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Book review

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Dufon, M. A., & Churchill, E. (Eds.) (2006). *Language learners in study abroad contexts*. Tonawanda, NY: Multilingual Matters Ltd. 329 pp. ISBN 1853598518, \$54.00 (paperback)

Given recent cultural, political, and global shifts, scholars and universities across the United States and around the world have devoted increasing attention and resources to develop study abroad (SA) programs under the presumption that such programs result in acquisition of new languages and appreciation for different cultures, and in a unique and intensive immersion experience. SA participation among all U.S. students has increased nearly 150% over the last decade (Schemo, 2007), and 20% since 2001. About 200,000 U.S. students currently go abroad each year (Rubin & Sutton, 2007). Additionally, about 8% of all undergraduate degree recipients receive part of their education abroad (see also Allen, 2007; Connor-Linton, 2007).

In this edited volume, DuFon and Churchill have invited us to question whether SA is actually beneficial and effective, and whether it automatically provides language acquisition and total immersion no matter how long the program is and what its design features are. The book consists of a collection of nine research chapters embracing a plurality of theoretical perspectives, research designs, and methodological approaches. The nine chapters are organized in four main sections:

- I. The acquisition of pragmatic competence
- II. Interactions and socialization at dinner table
- III. The impact of SA environments on language learning
- IV. The influence of individual learner differences and program variables on second language acquisition.

### Introduction

In the introduction of the book the authors offered a detailed overview of the literature on SA in the four areas highlighted above. By doing so, they stressed why the nine research chapters included in the book are innovative and how they represent a significant contribution to the field of education and SA research. According to the authors, existing research indicates that studying

abroad is more beneficial than studying domestically in developing specific skills such as oral proficiency, conversational competence, and pragmatic use of language. Various studies have investigated the impact of duration of SA, the relationship between language learning and the nature of the host country language programs, and student language support for SA.

Even though it is assumed that SA will generate language acquisition and create a cultural immersion experience that is unlike any available at home, to date there has been little research on whether SA programs in fact provide such an experience, and if they do, whether it affects all students equally. In fact, Freed (1995) has argued that SA is a highly complex phenomenon. Students' experiences with, and exposure to, the target language and culture can vary enormously, and their interaction with native speakers is not always intense and frequent, which does not necessarily lead to total immersion and significant language gain.

### **Part one: The acquisition of pragmatic competence**

Part one of this volume includes two chapters on the acquisition of pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence in a study abroad context. In the first chapter, Hassall examined his own process of acquiring proficiency in leave-taking in Indonesia during a three-month sojourn, based on a rigorous analysis of his diary entries and language learning experience. In a similarly-themed quantitative study, Baron explored how 33 Irish students learned to say "you" in German using the two pronouns *du* and *Sie* after spending 14 months in Germany. The students participated in a free discourse completion task administered three times with intervals of seven months prior to, during, and at the end of the year abroad. Retrospective interviews were also part of data collection for this study. Both chapters touch on similar theoretical issues on second language acquisition (SLA) processes and the acquisition of pragmatic competence. The authors' results showed an improvement over time in the learners' ability to use leave-taking strategies and terms of address, respectively, although their competence did not become native-like.

### **Part two: Interaction and socialization at the dinner table**

In the first of three research chapters that comprise this section, Dufon used the language socialization framework discussed by Schieffelin and Ochs (see this volume) to investigate how five adult students during a semester abroad were socialized by their host family members in Indonesia into the Indonesian view of food and taste. Based on her analysis of audio- and videotaped dinner conversations, learner journals, and field notes, Dufon asserted that people approach food and taste very differently based on their own cultural background and ingrained first language patterns. In this study, SA students were not successfully socialized into how their Indonesian host families viewed food.

In the second chapter of part two, Cook used a similar theoretical framework and viewed language as a semiotic tool that has the power to shape and change the world. Within this framework, Cook microanalyzed 22 video- and audiotaped dinner conversations between eight adult students enrolled in a year-in-Japan program and their host families. She examined how they jointly and dynamically constructed, as well as mutually influenced and negotiated, folk beliefs at the dinner table. She concluded that both parties are socialized "into a discourse in which events are viewed using an interpretation convention that differs from their own" (p. 149).

The third chapter of part two continues with the topic of a bi-directional flow of linguistic and cultural resources, addressing the opportunities for mutual language learning as well as co-

construction of identity. In her micro-ethnography of social interaction, Iino examined the norms of interaction in a homestay setting in Japan, including what roles participants were expected to play. The author collected informal interviews, along with 30 naturally occurring videotaped conversations between Japanese SA learners and their host families during an eight-week intensive summer. These data revealed that both Japanese hosts and American guests experienced role confusions and at times identity conflicts, and that homestay can provide an opportunity space to negotiate and create a new environment as well as shape the holistic interpersonal relationship.

### **Part three: The impact of study abroad environments on language learning**

The two studies included in part three address the nature of meaning negotiation, modified output, and focus on form in both host family environment and classroom setting. In a mixed-method study, McMeekin used the concept of negotiation to discuss the data he collected from five Japanese students during a summer SA program. After analyzing audio- and videotaped interactions, interviews with teachers and host families, learners' journals, and weekly audiotaped group discussions, he concluded that students engaged in more meaning negotiation at home. In contrast, it was in class where they modified their output more significantly, and where they were exposed to less linguistic accommodation from the teachers.

Churchill also focused on instructional contexts and investigated how classroom dynamics impacted 39 Japanese high schoolers' competence during their month-long stay at three different schools in the US. The ethnographic method of data collection included participant journals, classroom observations, and informal interviews with learners and teachers. Churchill found that experiences varied significantly even within the same program, institution, and courses. Interestingly, cultural excursions and presentations had a negative impact on students, and turned out to be time-consuming and distracting, whereas the program presentation to both Japanese and US learners positively affected the whole students' experience and involvement.

### **Part four: Variables affecting second language acquisition**

The concluding two chapters addressed the influence of individual and program variables on SLA. In her mixed-methods study, Isabelli-García pointed out that SA can only translate into cross-cultural understanding, acknowledgment, and appreciation of cultural differences if participants are interested in establishing extensive connections with the native speakers, using the target language, immersing themselves into the host environment, participating in exchange initiatives (for example, help with English in exchange for help with Spanish), joining special interest groups and clubs (biking, soccer, or tennis clubs), or taking special courses (cooking, guitar, or art classes).

Isabelli-García drew these conclusions after collecting diaries, informal interviews, and oral proficiency interviews from four students living five months in Argentina. She argued that there was a strong connection between motivation and language gains in informal, out-of-class contact abroad, and immersion and integration within the host culture. The four SA participants in her study showed important individual differences as far as acculturation and acknowledgement of possible differences between native and host cultures. As the author explained, "[t]he difference in learner progress through these states of cultural awareness is

linked to their experiences, motivation, personalities and abilities to handle difficult situations” (p. 254). Two of the students preserved the feeling of hegemony of their native culture, maintained a negative behavior toward the host culture, and chose to interact mostly with Americans. In contrast, the other two students showed high motivation, established extensive connections with Argentines, and integrated themselves into the host social fabric, networks, and people of the target language. They recognized, understood, and accepted cultural differences after interacting and immersing themselves in the home culture. These two students also increased their language gains through scaffolding strategies and interventions designed to optimize their experience abroad.

In another chapter, Adams also touched on the role of program design features, students’ individual traits and attributes, and their impact on language learning strategy use and SLA. A significant amount of data were collected from a total of 86 US SA participants of various language levels studying in two- or four-month programs in the Dominican Republic, France, Brazil, Spain, and Austria. Participants completed the Strategic Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) and a two-part questionnaire on demographics and language use. Adams found that both specific program variables and increased language strategy use helped students and their SLA process.

### **Critical evaluation of the volume and future research on study abroad**

In this volume it is clear that, although quantitative studies have previously prevailed in the fields of education and SLA, qualitative research methods are gaining place, particularly in the SA environment where an interpretive approach seems to be most appropriate and effective to account for the complexity of the process of SLA abroad. This edited volume is a highly informative and thought-provoking work. It addresses both graduate students and scholars in the field of language education and study abroad research. It offers not only a thorough overview of the literature in the field but also a very carefully put-together selection of individual research chapters that complement each other well. The common thread in the book, and the overall message that the authors are communicating, is that SA is a very complex phenomenon for the multiplicity of variables involved in it, including program design features, nature of the host environment and community, students’ individual personality traits and attributes as well as group dynamics affecting the nature of the experience abroad. Keeping these ideas in mind, it is imperative to look at SA critically, to question whether it leads to actual acquisition and total immersion, and to examine what the real benefits and gains are.

As this edited volume witnesses, interest on SA is increasing and research orientations have broadened. However, there are still areas ripe for research. For example, there is a need to gain a deeper understanding of the notion of *immersion* abroad and what it means for a SA student to be immersed and integrated in another culture. Do different students have different criteria or thresholds before they feel they have had an immersion experience? What circumstances do students use as scaffolding to linguistic and cultural immersion? Could two different students experience the exact same program design features - e.g. homestay or residence hall setting - and one student lives it as an immersion experience while the other remains a guest or a tourist? What is the role of language proficiency in the degree of immersion abroad? Much cultural shock and acculturation research has focused on students’ individual personality traits affecting participants’ linguistic and immersion experience. What about contextual and social/interactional dynamics? To what extent do group dynamics influence

students' degree and nature of acquisition and immersion? In this context, a welcomed volume to DuFon and Churchill's series would include studies that can shed some light on the meaning that participants attribute to SA; on the political, legal, logistical, organizational, and financial aspects in SA programs that may facilitate or constrain acquisition and immersion; and on where SA programs fall down in providing significant opportunities to the students.

One thing is for sure: Education and academic training should incorporate greater multicultural and multilingual experiences to better prepare students for life in our globalized society, and to provide best practices and explicit service components to study abroad program directors. In the new millennium it is absolutely crucial to recognize the increasing value and political necessity of SA; to build SA into foreign language curricula; to analyze how SA programs address academic goals and challenge participant perspectives and practices; and to emphasize how they can help minority and low income students who might never get the chance to study and live an experience abroad.

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