The enigmatic topic of studying foreign languages in foreign countries has been studied and looked at for decades. Traditional beliefs hold that it is the fastest or best way to become fluent in a foreign language, or develop mastery of a new culture. Many researchers work off of this assumption that study abroad (hereafter SA) will enhance the language-learning process. Then they try to prove or disprove that assumption, that SA is the Mecca of language study.

Amuzie and Winke (2009) wrote, “Studying abroad offers a different level and type of language input, opportunities for interaction, and exposure to the target culture. Second language acquisition (SLA) scholars have investigated in depth how study-abroad changes learners’ interlanguage development and general proficiency.”

Several researchers have expressed beliefs that studying in foreign countries will grow in popularity, especially as the economy becomes more global.

They also look for specific predictors within that realm, such as measuring grammar, observing and rating oral fluency, writing skills, cultural attitudes, motivation, working memory, time spent speaking target language outside of class, the context of the SA program (whether traditional, service learning, or foreign-language housing), an application of virtual study abroad, the effect of social networking.

One study (Wilkinson 1998) looked at the phenomenon of spending time with one’s compatriots, and argues that it may actually be beneficial, if not necessary, for students to flock and talk together in order to process the new information.

Another study looked at the different types of errors in written translation to attempt to gain a better measurement of language acquisition (Tokowicz, Michael, and Kroll, 2004).
Many of the studies available are qualitative in nature. Wilkinson felt that it can be of particular value to learn from the student participant’s own perspective, rather than from third party researchers’ paradigms. If, as other researchers suggest, language truly is tied “inextricably” to culture, then perhaps observing how a SA participant thinks, talks, and interacts with the new culture and language can best be done by viewing through the student’s lens -- his own perceptions and reactions.

Certainly, SA lends itself to qualitative review, with questionnaires about attitude toward the target culture (hereafter C2), diaries, interviews, and self-reports of experiences had. There is also plenty of room for quantitative measurement, such as in Llanes and Muñoz’s (2009) study that measured time of delays and filled pauses, and in questionnaires wherein students rate their perceptions about culture or their own learning.

There are also quantitative measurements that cast light onto the problems and strengths, the prepared and the less-prepared SA students.

From the wide variety of measurements, programs, variables, places, languages, customs and cultures, contexts, locations, and plans, the one thing that everyone might agree upon is that the topic of studying abroad is complex, with many variables and factors influencing the course of a SA program.

While oral fluency and listening skills are often measured pre- and post-trip, (Cubillos, Chieffo, Fan, 2008). Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) saw a gap in studies about students’ improvement in their written skills. They even found, interestingly, that students made progress in their written fluency during their time abroad, even when no such elements were explicitly taught during their formal SA class time.
Researchers are also looking at the introduction and use of technology in SA programs. Many want to know whether and how using technology can help us learn and teach languages better – and if so, what can it do for a SA program?

Pertusa-Seva and Stewart (2000) wrote that little has been done to incorporate SA experiences into curriculum at home. To try out the pedagogical benefits that technology can bring in to the classroom, they conducted a study with virtual SA.

Through a website specifically created for their class’ study, students in Segovia, Spain, communicated and interacted with their peers back home at the University of Kentucky. What they found was that students benefitted on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. As part of a composition class, students at home got to follow and write about the experiences their friends were having. They got to ask questions of their counterparts in Segovia, who would then go find the answers and report back. “The Segovia website acted as a natural recruiter for those who stayed home: responses indicate that the opportunity for written exchanges with students living in Spain stimulated their interest in learning about the culture and the language.” Students also reported that the website helped them feel more “in touch”. The students who went to Segovia reported that they felt that the activities helped them improve their skills in written communication. Several students “indicated that they reflected more about their experiences and enjoyed a link with the Kentucky students who wanted to hear about what they were doing.”

The website (and the internet) increased the students’ access to culturally authentic materials, and increased the students’ interactions with each other, both inside and outside of class.
Hanna and de Nooy also found what may be considered side-benefits, if unintended. In a study where students learning English and students learning French interacted through a blog, “Laura and David got distracted from their French studies but ended up receiving lessons in French culture ... The respective successes and failures ... show us that the Internet forum can indeed be the site of invaluable [language] learning, but that it is not guaranteed.” (Hanna and de Nooy 2003).

**Duration: How long is good? How long does it last?**

Many SA programs last a year, or a semester. Llanes and Muñoz (2009) conducted a study on a stay of only three to four weeks, whereas most studies that have reported significant improvements dealt with longer periods. They measured improvement in terms of how many times per minute various indicators occurred, such as “syllables per minute, other-language word ratio, filled pauses per minute, silent pauses per minute, articulation rate, and length of the longest fluent run.” They found that even the short stay produced language gains in all areas studied: listening comprehension, oral fluency, and accuracy. This comes despite the students’ having spent a mean of five hours per day speaking L1. Llanes and Muñoz wrote, “The improvement is all the more remarkable given the fact that participants did not seem to have taken full advantage of the wide variety of opportunities that the stay abroad context may offer.”

Researchers from the Journal of Marketing Education (Clarke, Wright, and McMillen, 2009) found that “students who study abroad may have greater intercultural proficiency, increased openness to cultural diversity, and become more globally minded than those students
remaining in a traditional campus setting. Students who participate in SA programs perceive
themselves as being more proficient, approachable, and open to intercultural communication.”

The benefits accrued during the SA program are not fleeting; Dwyer and Peters (2004), as
quoted in Clarke et al, report that 94% of SA participants continue to be impacted by their
experience long after their time abroad.

**Pre-program proficiency a touchstone factor?**

Proficiency when a student starts SA is a factor that arose during several studies. Llanes
and Muñoz (2009) found that “proficiency level strongly affects the intensity of learners’
progress.” Furthermore, when they were able to “partial out” the age factor, it was shown that
the level of one’s proficiency has more to do with language gains than does age.

Specifically, participants with lower proficiency levels showed comparatively greater
gains in using L2 words, and in producing more accurate and fluent speech (Llanes and Muñoz
2009). This supports the notion from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign
Languages that language learning is like an inverted pyramid – or as this author prefers, an ice
cream cone: when filling a cone with ice cream, very little ice cream must be added initially to
produce a noticeable change. As the level nears the top, far more ice cream must be added in
order to make a noticeable difference.

However, Martinsen (2010) wrote, “A qualitative study by Brecht and Robinson (1993)
found that students with higher departure levels tended to spend more time speaking entirely in
Russian than did those at lower levels.” He further highlighted the seeming paradox of the pre-
tour skill level factor, using the conflicting analysis from a quantitative study by Brecht, Davidson and Ginsberg (1993), “which showed a strong and negative relationship between the pre-departure levels in all of the skills (reading, listening, and the OPI) with post-program levels in each measure.”

While students with a lower proficiency level made the greater vocabulary gains, students with a higher proficiency level made greater strides in cultural awareness.

Martinsen addressed the complex issue by comparing Brecht’s (1993) and Ginsberg’s (1992) findings, suggesting that “there could be a minimal level of proficiency at which learning abroad is optimal.”

Sunderman and Kroll (2009) also support the idea of a minimum threshold in their study about the role of working memory resources in lexical comprehension (for those who had or had not studied abroad): “Individuals who lack a certain threshold of resources are unable to benefit from the SA context in terms of being able to produce accurately in the L2. Conversely, individuals with greater working memory resources were better able to benefit from the SA experience.”

It has also been suggested that perhaps the more advanced learners are developing on other ways, which may not be the same as the ones being tested, or “in skills that are more difficult to quantify such as effectiveness in conveying the intended message (see Collentine, 2004, quoted in Llanes and Muñoz, 2009).”
Predicting Success

Martinsen (2010) sought to predict the factors that would lead to success in a SA program. Building upon work by Freed (1990, quoted in Yager, 1998), Martinsen wrote, “Freed’s study found that beginning students’ informal contact with Spanish speakers outside of class was positively related to improvement in grammar as measured by the College Entrance Examination Board test for Spanish. For advanced students in the same program, she found that non-interactive contact, such as reading or watching television in the target language was positively correlated with grammar improvement, but interactive contact bore no relationship to changes.”

Martinsen also looked at context as a factor. Among three groups; traditional study abroad, an immersion program, and a classroom group; participants in the immersion program made the greatest gains.

Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) wrote, “We would like to emphasise that our SA good language learners stand out from the rest because they actively practice their listening, reading, and writing skills, in addition to interacting with people and working” (emphasis retained).

Predicting Success: Social Networks

Isabelli-García (2006) discussed the importance that a student build social networks with native speakers. This can be difficult for participants, particularly during a short stay, but it
appears to be worth it: those who broke into an acquaintance’s circle of friends were more likely to develop more specialized vocabulary.

She wrote that, even when housed with host family, interaction does not always take place with the host family; relationships with new members must be built.

Some of Isabelli-García’s implications were that SA programs should carefully place students with host families, that programmers should be realistic about the goals they promise while recruiting students, and that they should tutor students in ways to create social networks. Program practitioners could also require students to give volunteer service, or to do some activity that requires interviewing various speakers during their stay abroad.

**Predicting Success: Motivation**

Isabelli-García’s chapter illustrated that “the type of motivation the learners had in learning the target language, the attitude they maintained toward the host culture, and the strength of their social networks were all connected.” She also showed that one’s motivation can change during one’s stay abroad. Her study confirmed that motivation is not a fixed trait, and that changes in motivation among students occur as a result of interactions or lack thereof, (Wilkinson, 2002).

Wilkinson looked at communication problems that came not from linguistic misunderstandings, but from cross-cultural differences.

Isabelli-García (2006) stated that various kinds of motivation orientations occur within the literature: integrative, resultative, instrumental, and intrinsic and extrinsic.
She wrote, “Without studies that focus on the interdependency of language acquisition, interaction, attitude and this complex notion of motivation, L2 researchers will not understand the effect that the learners’ perseverance to maintain social interaction has on their own language acquisition process.” She also expressed a need for “data that can empirically show parents, teacher, and learners the kinds of linguistic development that can be expected from spending a semester abroad, and the factors that influence this development.”

Wilkinson brought up an interesting notion regarding the tendency for students to flock together with their compatriots. Wilkinson concludes the learners’ process of adapting to foreign language (FL) and culture is not a linear progression. “Instead, the students’ perceptions and interpretations of the experiences, filtered through classroom-held beliefs, often led them to negative stereotyping of their hosts and to an increased tendency to congregate among themselves. (In one study, students were spending so much time together under one tree in a plaza that it came to be known as the “gringo tree”.) Based on students’ own reporting, Wilkinson contends that although there may be some truth to the perception that this was because of the participants’ laziness or lack of motivation, “Ironically, the data suggest that these seemingly counterproductive behaviors were actually a positive first step toward adaptation, the benefits of which could not be brought to fruition during such a short stay.”

**Unanswered questions, additional twist**

Could SA prove to be of any benefit to those studying “dead” languages? For example, let us suppose that someone went to Greece in hopes of learning more of ancient Greek. Surely
there must be some commonalities in the language, and some elements of culture to be better understood via a stay in modern Greece. According to a Greek-speaking returned missionary, modern Greek and ancient Greek are like Chaucer English and modern English. He felt he could read the Bible (written in a newer) Greek and at least be able to identify the verse, but that he would be unable to read anything that Homer wrote.

There is room for further research in the improvements on reading a writing as a result of SA experience. This author would like to see more about the use of wiki pages (online, multi-author, collaborative environments) to both enhance and link a SA class with a class at home. Here are links to two example pages: [http://ecceromani.pbworks.com/](http://ecceromani.pbworks.com/) and [http://wiki.dickinson.edu/index.php?title=Toulouse_Sudy_Abroad_Program](http://wiki.dickinson.edu/index.php?title=Toulouse_Sudy_Abroad_Program)

Cherice Montgomery, of Brigham Young University’s Spanish Department, recently attended a conference in which Kevin Gaugler, of Marist College presented. He uses study abroad students, and acquaintances abroad, as if they were foreign-correspondent journalists. He is “using the world as his classroom,” Montgomery said. The local class may pose a question, Gaugler contacts someone abroad, and the students in the country take their mp3 players, and go find some local people to interview.

**Summary and Conclusion**

SA is not a silver bullet that will magically transform a student into a better speaker of L2, somehow with or without his active participation. It is one method of exposing one’s self to
many opportunities to interact with native speakers. What the student does with those opportunities will make a difference in how much he progresses.

It appears that SA, while very complex, is simply beneficial to the participants. Whether they stay for weeks or months, whether they avoid native speakers and hang out with compatriots, or whether they interact from home with peer students who are studying abroad, there appears to consistently be some benefit to be gained. At a minimum, if students want to further their mastery of a foreign language, to experience more of a foreign culture, or both, SA appears to be a good use of their time.

SA appears to be the go-to solution among educators for helping students develop multicultural competence or cultural adaptation, and yet those are not guaranteed results – and no reputable SA program should promise those.

Interest in SA will continue to grow. It has been and will be an exciting, complex field, where all participants can benefit, especially if they work at their language skills and cultural understanding.