

Research Article

LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE ABROAD: CHALLENGES AND ASSESSMENT

*Mamame Seck

Associate Professor, University Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar, Senegal.

Received 03rd October 2024; Accepted 04th November 2024; Published online 20th December 2024

ABSTRACT

Today, with the pervasiveness of study programs resulting from the need for a more in-depth experience with the language and the culture of its speakers, it is important to assess the effectiveness of teaching and learning a foreign language abroad. Based on a case study, this work intends to address some of the challenges one might face designing a language learning program, teaching and learning a foreign language while residing in the target community and interacting with its culture. It is meant to be the beginning of a reflection on the assessment of language study programs abroad and approaches being used in that setting. The results of such assessment will contribute to strengthening study abroad programs and help address the multiple issues facing these programs and students.

Keywords: study abroad, language assessment, foreign language learning.

INTRODUCTION

Studying a language abroad has become almost a requirement at some universities or just an option for students at those universities. Especially in the United States. This sudden need has arisen from a combination of circumstances, including rarity of native speakers trained to teach these languages in universities, and lack of language immersion opportunities in the host culture of these languages. Having understood the impact of such challenges on the effectiveness of foreign language teaching in foreign universities, particularly on American campuses, some of which now run special units to oversee exchange programs whereby American students are sent abroad to study languages other than English while staying with host families for optimal immersion in the local culture(s).

Languages can be learned in the following contexts:

a. Speech community

These are native users of the language, living within the speech community who learn their language in a natural, language pick-up setting. Some of them may learn at school with the curriculum being taught in native community's mother tongue, from kindergarten to university. When the pupil or student complete their studies, they work in a context where the language is spoken. The examples of the United States and France, with English and French respectively, are telling.

b. School (formal education – first, second, third etc. language learning)

Students learn the language in a country other than the native lands of the target language with teachers who may be native or non-native speakers but have acquired an advanced level in the foreign language being taught. In either case, teaching takes place outside the native culture, in a classroom for the most part, and usually with limited or no contact with native speakers. Perhaps, there is a family

or two in the city, or a restaurant where students can practice the target language. But this is not enough to guarantee permanent contact with it and with its speakers.

c. Through contact (pidgin and creoles)

Pidgin is a simplified version of a language used for transaction between people speaking different languages and creole is a language that has its origin in extended contact between two language communities, one of which is generally European. A creole incorporates features from each language and constitutes the mother tongue of a community (Suraiya: 58). Mixed languages are found in urban areas where speakers of different languages meet and interact. This description does not refer to a language-learning context per se. It is about an incidental contact in which both parties seek to make themselves understood in order to trade, meaning to sell, buy, or both. We find this context in markets or business places in general. The language resulting from these exchanges is a mixed one, with markers from both languages in contact, including mixed vocabulary, structure, phonetic, or pragmatic features, among other characteristics.

d. Through study abroad programs (immersion into the language community via school and homestay)

This is the subject of the current study. As the phrase implies, studying a language abroad involves leaving one's country for a set period, to travel to and settle in another country or speech community, to learn the language and culture of that country. Students enrolled in such programs are subject to the rules and social conventions of the host country from the moment they start living with host families who make sure they are instilled to some of the local values. Examples include the long, customary greeting protocols observed in African communities in general (which are very pronounced in Wolof culture), the recurrent use of hedging markers, and even of nonverbal language to backup verbal interactions, which may vary depending on the social statuses of the interlocutors involved (as in Yoruba).

The rationale for working on foreign language programs abroad is multifold. It includes the following:

First, in foreign language programs abroad, students are exposed to the language daily, in the classroom from morning to afternoon and at home with the host family. The number of contact hours may amount between 8 and 10 hours per day depending on the setting.

Second, students are immersed into the target culture by living with host families, sharing space and food with native speakers, interacting with a variety of host community members including neighbors, street vendors, shopkeepers, police officers, fellow international students of other nationalities, etc. They may attend ceremonies held within their closest circles, in the neighborhood, or at the district, communal, regional, and even national level.

Third, by being exposed to the target culture, students acquire cultural awareness through conversations, narratives, sitcoms broadcasted on television, social events such as naming ceremonies, weddings, funerals, to name a few. All these settings provide students with practice and real-life experiences that otherwise they may not get a chance to run through.

Fourth, thanks to the intensive language instruction students receive, their immersion into the target culture and their subsequent acquisition of cultural awareness students progressively develop fluency in the target language and speak it with more confidence and accuracy than ever.

For decades, African language teachers and scholars have overlooked the topic of study abroad programs and language proficiency due to their limited awareness of recent developments in the field and to lack of empirical data. In addition, some African language teachers may view study abroad programs more as opportunities to visit foreign land than for academic purposes. At least this might be the perception of the local community when one of their constituents comes home with strangers.

This article intends to address some of the challenges one might face designing, implementing, and assessing a foreign language learning program while living in the target speech community from both an instructor and learner's perspective. It is meant to be the beginning of a reflection on the assessment of language study programs abroad and approaches being used in that setting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section we look at the literature on second language acquisition abroad. We look at both past and recent research conducted in the field.

The research on study abroad programs has been conducted by Freed (1995), Parker and Rouxville (1995), Coleman (1997), Murphy-Lejeune (2002), Pellegrino (1998, 2005), Jackson (2008).

Freed (1995), whose ground-breaker book titled *Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad (SA) Context*, looked at the following:

- Predicting and measuring language gains in Study abroad setting
- Comparative investigations of language study at home and abroad
- Acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in a SA setting
- Diary studies that explore students view of learning abroad.

Freed also looked at fluency, lexical and grammatical development, and use of communication strategies. He found that study abroad programs can help learners become 'fluent' speakers of the host language.

When compared with foreign language students who remain in their home environment, those who studied abroad 'appear to speak with greater ease and confidence, realized by greater abundance of speech, spoken at a faster rate, and characterized, correspondingly, by fewer dysfluent-sounding silent and/or filler pause' (Freed, 1995:26).

However, Freed noticed some gaps and weaknesses in study abroad research as follows:

- Testing instruments failed to measure adequately the language growth of the more advanced students.
- Applied linguists have much more to learn about 'how students actually spend their time while abroad, which language they speak with friends and host families, the propose for which and the amount of time they actually spend using the target language' (freed, 1995:28)

Parker and Rouxville (1995) brought insights into the preparation, monitoring, and evaluation of 'Year Abroad' programs in Europe. He noticed the need for empirical studies on stays abroad as much of the available literature on student mobility was anecdotal and not research based.

Coleman (1997) identified key factors of in second language that have relevance for student sojourners: linguistics, biographical, cognitive, affective, and personality. His conclusion was that there is need for longitudinal studies of linguistics, cognitive, and affective factors impacting on the learning of L2 sojourners, and, on a practical note, he emphasized the need to provide adequate preparation and support for stays abroad.

Coleman (1998) argued that limiting research to linguistic outcomes "distorts the experience, as language skills are not merely mechanical: sociocultural and intercultural competences are essential elements of the true linguistic proficiency which residence abroad is expected to enhance."

Collentine and Freed (2004) echoed Coleman's view and warned that "focusing on traditional metrics of acquisition such as grammatical development might not capture gains by learners whose learning is not limited to the formal classroom (Collentine and Freed, 2004: 157). Recent research works emphasized language and cultural learning using introspective techniques (diaries, first person narratives, interviews) and case studies and ethnographies.

Pellegrino (1998, 2005) argued that introspective data (e.g., Study Abroad narratives) can offer valuable insight into sojourner perceptions of language and help to understand better the quality and impact of their language learning experience (both inside and outside the classroom). Jackson (2008) thinks that "qualitative data can help gauge students' personal, social, linguistic, and academic development during stays abroad and provide vital information for program administrators and teachers. (Jackson 2008: 5)

CHALLENGES

The challenges facing study abroad programs concern both instructors and students. From an instructor perspective, designing and conducting a foreign language program abroad requires self-adjustment and selection of relevant materials.

First, instructors need to adjust to the new environment of learning and teaching a foreign language. The classroom is no longer in the student's native environment but abroad, among the native community. The student is directly in contact with the target culture

and the instruction is multisided: homestay, street, and classroom. All these require a lot of adjustment from the instructor. Indeed, foreign language instructors tend to idealize their language and the culture of the people to build interest in the target culture. When in the target culture students discover the reality themselves. Therefore, the role of the instructor changes from being a transmitter of knowledge to an interpreter of knowledge. Students deal with culture shock resulting in physiological effects. The instructor becomes a mediator between two cultures: the indigenous and the foreign cultures.

The second challenge facing the instructor is the designing of the course. In preparing for the course, the instructor needs to select the appropriate course material, select the language partners to help student navigate the society, choose a language to teach (standard or dialect) and finally, setting up a pedagogical norm as to what variety or register of the language to begin with and why.

From a student's perspective, the challenges include self-adjustment, bearing in mind the fact of being a student versus being a tourist, and the learning process.

The first challenge, self-adjustment, starts with the fact of living in the target culture versus being at home. The student adjusts to the lifestyle of the host family, the food, the living environment, the size of the family, the relatives, and visitors, etc. they also adjust to the numerous speakers they interact with the host family, the salespeople, the language partner, etc. Finally, they deal with identity formation. Do they keep up with their worldview or do they mix their identity with that of the indigenous people. For example, in a religious environment of Senegal, are they going to fast during the month of Ramadan because everybody is doing it or are they going to keep their regular diet?

As for being a student versus being a tourist, students are confronted with a schedule that does not allow them to behave like a tourist. Their heavy course load and excursions limit their mobility as visitors. They may not have an opportunity to experience the culture and life on their own. Usually, they come back in the country after returning home to have a different experience. Fulbright opportunities are the most common ways of returning to the community after the study abroad program finishes. Students can stay longer and explore more of the country. They can enhance and deepen their knowledge of the language and culture. Acquiring a language abroad takes place in a multilayered setting: classroom, home family, street, etc.

Students learn and put into practice what they have learned as they live in the culture of the language they are learning. Immersion transforms the student from a student to a member of the community.

ASSESSMENT OF THE AFLI STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM AT WARC

The study is six-year research undertaking on the assessment of the African Flagship Languages Initiative (AFLI) program at the West African Research center (WARC) in Dakar, Senegal. The center hosts study abroad programs every year, mainly from US universities, and AFLI, from the University of Florida in Gainesville, is one of them. AFLI is a special initiative of the Boren Awards for International Study that offers awardees the opportunity for intensive language study of Akan/Twi, French, Swahili, Wolof, and Zulu, and for cultural immersion by participating in domestic and overseas language programs. The program starts in Florida in the summer and continues in Senegal in the fall of the same year. It is sponsored by the National Security Education Program (NSEP) through the Institute of International Education (IIE). AFLI graduates are expected to work for

the US government for a certain number of years at institutions such as embassies, and programs and offices abroad.

Methodology

Thirty students, twenty-two girls and eight boys, participated in the study through the years from 2015 to 2023, except during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the program was suspended. The assessment concerned both French and Wolof because students study the two languages, although French is the main language of instruction. Wolof is offered for survival needs. Two forms of assessments were conducted: formal assessments and student's self-reports.

a. Formal assessments

It is the assessment of acquired competences through the program (August through December): The linguistic competence is assessed through quizzes and final written and aural examinations (presentational activities, grammar-based tasks, etc.)

The cultural competence is assessed through a post-study program test, communication-based test (interpersonal activities e.g., role-plays with instructor and native speakers). Students are exposed to culturally relevant situations where they need to show mastery of the cultural etiquette.

b. Students' self-reports

As for students' self-reports, they are conducted through questionnaires. Students are asked to answer a set of questions, including multiple-choice questions and questions that require explanations. The following questions were asked:

1. What competence have you acquired while studying Wolof in Senegal (language, culture, both, and other)
 - a. Linguistic competence.
 - b. Cultural competence.
 - c. Both.
 - d. Other (please specify).
2. How does your experience studying Wolof in Senegal compare to what you've learned or might learn in a regular classroom in the US?
 - a. Extremely different.
 - b. Slightly different.
 - c. Comparable.
3. Was staying with a Wolof speaking family or community useful and helpful to your foreign language training?
 - a. Extremely helpful.
 - b. Fairly helpful.
 - c. Not helpful (please tell us why)
4. How did you construct your identity living with a different language community?
 - a. Espousing the local cultural viewpoint.
 - b. Keeping my own cultural viewpoint.
 - c. Mixing my cultural viewpoint with the one found in place.
 - d. Giving up my own cultural viewpoint.
5. What adjustment did you make to survive in your new environment?
 - a. I changed my perception.
 - b. I listened more to people.
 - c. I observed people's daily life activities and tried to understand them.
 - d. All the above.
6. How did you socialize with your host family?

7. What were the best moments of your stay in terms of socialization and language learning?
- Talking with my host family.
 - Sharing cultural etiquettes with my host family.
 - Learning how to do things (cooking, singing, dancing, etc.) in the target culture.
 - Sharing moments with my host family.
 - All the above.
8. Did your stay in the target culture help you with fluency?
- Yes
 - Somehow
 - No (please explain why)
 - Not at all (please explain why)
9. What challenges did you face learning Wolof in Senegal?
- Native speakers fast-paced speech.
 - Processing meaning b. Fear of being corrected.
 - Lack of vocabulary and cultural knowledge
 - Others (explain)

Results

After conducting these surveys, students' responses cover the following topics:

Competence acquired during the stay

Students acquired both linguistic competence and cultural competences.

One student said: "Studying Wolof in Senegal at the introductory level afforded me an incredible introduction to the language. Even before formal instruction began, I already began to learn the basic greetings, which are an incredibly important part of Senegalese language and culture. Additionally, being immersed in the local culture presented opportunities for understanding the linguistic structure and vocabulary in a way which could not have happened in a classroom in America. Once I began to learn Wolof, I found that it was much easier to immerse myself in the culture around me and made my friends and family much more eager to help me experience all that I could."

Comparison with previous experiences

Students' experience learning Wolof in an American University and Abroad was extremely different.

One student said: "My experience studying in Senegal was so much more valuable than what I would learn in a regular classroom at UNC. It is not that the instruction is different, just that the on-location language training affords so many opportunities for practicing the language and making cultural and linguistic connections outside of the classroom that it just cannot possibly be compared to a traditional classroom experience."

Advantages of living with the community

Staying with a Wolof speaking family or community was extremely useful and helpful to the foreign language training.

One student who thinks her staying was fairly helpful wrote:

"Because I speak French, I usually spoke that with my family because it allowed me to communicate so much more information at a time. My family spoke Wolof around me all the time, which was helpful for the language and familiarity, but because I did not really understand any of the language, it made comprehension very difficult. They also knew that I was learning Wolof but didn't always express things in the same way as me. It was, however, very helpful for learning and

mastering basic phrases to communicate information. Also due to the language barrier [a field by itself], it was difficult for them to always be able to explain what something meant when I was confused, and I often had to write things down to ask in class."

Identity construction

Students mixed their cultural worldview with the one found in the target culture. None of them had given up their own worldview or espoused the local cultural worldview.

One student said: "As much as possible, I tried to understand and adopt the local cultural viewpoint. However, it is impossible to ever fully give-up your own, and additionally I found that my own viewpoint and experiences directly determined how I observed and processed the local culture."

Self-adjustments

Students changed their perception, listened more to people, and observed people's daily life activities and tried to understand them.

One student said: "Though I was not always able to communicate with those around me in detail, I listened with great interest to whatever I was able to understand about what they communicated with me- what they did, why, and how it differed from what I was used to. I was in Senegal to learn about it, after all!"

Socializing with the host family

Students socialized with their host family, especially with children.

One student said: "We would eat dinner together and have tea. Me and my host siblings would stay up late at night talking and laughing and watching TV."

Another student wrote: "I socialized a lot with the children in my host family, who were very interested in me, my things, and my activities [curiosity]. In addition, my family did their best to include me in all their activities, such as weddings, birthdays, and other celebrations. I tried to do my work at the table or in common areas when possible, and to watch TV with the family even though I could not understand it to be more involved in family life."

Best moments

In terms of best moments with their host families, students said that they always enjoyed talking to people, sharing cultural etiquettes, learning how to do things (cooking, singing, dancing, etc.) in the target culture, and sharing moments with their host family (one student offered a birthday cake to her host sibling).

One student said: "I will always remember how I learned the expression "maa ngi dem" after my host mom made me repeat it every single morning when I left the house. Eventually, I learned the meaning of the expression and could apply it properly to different situations. This was areally great learning experience that I shared with her."

Fluency

Students appreciate the fact they improved their language skills staying with their host family. One student said: "I would have never learned as much Wolof as I did if I had not stayed with a Host Family. My French improved incredibly as well. It was very useful to practice with them and have them help me with my pronunciation and explain things to me."

Another student: "Because I was a complete beginner, I am still nowhere near fluency in Wolof. I believe that if I were to go back and repeat the experience now, a year removed with much more language instruction under my belt, I feel that it would *definitely* help me to achieve fluency in a way I would not have been able to do in a regular classroom at UNC."

Challenges

Students pointed out some challenges they faced during their stay in the country:

- Native speakers' fast-paced speech and meaning processing
One student said: "the grammar was also very difficult to understand because it is so complex."
- Complex grammar structure

Another student said: "Native speakers spoke quickly and without explanation, making it difficult for me as a beginner to process the information. Additionally, because I did not yet have much knowledge about sentence-structure or thought expression, it was difficult for me to even determine what it was that I did not understand about an expression. I found it easy to greet people and express basic statements which I had learned, but difficult to absorb things on a holistic or structural level, or transfer meaning from one expression/context to another until we went over the concept in class."

ANALYSIS

The analysis of students' responses indicates that study abroad programs increasingly require an in-depth study of its approach, implementation, and assessment. For the most part, students find this prerequisite very useful for the study and mastery of a foreign language abroad. The reason is students now live in the target culture, talk to native speakers within the host family and on the streets, with vendors and people they meet. These encounters enable them to become fluent in the language much quicker than in a foreign language classroom in their home country.

Students often compare their own culture with the culture in which they now stay. Sometimes they need to change their identity, or some of its features, to adapt to their new environment and culture.

However, they face many challenges. These include the speech pace of native speakers, the extent of vocabulary acquired abroad, and the need for more information and explanations regarding certain language structures and cultural practices. However, these challenges are necessary and indispensable for language acquisition abroad, and students must be prepared to deal with them. Instructors also need to adapt to the new category of students they have. These students are not native speakers, and therefore need more attention and time to adapt. Host families need to feel part of the learning process, especially as students spend much more time with them than with the instructor. The host parents must allow the student to integrate and belong to the family, to be involved in the tasks to be accomplished in the family and to participate in ceremonies and other community gatherings for socialization. They must not, however, force students to change their identity. This must come from the students themselves. It is up to the student to synthesize the two cultures. The family can enrich itself with the student's culture in this context of cultural exchange.

CONCLUSION

Foreign language programs abroad can be the topic of important research projects in various fields such as language pedagogy, second language acquisition, language socialization, and cross-cultural studies. Although there is substantial research on study abroad programs, almost nothing has been done on the assessment of foreign language programs in Africa. The particularity of Africa is the bond between language and culture. One cannot study an African language leaving behind the culture of its speakers and vice versa. This study has shown the multiple challenges both instructors and students are facing in study abroad programs but also students' self-adjustments to survive in the target culture. The acquisition of linguistic and cultural competences becomes more effective as students live with host families and interact with the speech community in various settings. The main challenge is native speakers' fast pace, but students often survive by self-adjusting, listening carefully and asking questions.

The study opens new avenues of research undertakings. Possible areas of research include:

- Standardization and Study Abroad programs: what language to teach abroad? City or rural varieties or both?
- Quantitative analysis of Study Abroad programs (statistics): How many people are learning abroad in a specific program, how many of are fluent, how many are not, what factors explain the successes and failures, etc.

REFERENCES

- BARBARA Freed. (1995a). "Language learning and study abroad." In Freed, Barbara (ed.) (1995), 3-33.
- BARBARA Freed. 1995b, *Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad Context*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin.
- COLLENTINE, Joseph and Barbara F. Freed, 2004, "Learning context and its effects on second language acquisition", *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 26, 153-171.
- ELIZABETH Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, *Student Mobility and Narrative in Europe: The New Strangers*. Routledge, London.
- GABRIELLE Parker, & Annie Rouxeville, 1995, 'The year abroad': Preparation, monitoring, evaluation. London: Association for French Language Studies, The Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research
- JAMES A Coleman, 1997, "Residence abroad within language study." *Language Teaching*, 30, 1, 1-20.
- JAMES A. Coleman. (1996). *Studying Languages: a survey of British and European students*. The proficiency, background, attitudes and motivations of students of foreign languages in the United Kingdom and Europe. London: Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research.
- JANE Jackson, 2008, *Language, identity and study abroad: sociocultural perspectives* (London: equinox (pp. lx, 267)
- SURAIYA, Suraiya. 2020. "Pidgins and Creoles: Birth of Languages". *Jurnal Adabiya* 19 (1): 57
- VIRGINIA Pellegrino Aveni, 1998b, "Student Perspectives on Language Learning in a Study Abroad Context." In *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, ed
- VIRGINIA Pellegrino Aveni, 2005, *Study Abroad and Second Language Use*. Cambridge University Press.