



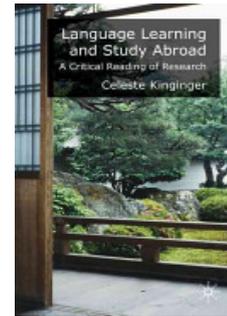
## Book Review

# Language Learning and Study Abroad: A Critical Reading of the Research

by Celeste Kinginger

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This volume reviews over 300 different studies on study abroad (SA) in a coherent, accessible way. It highlights the respective merits and demerits of a wide range of French and English language SA research. Moreover, this 248-page work can be appreciated both as an introductory text for applied linguistic majors as well as a resource for those attempting to do SA research. Three broad themes are discussed in the six chapters of this book. Each is briefly summarized.

## Language Learning Theory

To meaningfully interpret any claims about the linguistic merits of study abroad, it is important to have some idea about how language learning occurs in general. Although this book does not offer a comprehensive language acquisition theory, it does underscore the importance of socio-cultural factors in language learning. Kinginger reminds us that language is not an "individually owned" product, but it also includes our relation to a community and the embodied experiences of being a specific individual with gender, social class, nationality, and race. The author elucidates how these factors interface with linguistic experiences by stating, ". . . language learning is as much a process of socialization as it is of acquisition. . . . [it] involves more than the accumulation of competence in some sense owned by individuals: it is one aspect of the larger process of becoming a person in society" (p. 156). Diverse ways that SA participants may be positioned in their host countries are described. Some of these ways can foster genuine language development and integration within a given community. However, the possibility that SA participants might be isolated, minimized, and made incompetent is also acknowledged. Citing the experience of some JSL learners in Japan, the author notes how, "Language learners may be positioned in undesirable ways, as strange and fundamentally incompetent *gaijin*, or as homestay family pets. That is, interactions with host families may foster students' strategic *incompetence* as language users" (p. 202).

## Study Abroad Research

The author notes how most SA research is dominated by a strong utilitarian streak: essentially it attempts to prove how effective a specific SA program is. Kinginger further comments on the tendency of many studies to emphasize only broad outcomes and global constructs such as "proficiency, fluency or pragmatic competence" (p. 38); studies often fail to specify many details about learners' dispositions towards learning a given language. On a positive note, a recent trend in SA research is towards more emphasis on particularity (van Lier, 2005) and movement away from generalizations is noted.

This text highlights how SA research, which is often driven by SLA theory, frequently yields puzzling results. Part of the reason may be that a good deal of SA research is ridden with design flaws. For example, most studies involve small convenience samples and/or dubious coding procedures. Criticizing the over-reliance of discourse completion tasks in speech act analysis, a call for more "process-oriented scrutiny of language learners' routine interactions in study abroad situations" (p. 90) is made. Despite the limitations of many studies, the frequently mixed results,



and indeed the almost total lack of research in some crucial areas, Kinginger asserts that study abroad is "a valuable, if imperfect" (p. 100) way to develop communicative competence.

For those planning SA research, this book offers many cautionary tales. For example, the author points how many SA studies lack ecological validity because the instrument used to measure a given skill may be operationalized in ways that do not accurately measure that skill. Global listening comprehension, for instance, is often operationalized as scores on a multiple-choice listening test. Moreover, the fact that "students are tested on their ability to carry out formal tasks using standard language normally characterized by academic register" (p. 61) rather than natural language as it often occurs is an ongoing concern.

Readers are reminded to stay skeptical about existing SA research. Kinginger also argues for more combined method studies that take into account the emic perspective of informants, yet with methodological rigor. Finally, she advocates the use of an ethnographic and qualitative approach to SA that is both "more holistic and more particularistic" (p. 153) than standard approaches currently used.

### Study Abroad Results

We are astutely reminded that just because students are in an SA program it does not mean that they will position themselves as second language learners: many prefer the comfort of maintaining familiar L1 interactions even while abroad. For this reason Kinginger cautions that SA should not be regarded as a panacea to address the needs of all language learners.

With this proviso, ways that previous studies have attempted to ascertain the effect of SA on various language skills are described. Where SA's impact appears most salient is in domains related to social interaction. In particular, pragmatic fluency and approximation of native speaker sociolinguistic norms tend to increase as a consequence of SA. Persons who have engaged in a long-term SA generally have better speech act repertoires and register sensitivity.

Towards the end of the book, a possible erosion of SA benefits is discussed in light of increasing trends towards globalization, prominence of English as a lingua franca, and the spread of Internet technologies. With consternation the author points out how some students "remain attached to their communities of origin through their electronic umbilical cord of computer-mediated communication" (p. 149) while overseas. She also notes the tendency of some SA programs to become commercialized, packaged "entertainment and shopping experience[s]" (p. 218). Though many good reasons for questioning the claims made in a lot of SA promotional literature are given, the author expresses a tentative faith in the potential value of SA.

### The Bottom Line

Kinginger's book is probably the best summary of SA research in English since Freed's *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (1995) came out. This book covers some of the themes raised in Block's *Second language identities* (2007) as well as Regan, Howard, and Leme's *The Acquisition of Sociolinguistic Competence in a Study Abroad Context* (2009), but fortunately it offers a wider focus than both of those books.

One nice thing about this text is how Kinginger debunks several misconceptions about study abroad. For example, she refutes the notion that foreign language learning during SA is "an inevitable, effortless, osmotic process" (p. 114). The author also underscores how language learning is in many ways a deliberate act that involves conscious investment, rather than a passive process in which one soaks up surrounding information like a brainless sponge.



The main weakness of this work is that it relies on some studies that are not well designed. As a result, the conclusions that can be drawn are limited. Kinginger acknowledges this, and this limitation is by no means her fault. Another criticism that could be made of this book is that it uses the term "study abroad" too broadly. This problem could have been rectified if the author adopted Engle and Engle's (2003) detailed classification of the variety of SA programs. A final qualm is that although this text does a good job of describing American, Western European, and Japanese SA research, other contexts are under-represented. Since Chinese and South Korean SA students outnumber Japanese SA students globally, hopefully a future edition of this book will provide more information about SA studies in other countries throughout Asia and the Middle East.

Despite these shortcomings, the book belongs on the desk of every SA researcher. I am looking forward to a revised edition incorporating newer SA research in a decade or so.

-Reviewed by Tim Newfields

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