

# Language Proficiency and Intercultural Adaptation

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## Introduction

Foreign language proficiency and learning are a crucial part of many study abroad programs; especially those whose host culture language is different than that of the native language of students electing to study in them. Indeed, how a program organizes itself with regard to pre-departure language proficiency requirements, on-site language learning, and access to academic coursework in the host culture language may impact the intensity of student immersion and the overall quality of the program (Engle & Engle, 2003). However, there is some debate about the actual impact of foreign language proficiency on student intercultural competence. Experts in the study abroad field could not agree on the necessity of foreign language knowledge as a prerequisite for intercultural competence. (Deardorff, 2008 p38). In a longitudinal study of U.S. study abroad students, those attending English speaking study abroad programs seemed to gain as much in intercultural competence measures as did students in foreign language speaking programs (Norris & Steinberg, 2008). Even though we might expect foreign language proficiency to have an effect on intercultural competence for study abroad students, the research findings are uncertain. Part of this inconsistency between expectation and research findings with regard to the impact of language proficiency may lie in the different methodologies in assessment

### Language proficiency assessment

Language proficiency assessment varies from specific to general, formal to informal, quantitative to qualitative. The most rough, yet easily attainable measure of language proficiency relies on a count of language coursework students have completed. More formal and quantitative measures of language proficiency focus on written and/or oral language knowledge. These measures have the benefit of normative comparisons and systematic psychometric attention to reliability and validity. They are, however, quite fixed and proscribed in their administration and interpretation. At different level of formality are placement tests often given by language faculty at the study abroad site to determine in which language coursework a given student might best enroll. These assessments tend to be less formal, and more focused on the specific milieu of the study abroad program. Finally, with regard to actual language usage, student self-report may offer an uncomplicated yet reasonably accurate measure of how students actually employ the host culture language.

### Study abroad outcomes

Ward (2001) offers a scheme to understand the integrated processes involved in acculturation to a study abroad culture that taps several aspects of human experience. She describes three general categories in which study abroad sojourners in a foreign culture may react: the ABC's of acculturation. The first, Affect (A), is most related to stress, coping, and psychological well-being. Behavior (B), as the second component of the ABC's of behavior, focuses primarily on those overt actions and skills that may indicate that a study abroad student is "fitting in" with the host culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Finally, Cognition (C), the third component of the ABC's focuses specifically on a study abroad student's social identification (Ward, 2001). The emphasis here is on the mental schema the student has regarding his or her national identity, and how that identity may be compared with the assumptions and values of the host culture.

### Hypotheses

**Hypothesis 1.** The three measures of language proficiency (coursework completed, initial placement test results, and discretionary language use) will show moderate correlation, yet measure somewhat different aspects of proficiency.

**Hypothesis 2.** Language proficiency measures will be related to study abroad outcome variables that span affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of acculturation.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were 32 U.S. university students studying abroad for three months in Argentina. The average age was 21.3, 45% were male, 10% were Sophomores, 50% Juniors, and 40% Seniors. Some fluency in Spanish language was required for admission to the program. On average they had completed 2.5 years of high school Spanish and 1.3 years of university Spanish, though there was a wide range of previous language study. All students participated in four hours per week of both Spanish grammar, and Spanish conversation courses during their sojourn. Academic coursework in both English and Spanish was available during the sojourn.

### Measures

**Language proficiency-completed language coursework.** High school and university Spanish language coursework were combined to form a composite measure of language coursework completed prior to the study abroad sojourn. Following a formula typical in university foreign language departments, high school level courses were counted as half that of university courses.

**Language proficiency-entry Spanish language fluency.** Upon arriving in Argentina, students took a locally constructed Spanish language placement test, and were assigned to one of five different levels based on their test performance. Each student's assigned level (1-5) represents their entry language proficiency.

**Language proficiency-discretionary Spanish language usage.** At the end of the term students responded to a 6 item language usage questionnaire that employed a constant sum procedure following Laroche, Pons, and Richard (2009). Students estimated the percentage of Spanish and English they used in specific situations; e.g. "read newspapers and magazines," "listen to radio or watch TV," "go travelling," "go shopping." In these situations, use of the host culture language was "discretionary" in the sense that no rules of behavior dictated that a particular language be used as was the case in classroom activities, or while communicating with non-English speaking host families. Cronbach's alpha was .805.

**Outcome measures included:** Positive and Negative Affectivity Schedule (PANAS), (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), The Appraisal of Life Events (ALE) scale. (Ferguson, Matthews, & Cox, 1999), Socio-cultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS), Ward and Kennedy (1999), American Identity Measure (AIM), (Meyer-Lee & Evans, 2008), Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), Self-report of percent contact with student peer cohort, host culture nationals, and other culture nationals.

### Procedures

Students voluntarily responded to a pre-departure questionnaire immediately prior to or upon arrival at their study abroad program. They completed the post program questionnaire during week 11 of the 12 week program. They also completed the SCAS during weeks 2, 5, and 8. All data was treated with confidentiality.

Table 1. Means, SD's and correlations between language variables and outcome variables

Proficiency variables	Mean	SD	Initial language level	Completed language courses	Percent of Spanish used
Initial language level	3.543	1.291			
Completed language courses	2.558	1.518	.577**		
Percent of Spanish used	56.338	16.995	.444**	.288	
Outcome variables	Mean	SD	Initial language level	Completed language courses	Percent of Spanish used
Satisfaction with Life	28.606	5.895	-.054	.182	.280
Affect					
Negative Affect	18.863	5.764	-.204	-.173	-.404*
Positive Affect	39.219	6.573	-.147	-.367	-.170
Stress Appraisal					
Challenge	4.377	0.800	-.393*	-.349	-.065
Threat	1.059	0.653	-.446*	-.616**	-.447*
Loss	0.664	0.922	.095	-.062	-.192
Psychological Symptoms					
Anxiety	0.429	0.510	-.173	.105	-.330*
Irritability	0.503	0.456	-.075	-.037	-.247
Somatization	0.359	0.539	-.118	.009	-.064
Depression	0.495	0.643	.082	.059	-.383*
Contact Percentages					
U.S. Peer Cohort	51.970	15.573	-.206	-.063	-.129
Host Culture Nationals	36.606	15.203	-.268	.215	-.155
Other Culture Nationals	10.625	12.916	-.064	-.183	-.015
American Identity					
Commitment/Affirmation	3.212	0.596	-.059	.178	-.437*
Explore/Search	2.624	0.655	-.139	-.051	.115

## Results

### Relationship of language proficiency measures to each other

The first three rows of Table 1 show that the language proficiency measures were, as hypothesized, with one exception, moderately, significantly correlated with one another. The largest correlation, between Initial Language Level and Completed Language Courses, only accounts for 33% of the variance between the variables. The smallest correlation, between actual Percent of Spanish Used and Completed Language Courses, accounted for only 8% of the variance.

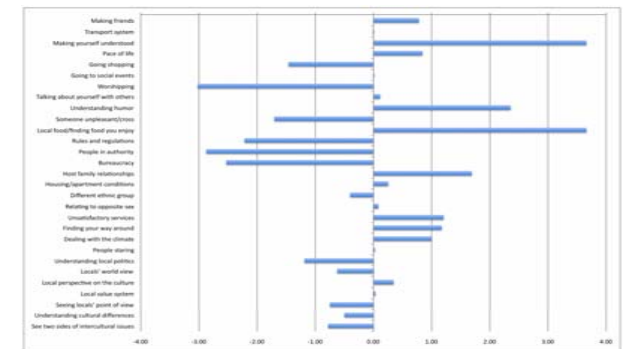
### Relationship of language proficiency measures to study abroad outcomes

In general, measures of language proficiency had a helpful relationship with affective aspects of student acculturation. All proficiency measures showed that more proficient students reported significantly less threat appraisal (see table 1). Those actually using higher percentages of Spanish during their study abroad sojourn showed significantly less Negative Affect, Depression, and Anxiety (marginal significance). Interestingly, students with higher Initial Language Levels also showed significantly less of the stress appraisal of Challenge. For American Identity, the cognitive, social identification component of study abroad outcome, Table 1 shows that Percent of Spanish Used significantly correlated with the American Identity Measure Commitment/Affirmation factor. The more students used their foreign language in discretionary situations during their sojourn, the more they expressed approval for and endorsement of their national identity.

Figure 1 shows a substantial variation in distribution in importance of the 29 SCAS items. "Making yourself understood" with a frequency of 4 (Regularly) and a difficulty of 2.485 (Slight to Moderate) ranked highest along with "Getting used to the local food/finding food you enjoy." "Worshipping in your usual way" with a frequency of 1.906 (Seldom) and a difficulty of 1.645 (None to Slight) ranked lowest. A few items occurred with some frequency but were rated not at all difficult ("Going social events/gatherings/functions," "Dealing with the climate") Other items were rated difficult, yet happened infrequently enough that they did not reach the threshold for importance ("Making friends," "Dealing with someone who is unpleasant/cross/aggressive"). For the purposes of discussion, those items with weighted scores of plus or minus 1 or more (one standard deviation from the mean) will be highlighted.

Percent of Spanish Used related to the most items from the SCAS. Five of these significant correlations occurred with items that were seen as not important, or within an average range (e.g. "Accepting/understanding the local political system," "Relating to the opposite sex," "Making friends.") Although speaking the host culture language in these situations showed proficiency, it did not represent a challenge for fluent speakers. The two challenging situations "Dealing with unsatisfactory service in stores and restaurants," and "Finding your way around" represent situations that happened often enough and posed enough difficulty that students' proficiency was put to the test. Several of the more important items on the SCAS were not correlated with any of the language proficiency measures; e.g. "Making yourself understood," "Understanding jokes and humor," "Getting used to the local food/finding food you enjoy," "Adapting to host family relationships." It may be useful for programs to identify such high importance adaptation issues and address them in the on-site program regardless of student language proficiency

Figure 1. End of term weighted mean scores for SCAS items.



## Conclusions

The most potent measure in the current study was student self-report of percent of Spanish they used in everyday discretionary situations. Clearly, there is an advantage for students in using the host culture language; early sociocultural adaptation, higher levels of psychological well-being, and higher affirmation of national identity correlated with language proficiency. However, language proficiency seemed to have no relationship to immersion, in the sense that percentages of contact with both U.S. peers and host nationals were uncorrelated to proficiency. In conclusion, the relationship between different measures of language proficiency and their connection with study abroad outcomes and inputs in the current study showed some trends and some continued ambiguity.