# Study abroad and SLA: defining goals and variables

Book Section

***Study abroad and SLA: defining goals and variables***

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**Abstract**

Study abroad is a centuries-old phenomenon, but has been a research topic for only forty years, during which time the principal focus has been on linguistic gain, within a broad Second Language Acquisition (SLA) paradigm. However, recent changes in SLA (notably the 'social turn'), new qualitative studies, and the recognition that study abroad lies within a broader educational context make it appropriate to re-examine what study abroad is for, and which factors have been identified as influencing its outcomes. This is the objective of Coleman's study abroad taxonomy (2006a, 2007) which is designed to allow greater comparability and generalisation across study abroad research. The taxonomy is here updated and a rationale provided for the selected contextual variables.

The first European overview of study abroad research (Coleman 1997) grew indirectly out of a collaboration between Rüdiger Grotjahn of Bochum University, Ulrich Raatz and Christine Klein-Braley of Duisburg University, and the present author. The C-Test had enabled the collaborators to show the links between study abroad, target language proficiency, and other variables such as attitude (Coleman 1996, cf. Raatz et al. 2006).

Since 1997, the cognitive paradigm has been challenged by socio-cultural approaches, and the near-exclusive focus on language gain has been tempered even within Second Language Acquisition (SLA) by an interest in learner identity (e.g. Norton 2001), while the 'social turn' in SLA research (Block 2003, 2007) has meant greater understanding of the fluid nature of cultures and identities, and led to investigating the group as well as the individual as the locus of meaning-making and knowledge construction.

Thanks to recent book-length studies from Murphy-Lejeune (2002) followed *inter alia* by Dervin (2008), Ehrenreich (2004), Federico (2005), Jackson (2008), Kinginger

(2008), Papatsiba (2003), and Pellegrino Aveni (2005), cf. Isabelli-García (2006), a rich qualitative dimension has been added to more conventional quantitative studies, throwing light on social networks, identity, and perceptions of self and other. While they adopt radically different theoretical stances, all seek to address study abroad as a real life experience rather than simply a cognitive change triggered by a new context and a higher quantity of meaningful target-language input and interaction.

But if study abroad research is expanding in scale and scope, it remains hampered by a lack of comparability between published studies. Near-synonymous labels such as *Auslandsaufenthalt*, study abroad or student exchange conceal distinct models, while undefined contextual variables reduce the generalisability of findings. The term 'residence abroad', widely used in the United Kingdom and adopted by three nationally funded educational development programmes in the late 1990s (Coleman 2001a, b, c, 2002, Coleman & Parker 2001) is very different from the 'island model' of study abroad (Haug 1996), yet results have often been conflated. The present author, believing that each label supposes particular settings of the parameters or contextual variables which shape the study abroad experience, has been attempting (2006a, 2007) to devise a list of twenty parameters encompassing all facets of both professional and research-oriented study abroad literature. The present article offers the latest (2009) version (Table 1), incorporating recent feedback and expanding on certain variables, all of which have been identified as influencing the impact which study abroad has on the individual. Space here precludes citing individually the many studies which have informed the observations – a shortcoming to be rectified in the author's forthcoming book on study abroad. The exploration of and personal reflection upon individual variables which follow inevitably rely on unevidenced generalisations. Some variables also demand a lengthier rationale than others.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

**The taxonomy**

What Coleman has attempted for study abroad is akin to what Susan Herring (2007) has termed 'faceted classification'. Drawing on systems originally designed to classify library books, and subsequently adapted to assist automated search and retrieval for complex and compound subjects, including internet-related domains, she proposed a faceted classification of computer mediated discourse (CMD), designed to facilitate data selection and analysis in research. Her classification identified two over-arching influences – medium (technological) and situation (social). Study abroad requires different headings, but shares many features of her approach.

Several features of faceted classification are worthy of note.

- The facets are listed in an unordered and non-hierarchical relationship: all listed facets have been identified as significant in conditioning variation in at least one study, but which influences may be strongest will depend on empirical testing in specific contexts.
- The facets are open-ended: while the list is intended to be comprehensive, future changes to the phenomenon being studied, and the methods adopted to study it, will probably identify additional significant variables.
- Separate listing does not imply independence. In real life, it would be expected that several would interact, but once again the particular pattern of interaction will vary from context to context, and the approach allows for unpredicted patterns to emerge.
- Each category may be realised by more than one possible value.
- Categories are heterogeneous: some are binary, others scalar, others nominal or discrete-item.
- Values need be assigned only to those facets that are relevant to the analysis.

The disadvantages include the length of the list and the complexity of the table. Such an approach will also provide an aggregation of facets rather than a coherent theoretical definition. And in study abroad, as in all real life, the sum of the parts is greater than their individual contribution, so a truly valid analysis must take into account the interaction of different facets.

It should also be noted that the classification refers to *contexts* of study abroad, rather than individual studies, and therefore ignores variables such as numbers and methods, as well as the individual variation which is the *leitmotif* of study abroad research. It is hoped nonetheless that such a classification might help the reporting, comparison and even design of study abroad research.

**The taxonomy in selective detail**

**1. Within-programme and whole-programme study abroad**

Of primordial importance is whether a student is undertaking study abroad *within* a programme of study at an institution in their home country, or whether they have travelled in order to complete a *whole* undergraduate or postgraduate degree qualification in a foreign land. It is particularly when citing big numbers to underline the importance of the domain of study that such confusions between within-programme and whole-programme study abroad tend to occur. Freed's ground-breaking collection of 1995 refers (Freed 1995a: 3) to 'half a million international students' in the US in 1993-94. Coleman (1997: 15) cites 'well over a million' mobile students, but these are not in fact the short-term sojourners to whom most of the research literature, at least within Second Language Acquisition, normally applies. There are certainly parallels between the whole-programme and within-programme study abroad experience – the culture shock and need to acculturate to a new educational community of practice, acquisition of academic literacies in the target language, the vagaries of accommodation and of new social networks which may embrace other international sojourners and out-groups rather than locally resident native speakers, and so on.

But a major difference is money. The numbers of whole-programme sojourners are far larger, and this form of academic mobility much more significant because of its economic importance to institutional and national budgets. Not only within Europe, but globally, a market in fee-paying international students has grown up, a market which is linked to the Englishisation of Higher Education (Coleman 2006b), to highly professional collaboration in marketing initiatives such as the Academic Cooperation Association, to a new concern with international rankings which in its turn has triggered national governments to launch initiatives such as Germany's *Exzellenzinitiative* or Spain's *Estrategia Universidad 2015*. Every country wants its Ivy League, Group of Eight or Russell Group, an élite group of research-active universities to which can attach the empty but ubiquitous adjective 'world-class', and which can spearhead the recruitment of whole-programme international students who not only pay fees but may well remain in the country after graduation to contribute to the national economy. The Bologna Process, initially conceived to enhance academic cooperation and student mobility within the European Union, is well on the way to becoming a global framework allowing worldwide competition for international students (Coleman 2009a). The frequency of stories, in the national academic press of most countries, devoted to international comparisons, league tables (rankings), visas, post-graduation residence and work permits, competitors' tactics and successes, and the need for and provision of courses in academic English testifies to the level of obsessive concern with recruiting international students. The narrative of their learning experiences deserves to figure more prominently in the study abroad literature.

There are also, of course, other implications of the distinction between whole-programme and within-programme study abroad. A student who goes from secondary education in, for example, Beijing to undertake a Bachelor's degree in Hong Kong or Singapore will encounter a different learning culture, but will not have to unlearn the indigenous approach to university teaching and learning and accommodate to a new approach in the way a student from the UK going to France or Portugal will have to do. And if one is facing three or more years in a foreign country rather than a single semester, it is probable that there will be an impact on language learning motivation and strategies, residential arrangements, social networks, degree of acculturation, impact on identity and a host of other conditions and outcomes. Moreover, there will probably be more robust linguistic, academic, personal and general support mechanisms, simply because of the greater economic importance of whole-programme mobile students.

Most study abroad research is concerned with within-programme students: but if that is the case for an individual study, the academic authors should say so clearly, while neither closing their eyes to the substantial, mostly national literature on the experience of incoming international students, nor alluding to whole-programme data while ignoring the distinction.

## 2. Learning outcomes

Maybe belatedly, research has come to accept that study abroad, however defined, is essentially an educational phenomenon. One of its few stable characteristics is that when research subjects spend time in another country, it is *within the context of* *formal education* – and usually in the tertiary rather than the secondary sector. And the universal educational paradigm insists that for all learning experiences, the desired objectives or outcomes of that learning are specified. The UK's Residence Abroad Project (1997-2001) was a major attempt in Europe to define the potential outcomes in a systematic and comprehensive way, but there have been other approaches, both in Europe (e.g. Stronkhorst 2004, 2005) and in North America (e.g. Engle & Engle 2003).

The intended learning outcome(s) are among the variables which all study abroad research should, but often does not, specify. While the term 'learning objectives' was previously often used in university quality assurance contexts (and also by myself in Coleman 2007: 40-42, where each of the six categories of learning outcome is explored in detail), it has been largely superseded by 'learning outcomes', notably in the Bologna Process which was designed to harmonise European tertiary education, which has been formally adopted by no fewer than 46 signatories, and which, though originally conceived to create a European Higher Education Area, is now influential worldwide (Coleman 2009a).

The Bologna Process, and specifically its quality assurance body, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), draws substantially on work conducted in the UK in the 1990s, particularly the Teaching Quality Assessments conducted under the aegis of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), and the Benchmarking statements which exist in the UK for each subject discipline. The national agencies which make up ENQA have signed up to the ESG (more formally *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, ENQA 2009) which requires that learning outcomes – in other words, what students will be able to do once the course, module or programme is successfully completed – be explicitly stated. The inclusion of learning outcomes marks a movement in continental Europe away from defining university courses merely in terms of workload or study time.

The Bologna Process itself is still ongoing: in the understated words of the most recent Communiqué issued at the meeting of higher education ministers held at Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium in March 2009 (Coleman 2009a), the objectives are still valid but 'not completely achieved'. But since both are administered by the European Commission on behalf of member states, the Bologna Process and its quality assurance processes are already closely linked to the world's largest study abroad exchange programme, ERASMUS. Not only are learning outcomes increasingly recognised as essential for the comparability which underlies a global market in higher education, but the Bologna Process itself is close to achieving international recognition even in North America (Adelman 2008, Steinberg 2008).

Learning outcomes are a useful aid to classifying study abroad literature, both research and professional. Despite the difficulties of disentangling elements of individual studies which address several learning objectives, I have estimated (Coleman 2009b) that SLA still dominates: nearly half (43%) of the published literature on study abroad relates to linguistic outcomes, with intercultural outcomes following at 21%, personal outcomes slightly behind at 15%, and the remainder devoted to cultural (10%), academic (5.5%) and professional (5.5%) outcomes.

**3. Age**

Age is a significant variable in all SLA. Within study abroad, there is a temptation to conflate studies relating to adults and to teenagers. While there may be common factors, it would be expected that adult students might on average have greater social, affective and cognitive maturity, which would in turn impact upon language learning and other outcomes.

**4. Programme at home institution**

International terminology tends to follow the North American Higher Education (HE) model. A degree programme is assumed to be modular, although students may major in one or more fields. In such a model, the study abroad participant may have little experience of or commitment to the target language and its associated cultures. This is very different from the traditional European model, where students typically register for a particular named degree programme, within which there may be optional elements, but which from the outset defines the student's specialism and disciplinary allegiance. Such constraints persist despite the major upheaval which the adoption of the Bachelor-Masters structure of the Bologna Process has required across continental Europe.

In the UK, despite moves towards modularisation in the 1990s, those new universities which in the 1960s attempted to broaden the first-year curriculum did not succeed in influencing others, or even in making the innovation stick. From the start, students are disciplinary specialists, even if they also take elective options. Unfortunately, one obstacle to researching language learning in UK HE has been that the Higher Education Statistics Agency has until very recently collected data by headline degree title rather than by modules followed, thus obscuring for many years, during the long collapse of recruitment to specialist language degrees, the buoyant interest shown in acquiring language skills by specialists in other disciplines. Such students demonstrate a different motivational profile towards language learning than do specialist linguists.

The specialist/non-specialist distinction is important when European and American studies are misleadingly conflated, and goes beyond differences in previous language learning and pre-sojourn proficiency. Acculturation, with its concomitant benefits for meaningful target-language interactions, would be expected to be easier for someone who has ten years of prior study of the target culture, has visited it half a dozen times, and has studied nothing else for the past two years, as compared with someone for whom it is one elective module alongside several others.

The distinction also affects, for example, participation in ERASMUS exchanges. The average proportion of language specialists within each national cohort is 15.5% (2005/06 figures), but for the United Kingdom, with its imagined monolingualism and blind hostility to multilingualism (Coleman 2009c), so few students in other disciplines have the necessary linguistic skills – or perhaps the *cojones* to cope with imperfect target-language skills – that specialists represent 38.14% of British ERASMUS participants.

**5. Previous language learning**

As in other areas of SLA, there is a relationship between extent of previous language learning and language gain during study abroad. However, partly because groups may be made up of students with different biographical profiles, prior learning may be expressed in the vaguest of terms such as ‘at least two semesters of Spanish’, or else may be taken for granted in the assumption that the readership will be familiar with the educational system in which the programme occurs.

### 6. Proficiency prior to departure

Pre-sojourn proficiency is often one of the measures adopted in many studies, although again comparability is undermined by unspecific or culture-specific labels such as 'lower intermediate'. While a number of studies find that initially 'weaker' learners benefit more from study abroad, the use of non-standard proficiency measures and the relativity of the word itself do not facilitate generalisable conclusions. Adoption of (or benchmarking against) one of the world's accepted language proficiency scales such as the Common European Framework of Reference or ACTFL would make comparisons easier.

### 7. Preparation

The UK's national quality enhancement projects mentioned above demonstrated, with the help of practitioners across the country, the need for integrating thorough preparation into a study abroad programme. In the most effective practices, preparation comprising practical guidance is integrated with induction into each of the six potential learning outcomes. In a very different context, the Minnesota project (Cohen et al. 2005) demonstrated empirically how valuable targeted preparation can be. Yet in some circumstances students go abroad with at most an in-flight briefing. No amount of preparation can obviate culture shock entirely, but an absence of preparation can accentuate it and leave the individual student with fewer strategies for taking advantage of the immersion situation.

### 8. Duration

Perhaps surprisingly, but perhaps as a consequence of other variables, there is no consensus on the impact of the length of the study abroad sojourn. It does, however, seem especially significant for the composition of social networks, for language progress, and for engagement with the local cultures. As with other variables, the label may imply a particular parameter setting. Thus, in the UK, the 'residence abroad' which specialist language students typically undertake is often called the 'year abroad', and the latter may be the most effective literature search term in British contexts. Individual variation – which is frequently shorthand for the combined influence of the other nineteen contextual variables, as well as the profile of the individual participant – means that a four-week group stay can lead to measurable linguistic gain while a three-year whole-programme degree course may not.

**9. Outgoing/incoming group**

Social networks are formed soon after arriving in the foreign country, and typically remain fairly stable for the rest of the sojourn, although they may expand to include both other outsiders and locals. In many programmes, particularly those involving American or Asian students, there is a deliberate attempt to create a coherent group dynamic before departure and while the students are abroad, in order to counter the potentially debilitating effects of isolation and the stress of constantly using the target language (L2). There is evidence that such a secure base can allow students to take more risks in the L2. However, it also means that much of the time is spent using the mother tongue (L1) and recalling a shared home culture (C1), which can undermine the immersion experience. It also makes contact with locals more difficult.

The traditional British approach is for language students to travel alone as English language assistants, meeting their fellows only for a few days of training at the start, and thereafter benefiting from a ready-made professional position in the local society. The ERASMUS scheme, by the nature of the reciprocal exchange arrangements, tends instead to send small groups to particular locations. However, once there, and especially if accommodation is provided separately from that offered to native students, they can often aggregate into a loose confederation of outsiders. The film *L'auberge espagnole* celebrates such an international grouping, with its tensions and short-term relationships but also its possible linguistic and intercultural benefits. Googling ERASMUS Orgasmus will bring up the fun, partying side of such social arrangements, rather than the more formal educational outcomes.

A very different experience often awaits whole-programme students. Whether or not sponsored by their home state, and despite attempts by the host institution to promote integration, such groups tend to congregate with fellow-country(wo)men, to the detriment of linguistic and other gains.

**10. L1**

Native speakers of a mother tongue (L1) with wide international currency, especially English, find it harder to engage abroad in target language (L2) interactions. Not only are locals often keen to practise their English, but English is often the most easily available *lingua franca* among the groups of international students which often form the incomer's social networks. On the other hand, native speakers of LWULTS (less widely used and less taught languages) may benefit from using both English as *lingua franca* and the L2. The more systematic features of particular L1-L2 pairs have been researched in both classroom and autonomous contexts.

**11. L2**

The status of *lingua francas*, and notably educational *lingua francas*, among which English plays a global role (Coleman 2006b), means that the nominal target language may be less prominent in the immersion context than students expect. The number of full programmes delivered in English in Europe's universities tripled between 2002 and 2007 (Wächter & Maiworm 2008) and continues to expand in parallel with universities' international ambitions. With social interactions also taking place in a *lingua franca*, the study abroad context may thus add to the well-documented challenges of specific L2s.

**12. Accommodation**

Homestay is common in many study abroad programmes, especially those organised for North American students, or, for example, Jackson's (2008) Hong Kong Chinese students in the United Kingdom. Homestay is itself a sub-category of study abroad research, while university residences (or dormitories) provide ready-made social networks, whose role as a source of linguistic and cultural input will depend on their own origins. Longer-term study abroad may see students moving out of organised accommodation into individual or shared apartments, which tends to intensify the relationships with fellow-nationals, other non-locals or locals.

**13. Accommodation shared by**

Shared accommodation is a major determinant of social networks, whatever the model of study abroad. In the island model, students may be in homestay or a residence, but normally with peers. Within Europe, many universities reserve residence places for ERASMUS students, but the resultant concentration of non-locals often leads to their socialising with each other rather than with locals. This may, however, lead to intercultural gains, and the L2 may well become the *lingua franca*. Heidelberg University is one of many which seek to optimise the social integration of incoming ERASMUS students by offering half of the rooms in its residences to German students, at a reduced rent, in return for a commitment to socialising with the foreign students and supporting their acculturation.

**14. Programme of non-language courses followed**

Within the island model of study abroad, courses are often arranged by the home institution, and may even be taught by its academic staff. In commercial study abroad programmes with a specific language focus, there may be no other courses, or at most an induction or orientation and a few excursions. Within ERASMUS, most or all of the formal study will consist of 'content' courses, while, for international students, initial or (occasionally) continuing language tuition will form only a minor part of their exposure to courses designed for native speakers. The different models clearly call on different levels of academic literacy and adaptation to the local learning culture, and offer widely divergent exposure to formal genres and registers of the L2.

**15. Programme of language courses followed**

By no means all studies report the specific extent of formal language teaching included in the study abroad programme, presumably in the assumption that such programmes always includes a certain level of classroom language teaching. This is regrettable, since any generalised conclusions about the impact of linguistic immersion must be assumed to be moderated by classroom instruction. At one extreme, that of in-country language programmes, language classes are the only formal tuition provided. At the other extreme, where students already possess near-native L2 proficiency, language courses are neither required nor provided. Even where the extent of formal tuition *is* given, it may be a complicating factor. An interesting and often-cited example is the authoritative study by Segalowitz & Freed (2004: 178-179), where the study-abroad group actually have *more* classroom hours than the control at-home group.

**16. Programme taught by**

Students who travel abroad under the wing of home-institution academic staff may find some of all of their classes taught by faculty they already know, which may reduce anxiety but equally reduce exposure to new academic experiences. Within European exchanges, the difference in approach between home and host universities is often one of the earliest and most eye-opening instances of cultural difference, reflected in accessibility of lecturers, size and frequency of classes, timetabling arrangements and just how the institution and the individual share responsibility for structuring and accounting for the latter's learning. For international students and within ERASMUS exchanges, all courses are delivered by local staff, and mostly in the local language.

However, the internationalisation process, especially within Europe, often means that the lecturer or tutor is not a native speaker of the local language. This arises both as a consequence of the deliberate policy of creating a European Higher Education Area, and of the growing international market in academic posts. In a climate of globalised, marketised higher education (GATS is just one example), international teaching experience is more and more a requirement for a successful academic career. It is interesting to note that incoming NNS (non-native speaker) students find understanding easier with other NNS students and NNS lecturers than they do the often idiom-laden and dialectally marked discourse of local staff and students (Coleman 2006b).

**17. Language of tuition**

As has already been noted, the presumed coincidence between the language(s) of the target country and the language of tuition is no longer automatic. The February 2009 Wulkow Memorandum, a statement from representatives of Language Centres across Europe
(http://www.ucml.ac.uk/sites/default/files/events/The%20Wulkow%20Memorandum%20all%20lang.pdf), seeks to reconcile this accelerating Englishisation with Europe's commitment to multilingualism: 'Language Centres at Institutions of Higher Education actively recognise and promote the acquisition of all languages as part of an ongoing commitment to multilingualism, while acknowledging and supporting the role of English as a Lingua franca' (p.1). Where formal instruction is part of the study

abroad experience – and this applies in most cases – it will be more and more necessary to specify the proportion of instruction in each language.

**18. Professional content**

It has repeatedly been claimed that a work placement is the most effective form of study abroad, both because the immersion in an entirely L2 environment ensures a maximum of meaningful exposure, and because students acquire professional knowledge, skills and contacts which stand them in good stead for their future career. Evidence tends, however, to be anecdotal, and subjects self-selected. There is as yet insufficient research into related forms of study abroad such as volunteering, military srevice, or religious missions.

**19. Institutional support**

Once again, the island model or commercial language placement provides an all-enveloping cocoon, while international whole-programme students may have little or no institutional support. The ERASMUS programme allows for local Programme Coordinators to meet and greet, and sometimes provide ongoing counsel, but such affordance usually depends on the individual academic's willingness to help despite a lack of resources and of professional recognition. Yet the level of host institution support will frequently influence not just academic outcomes, and needs to be addressed in reports.

**20. Assessment**

Programmes vary considerably in the whether, who and how of assessment. Even linguistic outcomes are often taken for granted and left untested, while personal outcomes may be unquantifiable except through self-report, for example in learner diaries. A whole literature exists on the desirability, feasibility and methodology of assessing gains in intercultural competence. But assessment normally impacts on effort and motivation, and its existence and nature are worth recording.

**Conclusion**

More needs to be written on just how a particular label sets the taxonomy's parameters – although a start has been made, for example by Shaw et al. (2008). The discussion would also benefit from the reflections of other researchers who might choose to unpack in very different ways the twenty proposed variables, or indeed offer an alternative set which would help provide more robust generalisations about the goals and outcomes of study abroad.

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