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0521827663 - Study Abroad and Second Language Use: Constructing the Self

Valerie A. Pellegrino Aveni

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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A number of years ago, I traveled abroad and became one of the thousands of students who leave their home every year to experience the world and, more specifically, to learn another language. I noticed then in myself and my peers what I have observed since in my students: an excitement and drive to mix with native speakers that vacillated regularly with a complete avoidance of speaking, at times for no apparent reason. Teachers and students have long believed in the powers of study abroad for second language education. The extensive authentic interaction with native speakers (NSs) that in-country living can provide cannot be duplicated in the classroom. As a result, students around the world spend millions of dollars annually on the study-abroad experience, and still billions more are invested in the development of self-directed language-learning programs, such as distance learning, individualized instructional programs, computer-assisted programs, and independent, unstructured travel. These learning experiences all have two things in common: each is designed to enhance and expedite the foreign language learning process, and each is primarily learner-directed. As efficient means of language education, these programs are designed to maximize communicative language-use opportunities in a culturally authentic (or approximately authentic) environment. As learner-directed programs, however, they typically lack the constant guidance and influence of a language professional and require great student initiative in spontaneous language use for communication.

Given the high cost of study abroad in time and money and the importance of authentic interaction in language acquisition,<sup>1</sup> it seems somewhat

<sup>1</sup> Language educators and students alike have long valued study abroad as an important resource in the development of second language skills. Researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) have reported that when students move from the domestic classroom setting to the pure immersion setting of study-abroad programs, their communication skills increase multifold. Charles Stansfield (1975), for example, reported that after only three and a half months in Mexico, students who began their study-abroad experience with zero proficiency in Spanish performed at a level comparable with students who studied four semesters of college-level Spanish. Similarly, John Carroll's (1967) study of 2,782 college language majors found that the two strongest variables affecting the students' listening scores were age at which they began studying the language and amount of time they spent studying abroad. Moreover, Barbara Freed (1995) reports

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counterintuitive that students would waste any of the opportunities to speak that they encounter during study abroad. Yet variability in language-use patterns is quite common among language learners not only in self-directed programs, but in traditional classrooms as well. This book presents a study, conducted in the second half of the 1990s, that examines the social and psychological factors that affect language learners' spontaneous use of a second language and the ways in which learners exploit and avoid spontaneous speaking opportunities. The study draws on the experiences and insights of actual language learners and finds that learners communicating in a second language are often unable to present to others an image of themselves that is accurate and acceptable. Instead, learners often report that due to imperfect language skills, the self-image that they produce during social interaction is significantly inferior to the image they would ideally like to produce or that they are capable of producing in their first language. As a result, learners often reject or reduce their interactions in the second language in order to maintain and protect an ideal self-image. This avoidance of language use ultimately reduces their opportunities for learning and growth and can even inhibit the learner from continuing language study.

### What is the purpose of this book?

The object of this book is twofold. First, this volume is designed to help readers become aware of the many barriers that learners experience when attempting to speak in a second language. As teachers, we encourage our learners to go abroad or make friends with native speakers, but we often do not adequately prepare them to deal with common social, psychological, and cultural barriers. In

qualitative changes in speakers' attributes following a period of study abroad. In her study, she noted that learners who had lived and studied abroad spoke more frequently and more quickly, experienced fewer dysfluent silent pauses and dysfluencies in general, had longer uninterrupted or fluent speech runs, and typically attempted linguistic expressions of which they were not entirely certain, leading them to reformulate their speech and produce more false starts than those students who had not studied abroad (142–43).

The authentic language-use experience afforded by study abroad may play an essential role in the development of L2 proficiency for the majority of learners of Russian who wish to acquire Russian to a level at which they may function professionally or personally. Richard Brecht (Brecht, Caemmerer, and Walter 1995) of the National Foreign Language Center writes, "The American Council of Teachers of Russian, National Foreign Language Center, and Educational Testing Service data . . . clearly indicate that the overwhelming number of native English speakers who study Russian exclusively within the educational system in this country cannot get enough 'time-on-task' to bring them even to a minimal level of functional proficiency: level 2 on the FSI/ILR scale and Advanced on the ACTFL" (106). Study abroad is an educational goal for many learners of other languages. The accelerated and qualitatively distinctive language acquisition demonstrated by learners immersed in the in-country environment has confirmed in the minds of those interested in language learning that study abroad is essential for mastery of a second language. See also Chapter 1, note 1, for more information.

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many ways, the problems presented here are intuitively familiar to anyone who has studied a language independently, particularly during study abroad. Astute teachers will also recognize many of these issues in their classroom students. Yet the in-depth data analyses presented here identify and illustrate issues that are not easily articulated, provide a framework by which to understand them, and suggest possible solutions for overcoming these barriers. By analyzing and understanding the spontaneous language-use phenomenon, it is possible to address those inhibiting factors while empowering learners to maximize the interactive experience.

The second goal of this book is to introduce a research project that is in many ways novel for the fields of second language acquisition (SLA) and language pedagogy. First, the majority of studies to date deal primarily with the acquisition of a second language (L2) rather than its communicative use. This study operates instead on the principle that language acquisition depends, in part, on the extensive communicative use of the language during interaction. Therefore, the study does not look at learners' levels of oral proficiency or grammatical knowledge but rather investigates the ways in which learners *use* the language they *do* have during interactions. Second, issues of self-presentation and self-preservation have yet to be explored in any depth in the field of SLA. This work introduces research on the construction of the self and communication theory from the fields of clinical, developmental, and experimental psychology, as well as sociology and social psychology. Finally, the research method used in this study, Grounded Theory Methodology (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998), has been used extensively in the fields of social psychology, sociology, and medicine but has been used little in studies of SLA. Through close and rigorous analysis of extensive narrative data, the resulting theory is firmly grounded in the data themselves. Thus, the copious diary entries and interview excerpts presented in this work both provide the basis for the research findings and illustrate those findings, making the theories easily understandable and immediately applicable.

While this book attempts to incorporate literature and theories from a wide range of disciplines, it is important to note one vital area that is not addressed here, that is, the topic of individual learner differences, in particular, learning styles. Without a doubt, cognitive style, environmental preferences, sensory preferences, and personality, as well as ego boundaries, tolerance for ambiguity, and other commonly studied individual differences play a vital role in the individual's construction of the self and concurrent L2 use. Unfortunately, the scope of this book has been restricted to general trends among learners due to the limitations of space. It is my fervent wish, however, that the ideas presented here will garner further attention with the added consideration of the individual learner's needs and preferences.

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**Who should read this book?**

The issues explored here are of concern not only to language professionals in self-directed language-learning programs, but also to classroom teachers and students of language and culture. Given the popularity of communicative language teaching in the contemporary classroom, the identification of barriers affecting communicative language use will be of interest to language teachers and program administrators. For those who work with study-abroad programs, knowledge of the factors affecting spontaneous language use may impact on programmatic structure, student orientation, and teacher and host-family training. Given the extensive use of authentic diaries and interviews, this book is accessible to both practitioners and students alike. The real-life illustrations and analytical discussions provide learners with practical suggestions for developing communicative and intercultural competence. Whether participating on a formal study-abroad program or traveling independently, foreign language students of all levels may find this book to be a helpful and interesting guide.

**How is this book structured?**

The book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter, “Language use in a social context,” introduces the reader to the concept of self-presentation through social interaction. Humans use language for many reasons, including communication of thoughts, recording of events, and the establishment of relationships. Yet language plays an even more significant social role for the individual. It is through the use of language that we create and develop our own self-image and convey our personality to others. With imperfect command of a new language, learners’ ability to reveal their true thoughts and identity becomes severely impaired. A paradoxical conflict results in that the language learner wishes to create and maintain an ideal sense of self in the second language, yet the very act of language use threatens that image. Chapter 1 explores this conflict further and investigates the reasons why learners, given this potential conflict, choose to use the second language at all. Thus, the chapter looks as well at learners’ communicative goals in the second language.

Chapter 2, “The social dance: second language use and the construction of self,” further explores the presentation of the self in social L2 interactions. Learners interacting in the target language (TL) look to protect their *sense of security* (i.e., their self-image) along two social scales: the scale of social hierarchy and the scale of social distance. Within the scale of social hierarchy, learners seek to present a self-image that guarantees them a degree of relative social *status* and *control* during interactions. On the social-distance scale, learners create a self-image that helps them feel accepted and *validated* by their communicative partners and *safe* in their social interactions.

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Chapter 3, “Learners and their environment factors: affecting self-construction,” investigates factors that may affect learners’ self-presentation. These factors include social-environmental factors (such as caretakers’ behavior, attitudes, and personal characteristics, including age, gender, and physical appearance)<sup>2</sup> and learner-internal factors (such as learners’ own attitudes toward themselves, the L2, and the language-learning environment, and their ability to predict the potential outcome of communicative interactions). Finally, the chapter addresses how these factors interact and how they affect learners’ L2 use.

Chapter 4, “Coming into our own: the convergence of real self and ideal self,” highlights the ways in which learners address the presentation of the self in the second language and overcome barriers to their second language use. As learners spend longer amounts of time immersed in the learning environment, they naturally begin to develop strategies to deal with the problems of creating the self-image. Some of these strategies incorporate greater amounts of second language use, while others cause learners to withdraw from speaking. Thus, this chapter explores the problems of “fight” and “flight” behavior in self-presentation in the second language and considers the development of self-presentation and preservation strategies.

The conclusion addresses the importance of the construction of the self for second language acquisition research and practice. The development of communicative and intercultural competence for the benefit of improved self-construction and language use plays a central role, and practical suggestions for improving self-presentation and empathetic perceptions are offered. This section also revisits the use of qualitative research in this study, exploring the present and future roles of qualitative research methods in second language acquisition and language pedagogy.

### **Student voices: the participant profiles**

The experiences of actual study-abroad participants, gathered during their time in-country, play a central role in this work. In August, 1995, a group of 49 American students met in Washington, DC, to prepare to travel abroad. Nine academic-year students were getting ready to live in the Russian Federation for ten months, while the remaining 40 packed for a four-month semester program. In January, the academic-year students and five of the semester students remained and were joined by 27 new students. These 76 students made the decision to live in Russia in order to develop Russian language skills, to improve their knowledge of Russian culture and society, and to seek the life-changing personal exploration and development so inherent in the study-abroad experience.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of “caretakers,” see Chapter 2, note 2.

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These students were participants in a competitive international study-abroad program through the American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR). Each student was selected on the basis of her or his academic achievement, number of years of Russian study, and recommendations, among other criteria. Among the total 76 students, there were 54 women and 22 men, ranging in age from 18 to 29 with the majority (70 percent) falling within conventional college age of 18–21. All of the participants were enrolled in or were graduates of American universities, and 84 percent were undergraduates during the program. All of the students were American citizens with the exception of one student of Korean citizenship and one of Indonesian citizenship. The majority of participants (73 percent) were majoring in Russian or Slavic-related fields. Most students (80 percent) had only two or three years of college-level Russian before participating on the program, and 65 percent had not studied Russian in high school. Furthermore, 73 percent had never studied in the former Soviet Union before participating in this program and, therefore, were presumed to have no more than academic contact with native Russian speakers. All but two had reached a minimum of 1 on the pre-program Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI),<sup>3</sup> the highest pre-program score reaching 2+. Three of the academic-year participants did not complete the program, one leaving before the end of the first semester, the other two during the second semester.

During that year, all seventy-six students agreed to share their experiences with me through the use of narrative journals, interviews, and questionnaires in order to gain a better understanding of the study-abroad experience (see Appendix 1 for a detailed description of data collection and research techniques). The students were simply asked to describe their language-use experiences, both in and out of the classroom, while abroad. They were given some general guidelines to direct their thoughts but were not asked specifically about their “self” or “sense of security” in the second language. The thousands of pages of narrative diaries and hundreds of hours of interviews provided the foundation for the theory presented here. The data their words provided were extremely rich, as the students were tremendously candid in their stories. The insights of each student provide an invaluable perspective into the world of language acquisition in a culturally authentic environment.

The amount of data collected using the instruments described above is extensive and multifaceted. Therefore, a case-study approach provided an organizing principle and basis for selection of material within data sets. This book focuses in particular on the experiences of six young men and women: Camille, Jim, Madeline, Reanna, Bob, and Rebeccah. These six individuals were chosen according to two parameters. First, they were chosen according to their amount of participation in the project. Learners who provided a large amount

<sup>3</sup> For more on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines, see Liskin-Gasparro 1984, Clark and Clifford 1988.

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of information through multiple instruments and frequent interactions with the researcher were best suited as case studies because of the thoroughness of their cases. The extensive data sets on these individuals facilitated triangulation and enhanced researcher sensitivity to nuances in their individual behaviors. Second, case-study learners were selected to represent the demographics of the overall participant pool in an effort to help establish the potential generalizability of research findings to the larger group.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the six primary case studies, the reader will occasionally hear the voices of eleven other students. Their added stories enhance the color and depth of the findings and contribute to the general applicability of the theories. Before moving on to the chapters, the reader may wish to become more familiar with each of the participant profiles in Appendix 3. These descriptions provide considerable depth and insight into each personality and give background information that will provide a context for understanding the learners' experiences. To the extent that it has been possible, the students' words are presented exactly as they were recorded, including all hesitations, false starts, errors, even symbolic drawings. Furthermore, each student, including those mentioned by the diary authors, has been given a pseudonym to protect their identity.

The theories here are based on the experiences of a single group of American students studying in a particular country at a particular time. Naturally, detailed aspects particular to Russian and American cultures will remain specific to this group. However, the overarching experience of self-presentation in a second language and the maintenance of security (i.e., status, validation, safety, and control) in a second culture (C2) are, I believe, quite common for study-abroad students and many self-directed language learners.

### Final thoughts

The process of language study is like no other. To learn another language is to redefine yourself publicly, socially, and personally. No other topic of education so deeply affects the individual's own self-presentation in society. Yet, many universities require mastery of a foreign language for admission or graduation, businesses create international networks and demand proficiency from their employees, and students continue to sign up each year for courses in languages from Spanish to Arabic to Zulu. As you read the words of the seventeen students introduced here, listen to their voices and recall your own experiences in language learning. Many of us have "been there," but we didn't always know that others were there as well. By addressing these common, but often covert experiences, others may enter into language study even better prepared, self-assured and ready to speak.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 2 for complete group demographics.

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## 1 Language use in a social context

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The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.

Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

I just feel like a lot of times there are things I want to say, but I would rather say nothing than look stupid.

Jill, Fall Semester

What role does language play in a society? Is it merely a means of conveying messages from one person to the next, or is its role greater in scope and significance? It is upon the basis of sounds, symbols, and linguistic rules that we encode and catalogue our world, record meaning, and communicate information both within and between communities. Yet language is not only a primary means of human communication, but also a symbol of cultural and social unity and division, a fundamental mechanism of self-presentation and social identity, and it is simultaneously an instrument of power and a source of weakness for its users. All elements of language help define language users' image to those around them: not only the ideas that they express, but the words that they choose, the syntax of their sentences, the lilt of their intonation, and the precision of their pronunciation. Even beyond the content of the message, interlocutors look to their partner's speech to help define the individual; pronunciation and intonation suggest a person's heritage and the degree of his or her social refinement; lexical and grammatical proficiency point to levels of education, maturity, and even intelligence. Upon these factors, individuals amass social acceptance and power among their peers. Consider, for example, the caller who rings the university registrar to "inquire about the availability of funding for the coming academic year and the conditions of admission and enrollment," as opposed to one who calls to say, "yeah, I wanna know what I need to do to get in and get money." Regard the store clerk who greets his customers with a friendly, "Good afternoon! How may I help you?" as opposed to the one who barely

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glances at the customer with a surly “Yeah?” Who is immediately perceived to be more intelligent, educated, and refined, and who is more likely to make the sale and earn a customer’s loyalty? It is not only that “the clothes make the man,” but it is also the language that embodies the man’s wit, personality, and sophistication.

Speakers of multiple languages come to understand this phenomenon better than most. Second language learners, whose knowledge of cultural conventions and communication skills in the new language may be particularly novice, might find conversation partners responding to them in unexpected ways, such as simplifying and slowing their speech excessively or speaking more loudly, as if to compensate for a loss of hearing. Madeline Ehrman and Zóltan Dörnyei (1998) appreciate this point, writing, “language learning frequently entails new thought processes, identity, and values that can present a threat to learners” (184). For example, Mamie, one of the many students we will encounter here, relates the following experience:

The second day we did a whirlwind tour of the city but I soon got tired of her pointing things out to me and repeating everything 3 or 4 times like I was blind, deaf and stupid. I couldn’t enjoy anything because she just kept rattling on and treating me like I was five years old. Why do people always assume that if you are speaking with an accent that means you don’t understand and are slow and stupid too?

Stripped of the comfortable mastery of their first language and of cultural and societal adroitness, learners in immersion environments, such as study abroad, often report feeling as if those around them may perceive them to be unintelligent, lacking personality or humor, or as having the intellectual development of a small child. Accents, incorrect intonation, grammatical errors, and unsophisticated lexical choices, all a natural part of a developing linguistic system, contribute to this “inferior” presentation of the individual. As language learners and teachers, we understand the importance of authentic language use for successful second language acquisition.<sup>1</sup> By using this new language, however,

<sup>1</sup> Language education is a staple element of study-abroad programs, as noted by Jerry Carlson (1990), who wrote, “One of the primary objectives of study-abroad programs is the improvement of students’ foreign language skills” (43). Researchers in second language acquisition have begun to examine the nature of benefits that study abroad provides language learners and the process by which improvement in language skills occurs. Goodwin and Nacht (1988) note that “Mastery of a foreign language has traditionally been perceived as the most direct educational benefit of study abroad. A foreign language, say its advocates, is not merely a tool and a key to both scholarly inquiry and commercial success; it is also the main route to cultural understanding” (15). Study abroad provides a cultural context with which learners may associate the language and in which learners may develop their language skills. Moreover, study abroad offers learners innumerable opportunities to practice and learn to rely on their L2 skills, as Goodwin and Nacht note, “overseas the variety of linguistic opportunities is unlimited while the ‘need to know’ is everywhere around” (15). Concerning language-use opportunities, Brecht and Robinson (1995) write, “Indeed, the contribution of study abroad to significant language gains is commonly believed to derive from

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learners risk conveying an image of themselves to their conversational partners that is inferior to the self they may present in their first language (L1). With their intelligence, personality, and sense of control in jeopardy, students' language-use behavior can vary drastically from environment to environment. Consequently, language learners may resist learning because to do so means accepting gaps in their own knowledge and struggling with limitations on their own self-expression (Ehrman 1996). In this book, we will explore the question of second language use by learners living abroad, focusing on the social and psychological factors that affect learners' spontaneous use of a second language. Specifically, we will look at the role of the self and of social influence in learners' second language (L2) use. By examining the experiences of seventeen American college students living in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia, we will investigate how learners' personal sense of security in their self-presentation affects their language use, and how their sense of self develops through study abroad.

This chapter lays the groundwork for understanding the construction of the self in a second language and how that self-construction affects a learner's L2 use. First, we will explore what is meant by the "self," based on existing literature on the construction and presentation of the self-image in social interaction. We will consider the effects of culture and society in the development of the "self," and we will contemplate the distinction between the learner's "real" self and his or her "ideal" self. We will examine four areas in which learners must maintain a sense of security in order to construct the self in the L2, that is, through validation, safety, status, and control. Further, we will consider a new approach to the issue of anxiety in L2 use, specifically as it arises due to a loss of security and the derogation of the "real" self. Finally, this chapter explores the risks learners take when using the L2 and the goals they have for taking such risks. By understanding the risks and goals, the reader can better appreciate the difficult decision learners must make when deciding to speak or not to speak in

the numerous opportunities program participants have to engage in first-hand language practice on 'the street,' in restaurants, in shops, in the homes of native speaker friends and acquaintances as well as a variety of other out-of-class environments in which students find themselves while living in-country" (317). In fact, the increased and varied opportunities learners encounter for activating their language skills may be of the greatest value to students studying in the target language culture. The American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR) and the National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) found in their large-scale study of American students studying Russian in Moscow and St. Petersburg (Brecht and Robinson 1993) that students who made a measurable gain in oral proficiency from 1 to 1+ (according to the FSI oral proficiency scale) spent 25 percent more time speaking Russian only than those who made no measurable gain. Moreover, those who made a gain from 1 to 2 on the OPI scale spent 45 percent more time speaking only Russian than those students who demonstrated no gain in oral proficiency. This finding reveals a clear relationship of "time-on-task," that is, time spent using Russian, and gain in oral proficiency. Thus, study abroad provides for learners that which domestic classrooms cannot: intensive exposure to target language use, numerous and diverse opportunities to activate their L2 skills, and a certain demand to use the L2 for daily survival.