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Language Learning and Study Abroad: A Critical Reading of the Research (Review)

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LANGUAGE LEARNING AND STUDY ABROAD: A CRITICAL READING OF RESEARCH. *Celeste Kinginger*

New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009. Pp. ix + 248.
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Kinginger's interpretation of the research represents an endorsement of the great potential of study abroad, balanced with several limitations and caveats. Kinginger argues that while study abroad generally results in increased proficiency and oral fluency, slightly superior to gains resulting from at-home formal study, one should note the design flaws of many studies such as lack of a true control group as well as reliance on monologic, situation-less tasks to measure language gains, even in the areas of discursive, pragmatic, and sociocultural competencies. Kinginger also notes that opportunities for learning language and cultural through interactions with native speakers can be limited, even stymied, by the unwillingness or inability of interlocutors to manage differences in conversational expectations, cultural norms, and personal identities. One of the main thrusts of the book seems to be challenging the pervasive belief that study abroad is a quick fix or cure all for second language learners. Another thrust is encouraging future researchers to deal with the limitations of the research to date by exploring new geographic regions, pursuing more mixed-method (qualitative with quantitative) approaches, and giving a voice to native participants that is equally as valued as the students' perspectives.

The volume begins by delimiting the notion of "study abroad" (e.g., as different from academic *brain drain*) and providing a brief historical overview of study abroad trends in three regions: the United States, the European Union, and Japan. Next, research on language

acquisition in study abroad is traced back to Carroll's (1967) nation-wide study of language majors and the diary studies of the Schummanns (e.g., Schumann, 1980). These seminal studies would come to define the purview of study abroad research as reporting language-related gains in terms of holistic constructs like "proficiency" and "fluency," measured by Oral Proficiency Interviews, C-tests, and the like. The following section continues to track the chronological development of study abroad research as it moved towards analysis of ever more nuanced domains of communicative competence, beginning from a focus on lexicon size and mastery of discrete-point grammar and moving on to speech acts, discursive competence, strategic competence, and sociocultural competence. The various communicative settings for native speaker – nonnative speaker interaction, including formal classrooms, host family homes, and service encounters are then addressed one by one. Finally, the volume highlights several qualitative investigations of learner experiences abroad, emphasizing the stances taken by students and native speakers and relating those stances to issues of language socialization, gender, culturally-constructed linguistic folklore, and nationalism, among others.

In total, this volume critically reviews over 300 research reports relating to study abroad in relatively few, easy-to-read pages. It provides great breadth of coverage in terms differing research methodologies, theoretical perspectives, and geographic locations, and yet it maintains a coherent narrative thread throughout. Kinginger's writing style is effortless, making reading this volume a truly enjoyable experience. The reader will find Kinginger's references to her study abroad sojourn in France to be highly engaging and may begin to reflect on how, much like Kinginger, her perspective on study abroad has been shaped by her own personal experiences. Perhaps as part of a compromise for improved readability, Kinginger at times omits relevant details about studies' methodologies, statistical analyses, and specific results, which some

readers will desire in a critical review. Depending on the reader's research interests, the volume might appear to be missing entire subfields of SLA research that could have relevance for study abroad issues; references to psycholinguistic and neurocognitive perspectives, for instance, are largely omitted.

However, what this volume may lack in that regard it makes up for in accessibility for a very wide audience. The variety of topics addressed and the avoidance of alienating disciplinary jargon makes this volume a helpful resource for study abroad students, program directors, language teachers, and even host families; it has the potential to inform and improve their current practices. Those readers who already have broad knowledge of SLA research will still find this volume to be a valuable contribution to their library for its references and its ability to draw from multiple perspectives to paint an encouraging but balanced picture of study abroad.

References

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