

THE IMPACT OF STUDY ABROAD: QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE MEASURES

An essay submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for graduation from the

Honors College at the College of Charleston

with a Bachelor of Arts in

Spanish

and a Bachelor of Science in

International Business

ALEXANDER MALLET

MAY 2019

Advisor: Lancia Affonso

Abstract

This paper aims to form conclusions about the research that has been conducted on the impact of study abroad on students. In measuring the impact of study abroad, there are five areas where the students may feel this: foreign language skills, cultural knowledge and awareness, academic growth, personal growth, and professional growth. In each of these five key areas, there have been notable studies conducted; however, many of them have been unable to properly conclude that study abroad positively affects students. Out of these five areas, the effect on foreign language skills has been researched the most, and it can be concluded that study abroad does, in fact, lead to increased foreign language skills. This paper also discusses the major challenges of researching this topic and points toward more conclusive research in the future.

Introduction

Often times, college students view and talk about studying abroad as one of the most formative experiences of their college career, or one of the most influential times of “the best four years of their life.” They cite a trip to a Somali village, volunteering at a local school in need, or working in the host country’s embassy offices as “eye-opening,” “impactful,” “educational,” or simply “fun.” While these words may place a strong sense of worth on these experiences, the students who have described them as such are using these words only because they’re the bridge between the impact of that experience and conveying the level of impact of that experience to other people. The majority of students who participate in a college-level study abroad program, be it a week-long program or an entire year in a foreign country, say that they had “a great time” abroad, but aside from all the fun they may have had, do study abroad programs truly have the impact that so many students, professors, college administrators, and others believe them to have? This essay explores that question in depth by looking at foreign language skills, cultural knowledge and awareness, academic performance, personal growth, and professional growth as the five key areas of measuring the impact of study abroad programs on college students, and it also discusses the key roadblocks that have prevented large-scale, conclusive studies on this topic.

Foreign Language Skills

While many study abroad programs take students to countries whose native language is the native language of the students, many students still travel to other countries for these programs, where the language spoken is one different than the student's own. Most students have prior experience with a language that they will speak before departing for another country, even if that experience is only a language class, but even a small amount of time spent being exposed to that language in the other country is enough to noticeably impact the student's skills. How, then, can this be measured, and how much more proficient are students upon returning to their home country?

In a study sponsored by the American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR) and the National Foreign Language Center (NFLC), a sample of more than 2000 students was taken to determine the answer to those two questions. All of these students participated in semester-long programs in Russia, where Russian was the primary language spoken, and were given an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) test before departing. Upon arriving to the United States, these same students took the same version of the OPI test. Consistent with what was predicted using the measurements of the OPI, the majority of students saw an increase in performance on the exam, even though due to the structure of the results of the exam, the scores of some students did not increase (Freed). The results of the OPI dated to the time period of this survey, according to their archives, contains five different levels (for example, Intermediate and Superior), and three different subgroups within those five different levels ("ACTFL 1989"). As evidenced in Figure 1, whose delineations are drawn to scale according to the amount of improvement a student must make in order to reach the next proficiency level, students who take this test generally move up from the Novice Low proficiency level quickly, while it takes more time--especially time spent

studying abroad--to advance in the Advanced and Superior proficiency levels. This is consistent with an S-shaped learning curve, especially with the reading and listening components measured by the OPI; this means that at the far low and far high proficiency levels, upward mobility is more difficult than at the intermediate levels (“ACTFL 2012”).

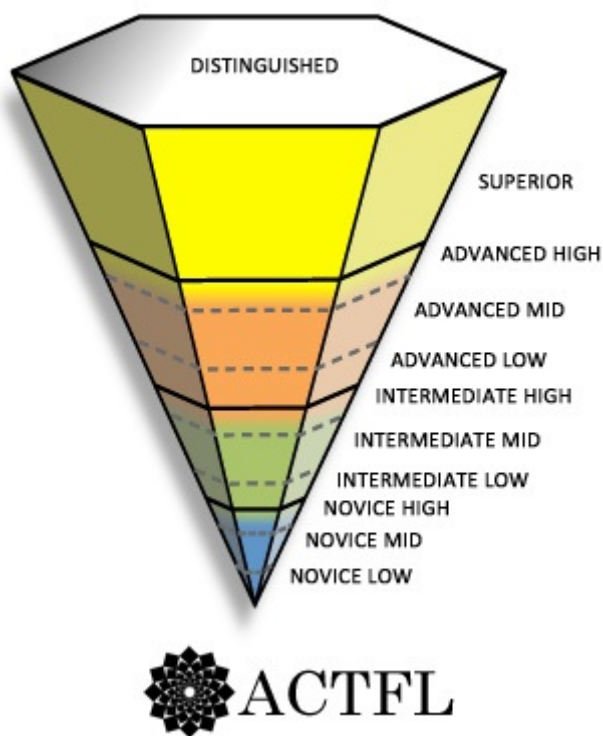


Figure 1: Proficiency levels of the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview test

Out of all the students surveyed by the ACTR and the NFLC who took the OPI test, only 5.97% of students at the Intermediate Low level, 11.7% of students at the Advanced Low level, and 23.8% of students at the Advanced High level had scores that dropped one level while studying abroad. That being said, the majority of students in each of these subgroups did see higher scores, and those in the subgroups not mentioned all either received the same score that they had before studying abroad or received a higher score than they had before studying abroad.

While the study concludes that studying abroad does, in fact, have a positive impact on language skills for the majority of students, it is important to note that, while sufficient, the OPI exam does not capture every single aspect of how one's language skills have evolved over the course of a semester-long study abroad program. For example, a student may learn new vocabulary that he or she does not use during the exam, or even new sentence structures or verb tenses not brought up during the exam. In addition, the OPI exam also does not test nonverbal communication that, in some cultures, has nearly as much weight in speech as the words themselves.

Cultural Knowledge and Awareness

For the most part, when students talk about their experiences abroad, they discuss the culture in which they were immersed, debate how much that culture differed from their home culture, and maybe even mention a criticism or two about the culture in which they grew up. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines culture as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group,” and as “the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time,” which forms a basis for understanding what exactly culture means in a global context (“Culture”). Cultural knowledge and awareness is especially important in today’s world due to the growing interconnectedness of the world; even though two people on opposite sides of the globe might be able to talk on a social media platform, there is a high chance that, without the knowledge and awareness of the other person’s culture of their own country, they will not be able to communicate effectively enough with people of cultures different than their own.

Heightened levels of the understanding of different cultures is one of the biggest assumptions that people make about how study abroad programs impact students. Testing these levels of understanding, though, is fairly difficult; there is no standardized “culture test,” like how foreign languages have the OPI exam. In some studies, researchers have used the pretest-posttest design, while in others, there is a heavier reliance on the qualitative data that may come from students being asked about a wide range of topics that do not directly relate to the development of culture in students while studying abroad. In any case, in order to study the effect of studying abroad on cultural knowledge and awareness, students must be tested before and after studying abroad. In addition, over any duration of time, people’s knowledge and awareness of different cultures may change regardless of the country they are currently residing

in; therefore, a control group of students who do not study abroad is also necessary to study this (Carlson and Widaman).

Academic Performance

Perhaps out of all five factors researched, it is the least obvious how academic performance might be impacted by study abroad programs. Study abroad programs require that students take at least one course, so there is not a lapse in students taking classes. Courses that students take in another country may differ in level of difficulty, methodology employed by the professor, topics discussed, course format, and more areas; once students properly adjust to and become comfortable with these differences, they might even have a hard time returning to the way that classes in their home country are taught. Often times, academic performance is not measured when looking at the impact of study abroad because it can be overlooked; after all, taking classes is one of the few things that remains constant in the lives of students studying abroad. That being said, academic performance during and after study abroad programs can be affected by studying abroad.

Like most other studies conducted with the goal of determining the impact of study abroad programs, one particular study conducted by Edward Ingraham and Debra Peterson of Michigan State University 2000 concluded that academic performance is significantly improved. One of its methods was a survey, in which the majority of participating students did report that their “study abroad experience has led to an improvement of [their] academic performance,” and that “studying abroad has enhanced [their] critical thinking skills.” Unfortunately, because this study heavily relied on surveys, which use self-reflection as its primary tool, strong conclusions cannot be drawn from these results. In addition, the vast majority of universities promote studying abroad because, among many other reasons, it promotes stronger academic performance; this bias might have also strongly influenced participants to say that their academic performance did, in fact, improve over the course of the time spent abroad. There was also no

control group for this study containing students who had not studied abroad; it is entirely possible that students who had not studied abroad would have reported the same levels of academic growth as those who had studied abroad. All students are, by definition, in college, and are therefore exposed to strong learning environments regardless of where they study (Ingraham and Peterson).

One of the biggest problems associated with determining the impact of study abroad programs--and one that has deterred those that have specifically focused on academic performance--is that the sample sizes are too small to form reasonably accurate conclusions. One such study that fell prey to this, conducted by Benjamin Hadis with students at various New Jersey colleges, was able to suggest, but not conclude, that academic performance is positively affected by studying abroad (Hadis). This is consistent with other studies conducted.

Due to the barriers already mentioned that block access to researching the impact of study abroad on academic performance, there are very few studies that have been published about this topic. Many times, professors note that their students seem to be more academically inclined after returning from studying abroad. However, because this has not been properly and adequately measured and studied, it is possible that these professors are biased by the widespread and well-known idea that study abroad programs improve academic performance. Usually, students take fewer classes while abroad, and sometimes spend less time focusing on coursework than they would at their home university, although no studies have been conducted on this (most likely due to the difficulties of developing and administering it). It is not impossible that study abroad programs hinder academic performance, or that students who do not study abroad succeed academically more than their peers who study abroad because they theoretically have more time to dedicate to their classes. There are many more distractions in another country, even

though all of them are not necessarily bad; however, they might still retract from dedicating time to classes.

Personal Growth

One of the aspects of studying abroad that students may spend the most time talking about is personal growth, which can be classified as “mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual growth that allows a person to live a productive and satisfying life.” (Berger) The duration of the study abroad program may have a significant impact on the level of personal growth a student experiences; a week spent in a different country will affect a student differently than a year-long program. In addition, the country in which the student is studying has a big impact as well, especially whether or not that country’s culture is significantly different than the culture that the student has grown up in. The one thing that remains constant is that the student faces challenges unlike those faced in the student’s home country, like exposure to other cultures, venturing into figuratively and literally unfamiliar territory, or navigating the laws that the student is not accustomed to following.

Out of all five components discussed, personal growth might be the most difficult to measure due to its complexity and all the factors that affect personal growth that may or may not be necessarily associated with studying abroad but instead with simply maturing in the world. This is, however, successfully remedied by a control group of subjects who do not study abroad.

While personal growth might be difficult to measure in students who have studied abroad, there is a widely-accepted, validated instrument that measures a certain set of personality traits that have been determined to be the most prevalent in measuring one’s personal growth. According to McGourty, these personality traits, best known as the Big Five, include openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Openness to experience refers to how much more one prefers a wide range activities over a routine; conscientiousness refers to the dependability and discipline one exhibits; extraversion refers to

how much one prefers the company of others and how much he or she is assertive, sociable, and exhibiting positive emotions; agreeableness refers to how cooperative one is when faced with challenges or working with others; and neuroticism refers to how well one is inclined to experience uncomfortable emotions, including anger, worry, and fear. In the German study outlined by McGourty, the researchers used the German version of the Big Five Inventory, which is a test proven to effectively determine one's levels of the Big Five personality traits. If the Big Five Inventory is administered to students before the study abroad program and after the study abroad program, then researchers are able to see how much each of the five personality traits have changed for the duration of the study abroad program. (7)

The study that McGourty discusses, which was conducted in 2013, used the Big Five Inventory and administered it to its test subjects, which were 527 students who studied abroad and 607 students who did not study abroad. The subjects took the Big Five Inventory three times: before the students studied abroad, halfway through the time of studying abroad, and after studying abroad. The control group of 607 students were given the Big Five Inventory during these same three times, and the results of the control group were compared with the experimental group, which were largely the changes of the results across the three instances of the Big Five Inventory being given. The results of the study are displayed in Figure 2, according to McGourty:

| Big Five Domains | Long-term Sojourners | Controls |
|---|--|---|
| Openness Curiosity and a preference for novelty | Increase ↑ | Decrease (but not significant) ↓ |
| Conscientiousness Dependable and well-organized | Decrease ↓ (The rate of decrease is similar to controls.) | Decrease ↓ |
| Extraversion Sociability and a preference for the company of others | Increase ↑ (The rate of increase is similar to controls.) | Increase ↑ |
| Agreeableness Cooperative rather than difficult | Increase ↑ | No change – |
| Neuroticism Experience unpleasant emotions easily | Decrease ↓ (a positive development in this case—more pronounced for the long-term sojourners) | Decrease ↓ (a positive development in this case) |

Figure 2: The findings of the study conducted by Zimmermann and Neyer, which McGourty has included

The two noticeable differences between the results of the experimental group--the long-term sojourners--and the control group lie in the openness trait and the agreeableness trait. While students are abroad, they are more exposed to new experiences rather than those who remain at their home university. Living in a different city and country, attending a different university, living in an unfamiliar culture, meeting many new people, and even trying new foods are all what study abroad students are exposed to; the German study suggests that, with the introduction of all these changes, students are more likely to see an increased score on the openness factor of the Big Five Inventory. This means that students who study abroad have become more welcoming to new experiences, preferring a wide range of activities instead of a familiar routine. In addition, because the agreeableness factor increased for the experimental group but saw no change in the control group, it is implied that students are more cooperative when working with

others and are better able to handle challenges they are faced with. This, of course, is a very useful skill to have in whatever environment one is in, so it can be concluded that study abroad has a positive impact on one's agreeableness. Also, it can be concluded that study abroad programs have a positive impact on one's openness, which is a useful skill as well (McGourty).

Professional Growth

While often overlooked by students, the professional growth that students experience during study abroad programs may be the most beneficial for them in the long term. Professional growth can even be thought of as the combination of the previous four factors discussed: foreign language skills, cultural knowledge and awareness, academic performance, and personal growth. Professional growth can be enhanced by jobs or internships that a student has during a study abroad program, but it is still affected regardless of these high-impact experiences. If the student seeks an international job after graduation, the improvement of foreign language skills directly affect this if the student would be speaking that same foreign language in the international job that he or she pursues. Also, the cultural skills that a student might gain from a study abroad experience could be very useful in any conversations that happen while the student is attempting to secure his or her potential international job.

Specifically, students who have studied abroad will reflect the increased adaptability, political and cross-cultural engagement and understanding, and intellectual abilities that the current international marketplace demands of its employees (Tillman). Many universities require that International Business students study abroad in order to gain professional, international skills that they might utilize in their careers. While it is fairly widely accepted that studying abroad positively affects professional qualifications, it is relatively difficult to conduct a study that seeks to determine how much of an impact study abroad programs have on professional growth. Subjects would need to be studied over the course of at least five years in order to have enough time to use whatever professional skills they may have gained while abroad, and it can be difficult for these subjects to point out where exactly they learned certain skills, like cross-cultural sensitivity. Simply conducting interviews would not be sufficient to determine the

impact of study abroad on professionalism; instead, the study would need to be more focused on scaled and open-ended questions strongly tailored toward relating professional skills to skills gained while studying abroad.

One such study was conducted by Kimberly Franklin of Dickinson College starting in 1998. 189 students were selected to participate in the study because they had studied abroad during their time at the university. Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used to collect the necessary data in this study using surveys and interviews, and all subjects were requested to be surveyed a little more than ten years after they had studied abroad in order for them to have adequate time to settle into their professional careers. Only a small group of alumni were willing to participate in interviews and fill out surveys, which limited the scope of the study. While the vast majority of students were able to connect professional traits with what they had learned during their study abroad programs, this does not necessarily mean that their professional skills were highly cultivated during their time abroad. In this study, there was no control group; it is entirely possible that alumni who did not study abroad would be able to simply attribute their own professional skills to experiences other than being abroad, like internships. In addition, surveying these subjects allows for only a limited weight to be placed on conclusions about the impact of study abroad on professionalism because it heavily relies on self-reflection. The study could have interviewed employers to confirm that such professional traits did exist in the subjects, and it could have also focused more strongly on the specific experiences that subjects said were the causes of the professional skills that were mentioned. That being said, Franklin does point out these two suggestions, so in the future, there might be more studies that take this into account (Franklin).

Like in most of the other areas of how the impact of study abroad can be measured, there are many difficulties in determining the effects of study abroad on professional growth, as already evidenced. Studies need to be focused on longer periods to determine the level of impact, and employers also need to be included in these studies because they, too, play a critical role in determining the professional skills that their employees have. Unfortunately, research on all five of these areas--foreign language skills, cultural knowledge and awareness, academic performance, personal development, and professional development--requires studies that span a long period of time in order to properly assess the impact of studying abroad, and this is most likely one of the biggest reasons that there is only a small amount of relevant and conclusive information about this topic.

Improvements for Researching the Impact of Study Abroad

As has been mentioned, there is room for improvement in this field of study. To avoid certain biases that come from different surveying methods, researchers could use implicit bias tests for areas like cultural awareness to properly measure how sensitive to other cultures these students are. Sponsored by Harvard University, Project Implicit would be a useful resource for researchers, as one of its primary purposes is to test implicit social cognition, described as “thoughts and feelings outside of conscious awareness and control” (“Project Implicit - About Us”). Because self-reporting bias is prevalent in study abroad research, this would be very useful since it almost completely eliminates this bias.

To further improve the area of measuring professional growth, employers could be surveyed, which would confirm specific traits that the test subjects say that they possess. It would perhaps be even more effective for employers to identify skills their employees may have gained while studying abroad, and then working toward matching these skills with the skills mentioned by the former students who had studied abroad. That way, researchers would be identifying real skills noticed by employers instead of skills that former students might only loosely associate with themselves and their study abroad experiences.

In addition, one of the biggest problems researchers have run into has been a small sample size. With this, researchers are unable to draw proper conclusions. There are many reasons for this, but one way for this to be avoided in the future is for a study abroad program, if it is interested in measuring the impact of study abroad, to identify certain students to be surveyed and studied. Most of the research conducted on this topic has been done by college professors and administrators, who do not always have proper access to students who have studied abroad. However, these study abroad agencies have large populations at their disposal,

and if they want to publicize the effects of study abroad, then they are advised to utilize what they already have to do so.

Conclusion

With the gathering of a large portion of the research already conducted, the question remains: does studying abroad truly affect all five of these areas for students? There have been at least four reliable studies for each of the five components that have been able to suggest, but not conclude, that studying abroad positively impacts those five factors. These studies were unable to form any extremely strong conclusions because of a variety of factors: the self-reporting survey bias, the lack of large sample sizes, the lack of a control group, there not being a standardized test--perhaps the area that we are most sure is positively impacted is foreign language skills due to the Oral Proficiency Interview test--among other factors. While there are obviously many ways that measuring the impact of study abroad can be improved, the research that currently exists is still beneficial. From it, people can learn how this research should grow and expand, and how it can be changed to be more effective.

While the majority of studies have only been able to suggest that studying abroad leads to a positive impact on students, this in itself is a useful conclusion to reach. Because no studies have found that studying abroad negatively affects the growth of students, it can be reasonably concluded that this would not be the case in most instances. In the future, research on this topic points toward a positive impact on students from study abroad programs, and the number of students who will participate in these programs will continue to increase.

References

- “ACTFL 1989.” *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 1989* | American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, February 1989,
<https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/public/ACTFLProficiencyGuidelines1986.pdf>.
- “ACTFL 2012.” *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012* | American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012, www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-proficiency-guidelines-2012.
- Berger, Vincent. “Personal Growth And Development.” *Personal Growth and Development*, 2005,
www.psychologistanywhereanytime.com/psychologist/psychologist_personal_growth.htm.
- Carlson, Jerry S, and Keith F. Widaman. “The Effects of Study Abroad during College on Attitudes toward Other Cultures.” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Pergamon, 18 July 2002,
www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/014717678890003X.
- “Culture.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, 2019, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture.
- Franklin, Kimberly. “Long-term Career Impact and Professional Applicability of the Study Abroad Experience.” *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 2010.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ936414>
- Freed, Barbara F. “Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad Context.” *Google Books*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1995,

books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Yizti8-cSHUC&oi=fnd&pg=PR1&dq=study
abroad

language&ots=eqrjCBNCml&sig=6yHDUG203xcnocqZEjbJk7_F3c#v=onepage&q=stu
dy abroad language&f=false.

Hadis, Benjamin F. “Why are They Better Students when They Come Back? Determinants of
Academic Focusing Gains in the Study Abroad Experience.” *Frontiers: The
Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 2005. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ891463>

Ingraham, Edward C. and Debra L. Peterson. “Assessing the Impact of Study Abroad on Student
Learning at Michigan State University.” *Institute of Education Sciences*, Michigan State
University, 2004. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ891450>

McGourty, Richard. “Does Study Abroad Accelerate Personal Growth?” *Trends & Insights for
International Education Leaders*, NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2014.
https://www.nafsa.org/_/File/_/ti_growth.pdf

“Project Implicit - About Us.” *ProjectImplicit*, IAT Corp, 2011,
www.projectimplicit.net/about.html.

Tillman, Martin. “AIFS Student Guide to Study Abroad & Career Development.” *American
Institute for Foreign Study*, 2011.

<https://www.scc.losrios.edu/studyabroad/documents/tillman-aifs-student-guide.pdf>