

The School for International Training's Initiative:

Measuring Language and Culture Learning in Study Abroad

November 27, 2001

INTRODUCTION

Given its commitment to, and national reputation for, operating study abroad programs which provide participants with focused opportunities for the study of language and culture in the context of field-based academic learning, the School for International Training (SIT), with support from the Mellon Foundation, undertook an initiative to measure the kinds and degree of language and culture learning that occurred during a select number of its 57 semester-long, undergraduate study abroad programs – most of which operate in the developing world. This pilot project began in September of 2000 and concluded with data collection and analysis in August of 2001.

Language Learning

SIT teaches 26 languages every semester to undergraduates attending its study abroad programs. These languages are: Twi, Fante Twi, Malagasy, Shona, Bamana, Wolof, Zulu, Swahili, Xhosa, Ndebele, Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, Nepali, Kannada, Hindi, Tibetan, Samoan, Serbo-Croatian, Russian, German, Czech, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch. 80% of these languages are considered “less commonly taught”. All languages are taught overseas using a combination of classroom and field-study instructional methods.

One-third of SIT Study Abroad programs operate in Africa. In May of 1999, SIT received a FIPSE grant to design instructional materials for the African languages we teach. These instructional materials are being designed specifically for undergraduates in a study abroad context, making the best use of the native speech community and the homestay experience all SIT students participate in. As a result, assessing students' language proficiency gains has become of greater concern for SIT Study Abroad and hence our desire to enhance the measurement of language learning in SIT's study abroad programs – one activity supported by this Mellon Foundation grant.

Culture Learning

Additionally, given the growing awareness at U.S. colleges and universities that studying abroad provides learners with opportunities to acquire skills that allow them to manage the challenges of living in an increasingly interconnected and multicultural world, we felt that it was equally important to attempt to better articulate the nature and the extent of the intercultural learning which is said to be taking place in these programs.

The School for International Training proposed to:

1. **Enhance the measurement of language learning** in SIT's Study Abroad programs by training on-site language instructors in the administration of the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview or another valid instrument;

2. **Identify a conceptual model of intercultural learning**, which identifies discrete elements that together constitute such learning and;
3. **Test an instrument or instruments** that purported to measure intercultural learning.

I. **ENHANCING THE MEASUREMENT OF LANGUAGE LEARNING**

SIT Study Abroad undertook the training of ten of its African Languages instructors in the administration of the ACTFL OPI (Oral Proficiency Interview) assessment instrument in Cape Coast Ghana in January 2001.

Five years ago, SIT's Study Abroad language curriculum was revised and updated in accordance with the ACTFL proficiency scale. The components of this scale include language function, context/content and accuracy. This new direction made it necessary to assess students in a manner consistent with this approach. As a result, all students enrolled in SIT Study Abroad programs in which a language is taught are tested at the end of the term. In addition, students with previous language study are also tested for placement at the beginning of the term.

Because of the lack of trained OPI testers, especially in the developing world where SIT operates the majority of its programs, SIT's language instructors provided only "estimated" ACTFL proficiency levels. These teachers needed to be trained in the administration of the Oral Proficiency Interview instrument (OPI) to ensure more accurate assessments of SIT students' language proficiency. We focused on our African languages' instructors because of the aforementioned FIPSE-sponsored grant to develop instructional materials.

The ACTFL Training Workshop and The Participants: The language instructors who participated in the workshop range in their levels of experience. Some instructors have taught for ten years, while others are only in their second year of teaching. Because of ongoing training by SIT in Proficiency Oriented Instruction, all were familiar with the concept of proficiency, the ACTFL standards, and in the conduct of communicative classes. Two instructors were trained Peace Corps instructors and were quite familiar with both Competency Based Instruction as well as with ACTFL guidelines for testing. Most of the instructors are speakers of more than two languages. All are fluent in English - the language used for the workshop and the language used to develop their OPI interviewing skills.

A 5-day training workshop was conducted in January 2001 in Cape Coast, Ghana. The language coordinators selected to participate were teachers of Fante-Twi, Twi, Xhosa, Shona, Ndebele, Wolof, Zulu and Malagasy. They were trained by Dr. David Hiple of the National Foreign Language Resource Center at the University of Hawaii. Dr. Hiple is a certified ACTFL trainer and specializes in training testers of the less commonly taught languages. (See Appendix A for the workshop schedule). The training was designed to introduce and/or expand the instructors' notions of function, context/content and accuracy as a basic format for use in measuring the language gains of students.

Results: The principle result obtained was the improvement of the instructors' ability to conduct the OPI. Before training, instructors were only able to provide estimated ratings. After training, they were better able to conduct interviews that included all of the components of the ACTFL Proficiency scale and to more accurately assess the correct proficiency level of each student. General comparisons between the proficiency results obtained in fall 2000 with those of spring 2001 shows some improvements in overall scores.

Conclusion: Testing goes hand in hand with the objectives of any language course; in other words, assessment attempts to measure the students' attainment of the course objectives. For this reason, adoption of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the revision of the language-training curriculum at SIT Study Abroad are interrelated. Proficiency assessment requires a proficiency-oriented course design - a design that is totally appropriate for an in-country experience. In both cases, the key to success, however, is the skill of instructors/assessors/interviewers. Training in proficiency-oriented approaches, something quite new to most language instructors in our Africa programs, is critical.

Finally, consistency in the quality and the implementation of the OPI has a clear and direct impact on reporting outcomes. In the future, we anticipate greater accuracy and confidence in the results reported, in our ability to compare the results of assessments conducted by the same person across groups and for the same individual, and a more accurate reporting of actual language gains made by participants.

II. IDENTIFYING A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

Beginning in September 2000, the Dean of SIT Study Abroad, Dr. Michael Vande Berg, began a process of investigating the instruments considered "cutting edge" in the field of intercultural assessment. A committee was formed at SIT comprised of the Dean of SIT Study Abroad and its Directors of Asian, European, and African Studies.

Animated debate arose around what constituted intercultural learning, its relation to the learning of language and the need to establish an assessment baseline from which SIT could continue this discussion. The committee concluded that testing instruments widely recognized in the field would be a practical first step in what was likely to be a multi-year process. Testing these instruments would also serve to illustrate whether or not they were suited to measuring learning outcomes of SIT's experientially-designed programs – most of which operate in the developing world.

The instruments chosen for testing were: the IDI, the CCAI, and a third instrument under development at SIT – the AIC.

The IDI: In 1986, Dr Milton Bennett created the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which shows a progression of stages people may go through in developing intercultural competency. Since then, he has partnered with Dr. Mitch Hammer of American University to develop the *Intercultural Development Inventory* (IDI) – an assessment instrument widely used in the corporate world that relies on self-report. The IDI is essentially a set of statements that allows an individual to assess his/her developmental stage of intercultural sensitivity.

The Bennett model assumes that as time goes by, people can move from a psychologically defensive posture regarding cultural differences to one of minimization of differences and eventually on to "integration" where one's experience of self allows one to move in and out of differing cultural worldviews. (See Appendix B).

The CCAI: The CCAI (*Cross-Cultural Adaptability Instrument*) was developed by Dr. Judith Meyers, a psychologist, and Dr. Colleen Kelly, a human resource specialist. Their 50-question self-assessment tool is designed for use in cross-cultural training to address the universal aspects of culture shock and cultural awareness. The psychological constructs that are the underpinnings of this instrument reflect the literature in cross-cultural psychology, cross-cultural

communication, and international management. The instrument also purports to have application in a wide variety of settings, including psychotherapy, assessment of cross-cultural competence in counselors and educators, training for effective communication in diversity workshops, and decision-making for overseas assignments. The CCAI considers five skill sets: Emotional Resilience, Flexibility/Openness, Perceptual Acuity, Personal Autonomy, and Positive Regard for Others. This is also a self-report instrument. (See Appendix C).

The AIC: As previously stated, the *SIT Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC)* tool is under development, much of its content growing out of our institutional experience over many years. Consistent with an ethnographic approach, its contents were empirically derived over a 3-year period by an institutional Task Force that attempted to delineate a common institutional conception of competencies needed for successful and appropriate intercultural interaction. The current form of the tool was developed by Dr. Alvino Fantini, an SIT faculty member, after limited cross-referencing of its contents with the literature of the cross-cultural field and other existing instruments. This is not a self-report tool but one that uses triangulation to better reflect disparities between students' perceptions of the gains they think they have made in intercultural competence. SIT's Academic Directors complete the tool for each student, as do members of the host community. (See Appendix D).

The “Assessing Intercultural Learning in Study Abroad” Conference Hosted at SIT – January 2001

Upon choosing the instruments to test, it was decided that hosting a conference to engage faculty and study abroad administrators from other colleges and universities around the country who were interested in assessing study abroad learning outcomes should be held. On January 12-14, 2001, 25 of SIT Study Abroad's Academic Directors in the field, along with representatives from 45 colleges and universities around the country, attended a conference in Brattleboro entitled, “Assessing Intercultural Learning in Study Abroad.” (A copy of the program agenda is attached in Appendix E and a list of attending institutions is attached in Appendix F).

In addition to the issue of assessment, participants shared their views on a wide range of issues related to academic study abroad, including undergraduate research, the extent to which study abroad programs augment or complement on-campus academic curricula, the current status of assessing learning outcomes in higher education and the role of campus faculty in field based study programs.

III. Methodology and Testing of the Instruments

The IDI and CCAI instruments were administered by SIT's on-site Academic Directors to 95 students in 10 SIT Study Abroad programs. These programs operate in the following countries: Cameroon, Ghana, Morocco, South Africa, Tanzania, Czech Republic, Central Europe, Ireland, Nepal and Tibet. (See Appendix G for program descriptions). Students completed the instruments at the beginning of the spring 2001 semester, and again upon completion of term in May. In order to further the development of the AIS tool, it was administered to 22 students in two programs. While the data recorded was helpful in further refining this tool for measuring intercultural competence, the sample size was not large enough to warrant a detailed data analysis.

Findings

1. IDI pretest and posttest results suggest that students did not demonstrate a significant change in their profile in the period between program start and finish. The overall profile was one of students who clearly reject ethnocentric approaches to dealing with cultural differences but who do not yet have the intercultural skills related to adaptive behavior and perspective taking. Mean scores on the pretest and posttest on the six stages of sensitivity to cultural differences are as follows:

Table 1 - Pretest and Posttest Scores on IDI Scales

<u>Stages</u>	<u>Pretest Mean</u>	<u>Posttest Mean</u>
Denial	1.49	1.53
Defense	1.38	1.41
Minimization	3.42	3.57
Acceptance	6.20	6.03
Cognitive Adaptation	4.95	5.19
Behavioral Adaptation	5.03	5.26

Interpretation: Mean score of:

1.00-2.50: few significant issues with these dimensions.

2.60-5.50: uncertainty in these dimensions

5.60-7.00: integration of these dimensions

The significance of the above finding is twofold. First, the pretest results suggest that students who choose study abroad programs, for reasons that are not entirely clear, may be disposed by experience, personality or temperament toward a perspective and attitude that renders them more adaptive, and hence, effective, in a different cultural setting than would be the case in the more general student population. That is, they “self select” based on their greater interest in and sensitivity to experiences in another culture. Anecdotal evidence collected from students and SIT Academic Directors suggest that most students are open to new experience and often assume that they have much to learn from a cross-cultural experience. Second, posttest results suggest that students did not experience a significant shift in any of the six dimensions. That is, they did not appear to make substantial gains in intercultural competence. How might this be explained?

One possibility is that on several dimensions students’ scores were significantly in the direction of greater intercultural awareness. To make greater gains, perhaps a longer immersion in the culture was necessary. Another hypothesis is that, given the academic focus of SIT Study Abroad programs, the self-awareness of intercultural learning that took place was either not substantial, or if substantial, not measured by the standardized instruments.

Another interpretation is that in situations where people are immersed in a new culture, initially they make few gains or even regress in their level of intercultural sensitivity and competence and only much later resume their “culture learning.” In language classes, a similar

phenomenon—referred to as the slingshot effect--has been identified where students in an intensive language class appear to regress in their language competency, only later to race ahead.

With respect to methodological issues, there may have been a pre-test bias, where students' responses on the posttest assessment were affected by their earlier tests. Since there was no control group, such bias cannot be determined in this study. More broadly, we must ask if standardized instruments focused exclusively on sensitivity can be applied successfully to the cognitive and affective learning outcomes of experiential models of international education.

Finally, there are conceptual issues, ranging from flawed and imprecisely defined concepts, to assumptions about the nature of cultural sensitivity, intercultural sophistication, intercultural competence, and the relationship between these concepts. Further discussion of problems with conceptualization and measurement issues is offered in findings 3, 4 and 5 below.

2. The relationship between students' proficiency in the host country's language and intercultural competence is inconclusive. There is evidence (Freed, 1999) that study abroad students have a far broader repertoire of strategies for initiating, maintaining, expanding and terminating a communicative situation than do those whose learning has been limited to the formal language classroom.

Additionally, we know that many SIT students view native speakers (especially in the homestay context) as participants in their language learning. This view is, in fact, encouraged by SIT's Academic Directors and language instructors. And we have found that students, who commonly reject certain classroom activities, will praise the same activities when they occur with friends or "host parents" in the native speech community itself. Ultimately, it is students' strategies around language learning and the opportunity to test these strategies in the native speech community that inspire confidence and affect their end of semester oral proficiency gains.

3. The concept of "intercultural competence", in order to be useful in social science, must be more clearly defined and measured than is currently the case. As it stands, there are important questions as to what the precise meaning of intercultural competence is. Does it suggest a set of universal skills that apply across cultures or is it more of a culture-specific concept? Is intercultural competence an organizing principle rather than a construct that can be clearly defined and operationalized in a valid and reliable way? And, are the various dimensions that comprise intercultural competence, e.g., ability to act "appropriately" in given circumstances and attitude toward different cultures, themselves too broad to be considered specific dimensions of an even broader concept?

The two standardized instruments make many implicit assumptions about the nature of cultural learning, what is deemed desirable, and even the very concept of culture itself. For example, the IDI includes a dimension of "Minimization" which purports to measure the extent to which a person is able to get "beyond feeling that other cultures pose a threat to your own." Yet an unstated but critical assumption is that if you believe that people are basically alike, you "recognize the essential humanity of every person and try to behave in tolerant ways toward others." But if you think that there are significant differences--that people from different cultures may indeed be rather different in attitudes and behavior, then you are somehow more threatened by other cultures, and by implication less interculturally competent. One could, however, make just the opposite hypothesis: that people with a greater understanding of other

cultures see significant differences in thinking and behavior, and therefore are more likely to act appropriately than people who assume that no such differences exist.

4. Any assessment of the learning of culture, or more generally, intercultural competence, must not rely exclusively on self-report questionnaires. Triangulated methodologies that include assessment of students, for example, by people knowledgeable in the culture in question, and the inclusion of content-specific instruments that are able to discriminate between people who respond appropriately from those who do not to sets of hypothetical situations are essential if any valid and reliable measure of intercultural competence (and, as with language, levels or gradations of competence) is to be developed. The two standardized instruments rely exclusively on self-report on a series of items that purport to measure different dimensions of intercultural competence. Therefore the instruments leave unanswered the issue of external validation from people who not only have a different perspective, but may be far more knowledgeable about a given culture. Moreover, these instruments assess only attitudes (in reference to general concepts, not culturally specific situations) and, to some extent, awareness.

As noted earlier, there are implicit assumptions about the nature of awareness in these instruments that need closer examination. Further, the ability to maintain relationships with others, to communicate with minimal loss or distortion, and the ability to collaborate in order to accomplish something of mutual interest—each a domain of intercultural competence-- require the use of assessment methodologies other than attitudinal self-report surveys in order to be measured.

IV. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH IN STUDY ABROAD

This study has significant heuristic utility by shedding light on at least four areas for further research critical to academic study abroad programs.

1. Relevance of the Concept of Intercultural Competence

The concept of intercultural competence is central to the field and literature of Intercultural Communication. This work is extremely useful in training and professional development applications in the fields of NGO management, international service and a number of applied intercultural settings. However, the literature and research of Intercultural Communication shares little overlap with other academic fields in International Studies, such as Cultural Anthropology, International Relations, Comparative Religion, Arts & Literature, to name a few. Our analysis raises questions regarding at least two aspects of the conceptual utility of Intercultural Competence for academic assessment:

Is the concept of “intercultural competence” a valid construct that can be nominally and operationally defined so as to be a useful addition to other basic constructs, e.g., language or politics? Does such a construct add to the body of theory and knowledge in intercultural communications and behavior? Or is it essentially a global variable—a sensitizing concept—that is useful only as a rubric or context under which more discrete and measurable concepts, e.g., language, cultural awareness, can be defined, measured and discussed; and

How can we measure and qualitatively assess cultural learning and intercultural awareness across a variety of programs in which an academic approach to international studies is central to the pedagogical objectives?

Recommendation: We recommend that future study of Intercultural Competence in an academic liberal arts setting include a comparative review and analysis of notions of culture, communication, and self-awareness for the improvement of the research survey instrument. The research design should also include typologies and desegregation based on the substantive academic disciplines that orient specific programs. Such research would strengthen our understanding of the learning process and intercultural aspects specific to different types of study abroad programs, with important pedagogical benefits.

2. The Relationship between the Learning of Language and Culture

The pilot study reveals promising avenues for further research in the relationship between learning language and culture on study abroad programs. Our pilot study examined gains in language proficiency as a factor influencing intercultural competency. The relationship between the learning of language and culture involves a rich variety of other factors: the linguistic environment, instructional methods, use of language among program participants, and degree of immersion in the host culture are among some which need to be identified. Further, if there is a relationship between the learning of language and learning culture, is it relatively constant or variable across different cultures?

There is some evidence to suggest that language acquisition may occur at an advanced level, with seemingly small gains in either the learning of culture, or the application of what is learned, i.e., intercultural competence. (An unflattering term often heard in intercultural research circles is “fluent fool,” i.e., one with strong language skills but utterly inept in navigating through the cultural context of that language.)

Recommendation: We recommend that future research on the learning of language and culture focus specifically on these two dimensions of the study abroad environment, and not solely as a factor in intercultural proficiency or competency. While the role of language learning is an interesting factor in the examination of intercultural communication, we feel there are important gains to be had in the field of foreign language instruction by examining differences in pedagogy, the societal context of the target language (i.e. the social differences of the Malagasy and French-speaking communities in Madagascar), and the level of immersion that students experience. The results of the ACTFL training presented here reflect this increased attention to local context and teacher preparation.

3. Expectations of Outcomes for Diverse Stakeholders in Study Abroad

Our analysis of research findings on intercultural competency led to important and interesting discussions with our colleagues in higher education regarding the purpose and expected outcomes of study abroad for undergraduates. Faculty who approves the academic credit of international study may be looking for different outcomes than university administrators who promote the role of international education in the liberal arts curriculum. Study Abroad advisors may be fostering a different view of the intercultural experience than expected by the field-based Directors of these programs. And importantly, students may have yet another set of expectations.

The above analysis has led to a set of questions that we believe need to be addressed in outcomes assessment for study abroad: To what extent do the primary actors in study abroad programs operate with a shared set of objectives, values and expectations regarding the study abroad experience? Do faculty, students, the administrative staff of sending institutions, the

administration of study abroad institutions, and those faculty and staff at study abroad sites operate in the same universe or parallel universes that converge at different points, e.g., overall objectives, but diverge in other critical areas, e.g., learning of language, culture and the substantive areas of knowledge so that any learning that takes place is significantly affected—most likely in a negative way.

Related to these questions, are study abroad programs best conceptualized as opportunities to further enhance one's mastery over a body of knowledge, e.g., environmental science from a comparative or cross cultural perspective, with the learning of language and culture viewed primarily as tools to better effect that learning? Or is the emphasis most properly placed on the language and culture learning as the primary learning objectives? Finally, is a major outcome for study abroad the opportunity to produce better citizens with a globally inclusive worldview?

Recommendation: We recommend that future research examine the roles and expectations of different stakeholders in International Education regarding a range of expected outcomes, including personal growth, academic achievement, and development of professional networks and skills. Based on a clearer understanding of these diverse views, we may anticipate a reconceptualization of the outcomes of study abroad programs—especially in locations in the developing world where less commonly taught languages often pertain. Whereas some proponents of study abroad view these programs primarily as vehicles for the learning of language and culture, we believe an important contribution in the field would be to view international education as constructing the capacity for a new comparative framework for academic inquiry. In this new view, the learning of language and culture is simply one of a number of outcomes sought including:

- the formation of a different world view based on acquiring academic knowledge in a non-western, host-country context;
- the practical learning of field work methods and synthesis;
- the completion of an international research project from conceptualization through design, data collection and analysis;
- the moral and ethical development of students who seek international study as a means to develop a broader worldview and more socially relevant practice; and
- the development of new career and academic objectives based on the learning that takes place outside of a US campus context.

4. The Changing Concept of Culture in Fields of Cultural Analysis

Many programs in international education examine the cultural and social conflicts associated with modernization and globalization. In societies marked by diffusion of dominant Western culture and fragmentation of communities at a local level, how are our understandings of culture and cultural differences being transformed? How do we teach these transformations and how do we assess this knowledge? Marcus (1998) writes of the necessity in the contemporary era of doing multi-sited ethnography. If culture is understood as a dynamic process of interpretation and meaning, we find that members of a particular culture often engage in this process from various physical locations in the world and influenced by an array of cultural diffused phenomena. Studies of cultural disappearance and labor migration are examples of how cultural change requires a shift in thinking from traditional ethnographic village- or place-based notions of culture.

The phenomenon of cultural change is not only a factor in thinking about the cultures U.S. students interact with, but is a significant factor in their own cultural identity. Educators interested in the growing multiculturalism of the U.S. point to the increased sophistication of U.S. undergraduate students around the notions of multiple, or negotiated, identities. As we saw in the 2000 U.S. census, many of our youth no longer identify with a single ethnic or racial identity; these same students view their own cohort as having multiple options in the formation of their social identity. How does this change in the formation of cultural identity among U.S. college students affect their perceptions of themselves in another culture, and of how they go about learning to engage with that culture?

Another difficult assumption in the definition of culture is the position of the knower vis-a-vis the cultural subject. Late 20th century fields of cultural analysis are marked by the self-reflective critique which questions the epistemic view of western, positivist science and the role of the observer (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). This critical view asks whether what we know of the "other", i.e. the host culture, is really a statement of our own subjective position (i.e. Said's *Orientalism*, 1976). Ethnographers and their colleagues in Cultural Studies ask how we can better understand the host culture's own perceptions and representations of themselves (Beverly, 1999).

Recommendation: We recommend that future research more clearly identify the variety of theoretical positions regarding the nature of culture, cultural inquiry, and cultural change within fields of International Studies relevant to study abroad.

V. CONCLUSION

The process unleashed at SIT by this pilot project to measure language and culture learning, is reflected in the ongoing debate at the institution on the meaning of culture within anthropology, ethnography, linguistics and cultural studies. This debate suggests that there are specific dimensions to the intercultural learning experience that require greater sophistication in how we define culture. This in turn has significant implications for any approach to either intercultural research or assessing culture learning in the field of study abroad.

We have identified the following dimensions of intercultural learning for more in-depth exploration:

- the role of cultural change in the contemporary era;
- multiculturalism and notions of negotiated identity among U.S. college students;
- the self-reflective critique within cultural studies and its impact on how we perceive the "other"; and
- the increased attention to "difference" made by interpretive social sciences and the corresponding view that there "is a disappearing line between the emic and the etic" in cultural analysis (Agar, 1996).

The more recent shift to an interpretative science examines complicating factors within culture that do not easily hold up to generalizations. Such views of culture claim that differences within a culture are much more predominant than realized by traditional ethnographic accounts; and thus we have seen a shift in analysis that examines cultural differences as the dynamic source of conflict, tension and the ongoing formation of meaning within a culture.

This shift in orientation in how we view culture is critical for pedagogical methods in how cultural learning is experienced, and consequently how we assess such learning in study abroad. It is also critical as study abroad seeks to redefine itself as a field with the capacity to both develop a new comparative framework for academic inquiry and to produce “better” citizens with a globally inclusive worldview.

We propose that future research include first a thorough exploration of the current theoretical positions regarding the nature of culture, cultural inquiry, and cultural change within fields of International Studies relevant to study abroad. And, secondly, that future research examines the roles and expectations of the primary actors in study abroad to determine what if any set of objectives, values and expectations around learning outcomes are shared.