed were better prepared to carry out autonomous practice and more willing to assume more learning responsibility, even if in different ways (e.g. Fredrick, Jeremy). However, some (e.g. Rachel and Jeremy) felt frustrated and did not fully accept the notion of learner autonomy, choosing to stay in their comfort zone, as reflected in their choice to stick with their group (Reinders & White, 2011). However, the challenges they experienced were not able to hold them back from becoming fully autonomous and they continued to participate in self-regulated, more non-interactive learning.

Philip was the most autonomous learner among the four study participants; he actively engaged in opportunities for autonomous practices in different contexts. For example, he was very proactive in becoming an all-round Russian user, looking for more autonomous practices of various types.

As observed in most studies, the awareness of learner autonomy does not necessarily convert into action (Gan, 2009). To realize autonomous beliefs into practice, students had to exercise their agency (Toohey & Norton, 2003). The participants of the present study were aware of their responsibility as independent learners, and engaged in appropriate behavior. Although some participants perceived themselves as being introverted and shy (Jeremy and Fredrick) and

others struggled with anxiety (e.g. Rachel), they acted on the out-of-class learning affordances which was mediated by their environment (Benson, 2007).

This study provides a thorough analysis of the degree to which the students perceived interactive and non-interactive contact as a valuable language learning opportunity. In addition, it offers insights into linguistic benefits of SA participation and what characteristics of learners make them successful. However, the most important conclusion that can be made from these study findings is that there really does not seem to be a one-to-one correlation between students' language outcomes during study abroad and individual variables (e.g. how much time they spend with NSs, how extensive their social networks are what strategies they use). Researchers and educators really have to look at the big picture of what opportunities students had and how they used their agency and autonomy to take advantage of those opportunities.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of the present study was to investigate perceptions of four Russian learners who made substantial oral gains during a SA program in Russia. It determined what factors contributed to students' success. Regardless of moments of frustration, anxiety and other difficulties on their way to improvement, most participants of this study were able to gradually build their agency through out-of-class participation and strengthen their learner autonomy, adapting their beliefs about themselves and language learning. This chapter addresses the conclusions, including implications for teachers, followed limitations of the study as well as suggestions for future research.

Conclusions

The findings of the current study have some important theoretical implications as they relate to the field of foreign language learning. The present study stressed that non-interactive contact may lead to gains in oral performance, and not just in receptive skills such as listening and reading as suggested by previous research studies. The main finding of the study was the impact that interplay between students' agency, beliefs, and the learning environment made on students' behavior. In other words, students' autonomy development was a product and a mix of various factors: personality (e.g. self-efficacy), socio-psychological (e.g. agency), education (e.g. language background), and social environment (e.g. the availability of speaking opportunities). These factors also interacted with each other as the students built up their learner autonomy through out-of-class learning.

Bandura (2001) argued that the more learners are aware of their control over their learning, the more they determine to use self-regulatory skills which are directed toward changing the learning environments to meet their needs. In this study, most students had a clear

goal in mind to improve their Russian by immersing themselves into the target culture and believed in their capacity to do so. As a result, they acted upon their beliefs by seeking out either interactive or non-interactive language opportunities. This confidence could be explained by the fact that three of the four participants had been to Russian- or Slavic-speaking country previously, and knew what to expect and how to handle possible difficulties. During their two-year religious mission they had numerous opportunities to interact with NSs. They planned to invest more in developing speaking skills, assuming its critical role in their learning. As a result, three of the four students made a significant effort to practice their language skills beyond the classroom at varying degrees. Throughout the whole semester most of them experienced difficulty in building immediate social circle with members of their local community. One of the possible reasons for such difficulties was the decision to stick with their group, thus spending less time establishing social relationships with NSs. However, instead of giving up, they initiated activities with available subjects; some of them took advantages of speaking opportunities with their host family, others with friends they had made previously. Also, in order to compensate for the lack of oral practice and to enhance their language learning, these students exposed themselves to non-interactive language contact. They initiated their language skills through non-interactive language contact, participating in activities in line with their interests (e.g. watching TV/movies, reading newspapers, books, and listening to music) which also helped to foster their self-efficacy in taking charge of their language learning. Interest-driven out-of-class participation played a crucial role in helping all students achieve their level and constituted the majority of their autonomous practices in a SA context. These experiences, although not focused on speaking practice, promoted students' learner autonomy and learner responsibility. As noted by Flowerdew and Miller (2008), participation in out-of-class activities did help the students realize

the availability of affordances in the social environments; this strengthened their ability to perceive learning opportunities in Russia.

Students actively sought language contact in a form that they did not anticipate to be involved with, but that initiative and active approach was what led them to language success. They were able to step outside their feelings, expectations and beliefs and using effective self-management skills adapted their language approach to the conditions that were present.

van Lier (2002, 2004) proposed an ecological approach to language learning as an extension of sociocultural theory and emphasized the notion of affordances. This approach aims to look at the learning process, the actions and activities of learners, the multilayered nature of interaction and language use in all their complexity. Affordances represent “a relationship between a learner and the environment, which signals an opportunity for or inhibition of action” (p. 4). Therefore, the most important principle for language learning in this ecological framework is access to the environment where language is spoken. Finally, according to van Lier (2000), learners should be active and engaged, because “what becomes an affordance depends on what the organism does” (p. 252). In other words, what becomes a possibility depends on the learners and how they employ agency in a more self-directed way. To summarize, the ecological approach is offering a completely new way of looking at the complex nature of language learning, which can shed some light on the actual learning processes that occur.

In this study, the SA environment afforded opportunities that varied from learner to learner. For example, Rachel had a difficult relationship with her host mother, which, for whatever reason, closed that off as an avenue for language learning. In addition, during her first month in Russia, she feared interacting with NSs and wanted to stay with the group of SA students. Jeremy’s and Fredrick’s efforts to make contact with NSs were either constrained by

NSs' lack of engagement or limited to superficial conversations in Russian, not allowing them to develop meaningful relationships with NSs. Only Philip was easily able to make friends with NSs, avoiding any L1 contact, and using his personal criteria to organize his language learning agenda and achieve his goals.

However, learners of this study adjusted their initial beliefs and self-regulated behavior to the affordances that emerged through interaction with the learning environment. For example, regardless of Rachel's fears, she chose to continue her language learning through non-interactive language contact opportunities Jeremy and Fredrick did the same.

This study has contributed to the continuously increasing research that has been done on the value of SA interactive environment. In addition, it extended our understanding of the linguistic affordances of a SA context by examining students' beliefs and their actions.

Limitations of the Study

This study did not seek to list characteristics of good language learners in a SA context, but rather to better understand the experiences of successful SA participants. It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the present study. I identified three main limitations. First, there were limitations with the selection of participants. Second, there were problems with data collection, and finally, methodological limitations. While these limitations did not prevent me from obtaining some valuable results, steps could be taken in future research to overcome these limitations and develop a stronger research design.

Due to the fact that the participation in this study was voluntary, many students who made substantial gains declined to participate. Thus, I ended up with a smaller sample size than was initially planned. There were only four participants, three males and only one female, due to the fact that most SA students at this university are males. In addition, all participants were

students of a private university and are thus not representative of all SA students. However, the purpose of the research was to describe a phenomenon and the uniqueness of students' stories rather than to generalize the results. Additional participants and more information about the participants would always be welcomed in a research of this nature. Nonetheless, the students' experiences highlighted a lot of the practical concerns shared by students in other studies, for example, anxiety, L1 use, autonomous practices, and change in learners' beliefs.

In qualitative research, the researcher plays a role of investigator, looking for evidence to answer research questions, becoming more and more familiar with the data, allowing the elimination of different explanations and making a case for conclusions. One of the threats to validity includes researcher bias. In terms of data collection and analysis, there was only one researcher who conducted those procedures. Thus, I was unable to use researcher triangulation as a means of ensuring descriptive validity. The use of several researches to conduct interviews, transcribe them and analyze the data would have eliminated possible researcher's biases and offer other explanations of study findings (Patton, 1990).

My data sources included interviews with students and with faculty directors. Therefore, I mainly drew on self-reported data, specifically on the interview transcripts, to analyze students' language learning beliefs and autonomous practices employed in study abroad. By the time of the data collection period (May-August 2012), most students had been home for a little over a year. Self-reported data is subject to the memory constraints of the participants. Thus, it is not always a reliable means of data collection.

Nevertheless, I sought to overcome these limitations by seeking out the perspectives of the faculty directors, as well as by immersing myself in the research literature.

Implications

The findings of the present study suggested a number of pedagogical implications for administrators and directors of SA and Internship programs. Findings of this study showed that there is no one simple formula for language success. In fact, success with foreign languages is highly individualized, and there is no right method to learn a language. What matters is rather that students learn what works best for them personally. That being said, universities should support implementation of autonomous learning in students, and instructors should look for ways to help them develop self-regulating investing through interest-driven activities and fully exploit the opportunities for learning. By doing so, it is hoped that language learners can make better use of out-of-class linguistic affordances and foster greater autonomy. It is important for students to understand the potential language gain and learning outcomes of out-of-class practice; teachers can help students understand this. Such activities can also strengthen students' ability to perceive and act on learning opportunities in wider sociocultural contexts. Thus, when students either go on study abroad or graduate from college, they become independent learners who are aware of how to promote their own learning in a certain environment.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are a number of implications for future research that could be examined as a result of the findings. As more and more students go on SA programs, it is critical that the participants understand how they can learn an L2 successfully.

This study provided confirmation that the type of contact students have with their L1s and L2s during the SA experience has an impact on their oral improvements. Differences in an individual's contact with both languages may help explain the variety of gains made by the students, specifically, the amount of direct oral communication vs. receptive communication of

oral and written messages. The majority of students reported non-interactive contact as the prevalent one. Hence, further research needs to be conducted to more accurately measure and analyze the types of contact students have in the L2.

In addition, this study demonstrated that good language learners in a SA context exercise their agency, manage to overcome different constraints, act on affordances, and foster greater autonomy. Further research is required to better determine how students enhance their self-efficacy beliefs, manage to overcome obstacles, reshape their learning environment, and foster autonomous behavior. More validation studies should investigate changes for these constructs pre-, during and post- a SA experience since this study focused primarily on post-self-reported data of the students' perspectives.

Moreover, the present study examined the successful SA students' retrospective accounts of their Russian language learning through their semester-abroad program. It did not examine the participation of students who did not make substantial or any gains during their time in Russia. As students shared similar language backgrounds, there is a need to see how low proficient learners tackle contextual constraints and develop learner autonomy in different contexts in order to have a more comprehensive picture of SA students' development. Also, future studies should seek for ways to help unsuccessful learners to achieve their language goals and become more independent learners. A longitudinal, mixed-method multiple-case study would be helpful to trace the holistic development of learner autonomy. Their long-term autonomous behavior could then be fully investigated. Also, various data sources should be elicited and triangulated to provide a more comprehensive picture of learner autonomy.

Furthermore, while looking at students' profiles and the results students made while abroad, it is apparent that future research can continue to explain what takes place in the SA

context and how this influences the SLA of L2 learners. Thus, research needs to focus on how to help students strengthen their autonomy, as well as on how to help students with minimal previous or no immersion experience to overcome their emotional breakdowns. One specific area of investigation should be how to lessen the negative effects of language and cultural anxiety and how to help students overcome their anxiety when performing in the L2 through a developing system of support. Additional areas of research may be to explore student personality types and motivation for second language learning. Many measurements are available in the fields of SLA and education to evaluate and assess these personal and affective individual differences.

This investigation has added to the literature in SLA by expanding the review of learners' beliefs and autonomy, in addition to known measures of oral proficiency such as the OPI. The current study showed substantial growth in the oral language skills made of Advanced-Mid students, a feat which has proven to be difficult in previous research (Brecht et al., 1995; Freed, 1998). It provided evidence that the OPI levels need to be studied more closely, particularly the upper levels of proficiency, in order to better understand the gains made by the students as they advance in their oral performance. The nature of the Advanced level on the inverted pyramid ACTFL scale does not allow researchers to accurately and objectively evaluate improvements made by Advanced speakers (Davidson, 2010). Moreover, the inverted pyramid shows that it is more difficult to make measurable progress at the advanced levels (Meredith, 1990). Thus, there is a need for more research on this type of measurement of oral gains.

Future research should also address solutions to the challenges students face abroad as a result of their SA environments. As evidenced by one participant of this study, students with no prior immersion experience need to be better prepared culturally and linguistically to face possible frustration and confusion in a target culture. Access to Russian is another area where SA

programs could play a larger role in terms of meeting NSs and help students negotiate that access. Since it is clear that for many of the students in this study, making friendships with NSs was a challenge, program involvement is necessary.

References

- Allen, H. W. (2010). Language-learning motivation during short-term study abroad: An activity theory perspective. *Foreign Language Annals, 43*(1), 27-49.
- Allen, H. W., & Herron, C. (2003). A mixed-methodology investigation of the linguistic and affective outcomes of summer study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals, 36*(3), 370-385.
- Amuzie, G. L., & Winke, P. (2009). Changes in language learning beliefs as a result of study abroad. *System, 37*(3), 366-379.
- Astin, A. W., & Sax, L. J. (1998). How undergraduates are affected by service participation. *Journal of College Student Development, 39*(3), 251-263.
- Bandura, A. (1986). Fearful expectations and avoidant actions as coeffects of perceived self-efficacy. *American Psychologist, 41*(12), 1389-1391.
- Bandura, A. (1989). Regulation of cognitive processes through perceived self-efficacy. *Developmental Psychology, 25*(5), 729-735.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman.
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology, 52*(1), 1-26.
- Barcelos, A. M. F. (2003). Researching beliefs about SLA: A critical review. In P. Kalaja & A. M. F. Barcelos (Eds.), *Beliefs about SLA: New research approaches* (pp. 7-33). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Bataller, R. (2010). Making a request for a service in Spanish: Pragmatic development in the study abroad setting. *Foreign Language Annals, 43*(1), 160-175.
- Benson, P. (2007). State-of-the-art article. *Language Teaching, 40*(1), 21-40.

- Benson, P. (2010). Measuring autonomy: should we put our ability to the test? In A. Paran & L. Sercu (Eds.), *Testing the untestable in language education* (pp. 77-97). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Brecht, R., & Davidson D. (1992). Language acquisition gains in study abroad: Assessment and feedback. In E. Shohamy & A. Walton (Eds.), *Language assessment for feedback: testing and other strategies* (pp. 87-101). Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt.
- Brecht, R., Davidson, D. & Ginsberg, R. (1993). *Predictors of foreign language gain during study abroad* (pp. 37-66). Washington, DC: The National Foreign Language Center Occasional Papers.
- Brecht, R., Davidson, D. & Ginsburg, R. (1995). Predictors of foreign language gain during study abroad. In B. Freed (Ed.), *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (pp. 37-66). Philadelphia: Benjamins.
- Carlson, J. S., Burn, B. B., Useem, J., & Yachimowicz, D. (1990). *Study abroad: The experience of American undergraduates*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Chapelle, C., & Roberts, C. (1986). Ambiguity tolerance and field independence as predictors of proficiency in English as a second language. *Language Learning*, 36(1), 27-45.
- Chieffo, L. P., & Zipser, R. A. (2001). Integrating study abroad into the foreign language curriculum. *ADFL Bulletin*, 32(3), 79-85.
- Coffey, A., & Atkinson P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data. Complementary research strategies*. London, New Delhi: Sage Publications Inc., Thousand Oaks.
- Collentine, J., & Freed, B. F. (2004). Learning context and its effects on second language acquisition: Introduction. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26(02), 153-171.

- Cook, V. (2002). Background to the L2 user. In V. Cook (Ed.), *Portraits of the L2 user* (pp. 327–343). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Cotterall, S. (1995). Readiness for autonomy: Investigating learner beliefs. *System*, 23(2), 195-205.
- Cotterall, S. (2008). Autonomy and good language learners. In C. Griffiths (Ed.), *Lessons from good language learners* (pp. 110-120). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cubillos, J. H., Chieffo, L., & Fan, C. (2008). The impact of short-term study abroad programs on L2 listening comprehension skills. *Foreign Language Annals*, 41(1), 157-186.
- Cubillos, J. H., & Ilvento, T. (2012). The impact of study abroad on students' self-efficacy perceptions. *Foreign Language Annals*, 45(4), 494-511.
- Davidson, D. E. (2007). Study abroad and outcomes measurements: The case of Russian. *The Modern Language Journal*, 91(2), 276-280.
- Davidson, D. E. (2010). Study abroad: When, how long, and with what results? New data from the Russian front. *Foreign Language Annals*, 43(1), 6-26.
- DeKeyser, R. M. (1991). Foreign language development during a semester abroad. In B. Freed (Ed.), *Foreign language acquisition and the classroom* (pp. 104-118). Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company.
- Dewaele, J. M. (2004). The acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in French as a foreign language: An overview. *Journal of French Language Studies*, 14(3), 301-319.

- Dewey, D. P., Belnap, R. K., & Hillstrom, R. (2013). Social network development, language use, and language acquisition during study abroad: Arabic language learners' perspectives. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 22, 84–110.
- Dewey, D. P., Ring, S., Gardner, D., & Belnap, R. K. (2013). Social network formation and development during study abroad in the Middle East. *System*, 41(2), 269-282.
- Dörnyei, Z. (1994). Motivation and motivating in the foreign language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78(3), 273-284.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Csizér, K. (1998). Ten commandments for motivating language learners: Results of an empirical study. *Language Teaching Research*, 2(3), 203-229.
- Esterberg, K. G. (2002). *Qualitative methods in social research*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Flowerdew, J., & Miller, L. (2008). Social structure and individual agency in second language learning: Evidence from three life histories. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 5(4), 201-224.
- Freed, B. F. (Ed.). (1995). *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context*. Philadelphia: Benjamins.
- Freed, B. F. (1998). An overview of issues and research in language learning in a study abroad setting. *Frontiers*. 4(2), 31-60
- Freed, B. F., Segalowitz, N., & Dewey, D. P. (2004). Context of learning and second language fluency in French: Comparing regular classroom, study abroad, and intensive domestic immersion programs. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26(02), 275-301.
- Fraser, C. (2002). Study abroad: An attempt to measure the gains. *German as a Foreign Language Journal*, 1, 45-65. Retrieved from <http://www.gfl-journal.de/1-2002/fraser.html>

- Gan, Z. (2009). 'Asian learners' re-examined: An empirical study of language learning attitudes, strategies and motivation among mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 30(1), 41-58.
- Gardner, R. C., & MacIntyre, P. D. (1993). A student's contributions to second-language learning. Part II: Affective variables. *Language Teaching*, 26(01), 1-11.
- Gibson, J. J. (1977). The theory of affordances. In R. Shaw & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Perceiving, acting, and knowing: Toward an ecological psychology* (pp. 67– 82). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Gillette, B. (1994). The role of learner goals in L2 success. In J. P. Lantolf & G. Appel (Eds.), *Vygotskian approaches to second language research* (pp. 195–213). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ginsberg, R. B., & Miller, L. (2000). What do they do? Activities of students during study abroad. In R. Lambert & E. Shohamy (Eds.), *Language policy and pedagogy: Essays in honor of A. Ronald Walton* (pp. 237-261). Philadelphia, John Benjamin Publishing Company.
- Glaser, B. G. (1964). Constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *The Social Problems*, 12, 436-445.
- Golonka, E. M. (2006). Predictors revised: Linguistic knowledge and metalinguistic awareness in second language gain in Russian. *The Modern Language Journal*, 90(4), 496-505.
- Graham, S. (2006). A study of students' metacognitive beliefs about foreign language study and their impact on learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 39(2), 296-309.
- Griffiths, C. (Ed.). (2008). *Lessons from good language learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Horwitz, E.K. (1987). Surveying student beliefs about language learning. In A. L Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learner strategies in language learning* (pp.119-129). London: Prentice Hall.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1988). The beliefs about language learning of beginning university foreign language students. *The Modern Language Journal*, 72(3), 283-294.
- Huebner, T. (1998). Methodological considerations in data collection for language learning in a study abroad context. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 4(2), 1-30.
- Hwang, C. C. (2005). Effective EFL education through popular authentic materials. *Asian EFL Journal*, 7(1), 90-101.
- Ife, A. (2000). Language learning and residence abroad: how self-directed are students? *Language Learning Journal*, 22(1), 30-37.
- Institute of International Education. (2013). Open doors report on international educational exchange. Retrieved from <http://www.iie.org/opendoors>
- Isabelli, C. (2003). Development of oral communication skills abroad. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 9, 149-174.
- Isabelli-García, C. L. (2006). Study abroad social networks, motivation, and attitudes: implications for second language acquisition. In M. A. Dufon & E. Churchill (Eds.), *Language learners in study abroad contexts* (pp. 231-258). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Jackson, J. (2006). Ethnographic pedagogy and evaluation in short-term study abroad. In M. Byram & A. Fong (Eds.), *Living and studying abroad: Research and practice* (pp. 134-156). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

- Juhasz, A.M., & Walker, A.M. (1988). The impact of study abroad on university students' self-esteem and self-efficacy. *College Student Journal*, 22(4), 329-341.
- Kinging, C. (2004). Alice doesn't live here anymore: Foreign language learning as identity (re)construction. In A. Pavlenko & A. Blackledge (Eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (pp. 219-242). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Kinging, C. (2008). Language learning in study abroad: Case studies of Americans in France. *The Modern Language Journal*, 92(s1), 1-124.
- Kitsantas, A. (2004). Studying abroad: The role of college students' goals on the development of cross-cultural skills and global understanding. *College Student Journal*, 38(3), 441-452.
- Kitsantas, A., & Meyers, J. (2001). *Studying abroad: Does it enhance college student cross-cultural awareness?* Educational Resources Information Center, ED 456 648. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED456648.pdf>
- Kline, R. R. (1998). Literacy and language learning in a study abroad context. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 4(2), 139-65.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy: Definitions, issues and problems*. Authentik: Language Learning Resources Limited.
- Little, D. (2008). Knowledge about language and learner autonomy. In J. Cenoz & N. H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education: Knowledge about language* (pp. 247-258). New York: Springer.
- Lafford, B. A. (1995). Getting into, through and out of a survival situation: A comparison of communicative strategies used by students studying Spanish abroad and "at home." In B. Freed (Ed.), *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (pp. 97-121). Amsterdam: Benjamins.

- Lafford, B. A. (2004). The effect of the context of learning on the use of communication strategies by learners of Spanish as a second language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26(02), 201-225.
- Liskin-Gasparro, J., Wunnava, P., & Henry, K. (1991). *The effect of intensive-immersive conditions on the acquisition and development of oral proficiency in Spanish and Russian*. Middlebury, VT: Middlebury College Language Schools.
- Macaro, E. (1997). *Target language, collaborative learning and autonomy*. Clevedon: Multilingual matters.
- Macaro, E. (2001). *Learning strategies in foreign and second language classrooms*. London: Continuum.
- MacIntyre, P. D. (1999). Language anxiety: A review of the research for language teachers. In D. J. Young (Ed.), *Affect in foreign language and second language learning: A practical guide to creating a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere* (pp. 24-45). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Mackey, A., & Gass, S. M. (2005). *Second language research: Methodology and design*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Magnan, S. S., & Back, M. (2007). Social interaction and linguistic gain during study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals*, 40(1), 43-61.
- Merriam, S. (1995). What can you tell from an *N* of 1? Issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 4, 51-60.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

- Martinsen, R. A., Baker, W., Dewey, D. P., Bown, J., & Johnson, C. (2010). Exploring diverse settings for language acquisition and use: Comparing study abroad, service learning abroad, and foreign language housing. *Applied Language Learning*, 20(1-2), 45-69.
- Maxim H. H., II. (2002). A study into the feasibility and effects of reading extended authentic discourse in the beginning German language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(1), 20-35.
- Mendelson, V.G. (2004). "Hindsight is 20/20." Student perceptions of language learning and the study abroad experience. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 10, 43-63.
- Meredith, R. (1990). The oral proficiency interview in real life: Sharpening the scale. *The Modern Language Journal*, 74(3), 288-296.
- Miller, L., & Ginsberg, R.B. (1995). Folklinguistic theories of language learning. In B. F. Freed (Ed.), *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (pp. 294-315). Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- McClelland, N. (2000). Goal orientations in Japanese college students learning EFL. In S. Cornwell & P. Robinson (Eds.), *Individual differences in foreign language learning: Effects of aptitude, intelligence, and motivation* (pp. 99-115). Tokyo: Japanese Association for Language Teaching.
- Naiman, N., Frohlich, M., Stern, H. H., & Todesco, A. (1978). *The good language learner*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Naiman, N., Frohlich, M., & Todesco, A. (1975). The good second language learners. *Tesl Talk*, 6, 58-75.

- Norton, B. (1997). Language, identity, and the ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(3), 409-429.
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. London: Longman: Pearson Education.
- Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2001). Changing perspectives on good language learners. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(2), 307-322.
- Paige, R. M., Cohen, A. D., Kappler, B., Chi, J. C., & Lassegard, J. P. (2002). *Maximizing study abroad: A students' guide to strategies for language and culture learning and use*. Minneapolis, MN: Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, University of Minnesota.
- Pajares, F., & Schunk, D. H. (2002). Self and self-belief in psychology and education: A historical perspective. In J. Aronson (Ed.), *Improving academic achievement: Impact of psychological factors on education* (pp. 3–21). San Diego, CA: Academic.
- Patton, Q. M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. (2nd Ed.). London, New Delhi: Sage Publications Inc, Newsbury Park
- Pellegrino, V. A. (1998). Student perspectives on language learning in a study abroad context. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 4(2), 91-120.
- Pellegrino V. A. (2005) *Study abroad and second language use: Constructing the self*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Rees, J., & Klapper, J. (2007). Analysing and evaluating the linguistic benefit of residence abroad for UK foreign language students. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 32(3), 331-353.

- Reid, J. M. (1987). The learning style preferences of ESL students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(1), 87-111.
- Reinders, H., & White, C. (2011). Special issue commentary: Learner autonomy and new learning environments. *About Language Learning & Technology*, 15(3), 1.
- Richards, J. C., & Lockhart, C. (1995). *Reflective teaching in second language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Riley, P. (1997). The guru and the conjurer: aspects of counseling for self-access. In P. Benson & P. Volle (Eds.), *Autonomy and independence in language learning* (pp. 114-131). New York: Longman.
- Rivers, W. P. (1998). Is being there enough? The effects of homestay placements on language gain during study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals*, 31(4), 492-500.
- Rowell, L. V., & Libben, G. (1994). The sound of one hand clapping: How to succeed in independent language learning. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 50(4), 668-687.
- Rubin, J. (1975). 'What the "Good Language Learner" can teach us'. *TESOL Quarterly*, 9(1), 41-51.
- Rubin, J., Thompson, I., & Sun, H. (1982). *How to be a more successful language learner*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Segalowitz, N., & Freed, B. F. (2004). Context, contact, and cognition in oral fluency acquisition: Learning Spanish in at home and study abroad contexts. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26(02), 173-199.
- Segalowitz, N., Freed, B., Collentine, J., Lafford, B., Lazar, N., & Díaz-Campos, M. (2004). A comparison of Spanish second language acquisition in two different learning contexts:

- study abroad and the domestic classroom. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 10, 1-18.
- Simoes, A. (1996). Phonetics in second language acquisition: An acoustic study of fluency in adult learners of Spanish. *Hispania*, 79, 87-95
- Stern, H. H. (1975). What can we learn from the good language learner? *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 31(4), 304-318.
- Toohy, K. & Norton, B. (2003). Learner autonomy as agency in sociocultural settings. In D. Palfreyman & R.C. Smith (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language education perspectives* (pp. 58-72). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Twombly, S. B. (1995). "Piropos" and friendships: Gender and culture clash in study abroad. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 1, 1-27.
- Ushioda, E. (2008). Motivation and good language learners. In C. Griffiths (Ed.), *Lessons from good language learners* (pp. 19-34). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- van Lier, L. (2000). From input to affordance: Social-interactive learning from an ecological perspective. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 245-259). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- van Lier, L. (2002). An ecological-semiotic perspective on language and linguistics. In C. Kramsch (Ed.), *Language acquisition and language socialization* (pp. 140-164). New York, NY: Continuum.
- van Lier, L. (2003). A tale of two computer classrooms: The ecology of project-based language learning. In J. Leather & J. van Dam (Eds.), *Ecology of language acquisition* (pp. 49-64). Dordrecht: Kluwer.

- van Lier, L. (2004). *The ecology and semiotics of language learning: A sociocultural perspective*. Norwell, Mass.: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- van Lier, L. (2007). Action-based teaching, autonomy and identity. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching, 1*(1), 46-65.
- van Lier, L.(2008). Agency in the classroom. In J. P. Lantolf & M. E. Poehner (Eds.), *Sociocultural theory and the teaching of second languages* (pp.163–186). London: Equinox.
- Walsh, R. (1994). The year abroad: A linguistic challenge. *Teanga, 14*, 48-57.
- Weyers, J. R. (1999). The effect of authentic video on communicative competence. *The Modern Language Journal, 83*(3), 339-349.
- White, C. (1999). Expectations and emergent beliefs of self-instructed language learners. *System, 27*(4), 443-457.
- White, C. (2008). Beliefs and good language learners. In C. Griffiths (Ed.), *Lessons from good language learners* (pp. 121-130). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenden, A. L. (1986). What do second-language learners know about their language learning? A second look at retrospective accounts. *Applied Linguistics, 7*(2), 186-205.
- Wenden, A. (1987). 'How to be a successful language learner: Insights and prescriptions from L2 learners'. In A. Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learner strategies in language learning* (pp. 103-117). London: Prentice Hall.
- Wilkinson, S. (1998). On the nature of immersion during study abroad: Some participant perspectives. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 4*(2), 121-38.
- Wilkinson, S. (2000). Emerging questions about study abroad. *ADFL Bulletin, 32*(1), 36-41.

- Wilkinson, S. (2002). The omnipresent classroom during summer study abroad: American students in conversation with their French hosts. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(2), 157-173.
- Wilkinson, S. (2005). Articulating study abroad: The depth dimension. In C. M. Barrette & K. Paesani (Eds.), *Language program articulation: Developing a theoretical foundation. Issues in language program direction: A series of annual volumes* (pp. 44-58). Boston: Thomson Heinle.
- Whitworth, K. F. (2006). *Access to language learning during study abroad: The roles of identity and subject positioning* (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation). The Pennsylvania State University. Retrieved from: etda.libraries.psu.edu
- Yager, K. (1998). Learning Spanish in Mexico: The effect of informal contact and student attitudes on language gain. *Hispania*, 81(4), 898-913.
- Yang N.D. (1992). *Second language learner's beliefs about language learning and their use of learning strategies: A study of college students of English in Taiwan*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of Texas, Austin, TX.
- Yang, N. D. (1999). The relationship between EFL learners' beliefs and learning strategy use. *System*, 27(4), 515-535.
- Zimmerman, B. J., Bandura, A., & Martinez-Pons, M. (1992). Self-motivation for academic attainment: The role of self-efficacy beliefs and personal goal setting. *American Educational Research Journal*, 29(3), 663-676.

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Introduction

This study is being conducted by Olga Ookhara, a graduate student at Brigham Young University, under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Bown. The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of successful SA students and to determine what factors help learners contribute to their language learning. You are being asked to participate in this study because you were participating in a study abroad program.

Procedures

As a participant, you will be asked to answer some questions about your study abroad experience. This interview was designed to be approximately an hour to in length. Also, if there are any questions you do not feel comfortable answering, feel free to indicate this and we will move on to the next question. You are also being asked for permission to allow the researcher to use results from the Oral proficiency Interview.

Risks

There are minimal risks or discomforts associated with participating in this research project. By disclosing interviews, you are giving the researchers access to all information you included in those items.

Benefits

No direct benefits are associated with this project. However, it is hoped that through your participation researchers will learn more about how students perceive their study abroad experiences and what factors help them to improve their oral proficiency skills.

Confidentiality

Your performance in this research project will be kept completely confidential. In other words, once collected, all of your information will be referred to only by made-up name (pseudonym). Any publications or presentations involving your results will *not* contain your real name.

Participation

While your participation in this study is greatly appreciated, you are not obligated to participate in this study and may withdraw at any time.

Questions about the Research

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact the researchers, Olga Ookhara (olyaisprobably@gmail.com, 801-358-1274), and Dr. Jennifer Bown (jennifer_bown@byu.edu).

Questions about your Rights as Research Participants

You may also contact the IRB Administrator, A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 84602; phone, 801-422-1461, irb@byu.edu, if you have any questions or concerns. I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

I agree to allow the researchers to use test scores as described above.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

I agree to participate in one 60-minute interview. I understand that the interview will be audiorecorded and transcribed and allow you to use quotations from my interview. I am aware that my name will never be used in association with any quotes that you use from my interview.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B: Interview Questions

General questions

1. Why do you want to study Russian?
2. How long have you been studying Russian?
3. What other languages do you know? In what aspect knowledge of other languages was helpful?

In general, how would you describe yourself as a student?

Study abroad

1. What were your language goals and expectations from SA? Do you think you reached those goals? Why or Why not?
2. What do you think about your OPI scores?
3. Tell me about your schedule in Russia.
4. Based on your experience, what do you perceive as the most important aspect of language acquisition? For example, are any of the following skills more important than another: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or fluency in speaking? If so, why?
5. Some people believe that language learning occurs only under certain circumstances (interaction with native speakers, presence of formal classroom instruction, etc.). What do you believe?
6. What do you think helped you to develop your language skills the most? Be specific.
7. How much did you use the internet, dictionaries, and/or other reference materials during your study abroad experience?
8. Can you assign a percentage value to each language resource in relation to how helpful it was to your overall language learning?

Social Networks

1. How did you find opportunities to speak the target language?
2. What percentage of your time was spent interacting with native speakers? Americans? How sustained were your conversations with NSs?
3. How much of an influence did the native population have on the development of your language skills? Why?

4. Was it common for native speakers to correct your mistakes? If so, how did you react to these corrections?

Frustrations

1. What aspects of culture were the most frustrating? Why?

Suggestions for future SA students

1. If you were to go to study abroad again, what would you do differently in terms of language study? Why?
2. What are your suggestions in terms of language learning for future SA students?