The careers of language study abroad alumni: Results and applications from a mixed-methods investigation

Celeste Kinginger & Jingyuan Zhuang
Penn State University, Department of Applied Linguistics

Amelia J. Dietrich
The Forum on Education Abroad

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Online
Project partners

- *Design and survey field testing/administration*: American Councils for International Education

- *Recruitment*: The Forum on Education Abroad, partner universities and SA providers

- *Dissemination*: WPSU Public Television, Multilingual Matters/Channel View Publications

- *Funding*: United States Department of Education
Research questions

• To what extent and how is language ability valued, recognized and cultivated across the lifespan of U.S.-based FL learners?

• How have language ability and study abroad figured in the career development of these participants?
Method

• Sequential explanatory mixed-methods design
  • First strand: Large-scale quantitative online survey
  • Second strand: Qualitative professional life history interviews with selected survey participants
Data collection: Survey

• Large-scale online survey (SurveyMonkey, February-June 2019)
• U.S.-based, self-identifying language study abroad alumni
• 4,899 complete responses
• Main topics:
  • Perceived impact on professional options
  • Language profile (learning and use)
  • Study abroad
  • Education
  • Employment
  • Demographics (gender and age group)
Data collection: Interviews

• 54 interviews completed via Zoom (September 2019 - June 2020)
• Variety of professions matching the survey (education, arts, business, engineering, medicine, sports, etc.)
• Main topics: professional life story, college study abroad experiences, influences in childhood, language maintenance
Highlights from survey findings

• Study abroad
  • Reasons for study abroad
  • Multiple sojourns and their durations

• Language learning
  • What languages
  • How many languages

• Employment
  • Fields of employment
  • Language use at work
Primary reason for study abroad

- Live abroad: 40.8%
- Learn/improve a foreign language: 34.3%
- Study in a foreign language: 6.8%
- Experience different learning/teaching methods and environment: 5.4%
- Improve and widen my career prospects in the future: 3.9%
- Meet new people: 2.3%
- Develop “soft skills”: 1.3%
- Register for courses that are not available in my home institution: 1.1%
- Enhance my employability in my home country: 0.8%
- Enhance my employability abroad: 0.7%
- Possibility to receive financial support to study abroad: 0.7%
Multiple sojourns and their durations

Duration of study abroad:
- Short term (2-8 weeks)
- Semester (2-5 months)
- Academic year (6-11 months)
- Full year or more (12+ months)
The ten most common languages in our sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>69.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>48.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>26.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>17.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>9.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>8.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>7.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>7.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>6.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Generational changes in the languages learned

The chart illustrates the percentage of individuals learning different languages across various age groups. The languages include Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Each line represents the percentage of learners for a specific language across different age groups (e.g., < 25, 25-30, 31-35, 36-40, 41-50, 51-60, and over 60). The trends show how the preference for learning specific languages changes with age.
How many languages has each person studied?

- One language: 29%
- Two languages: 32%
- Three languages: 20%
- Four languages: 12%
- Five or more languages: 7%

Percentage of respondents (%)
How many people in our sample are employed? (77%, $n = 3786$)

Percentage of employed respondents from each age group
Fields of employment

- Education: 43%
- Other: 17%
- Health: 9%
- Technology: 5%
- Professional and Business Services: 5%
- Finance: 4%
- International Affairs/Development: 4%
- Business: 4%
- Agriculture: 1%
- Construction: 1%
- Energy: 1%
- Manufacturing: 2%
- Media: 2%
- Transportation: 1%
- Real Estate: 1%
- Telecommunications: 1%
- Tourism (including Leisure & Hospitality): 2%
- Manufacturing: 1%
How many people have used their additional languages at work? 
(65%, n = 2429)

List of languages that are used at work (by at least five respondents)

- Spanish
- French
- German
- Italian
- Chinese
- Japanese
- Portuguese
- Russian
- Arabic
- Dutch
- Korean
- Hebrew
- Swedish
- Latin
- Greek
- Turkish
- Polish
- Norwegian
- Danish
- Swahili
- Thai
- Haitian Creole
- Ukrainian
- Vietnamese
- Hindi
- American Sign Language
- Finnish
- Other

Percentage among all reported languages (%)

- Spanish 40%
- French 22%
- German 9%
- Italian 4%
- Other

(65%, n = 2429)
Interviewee selection: Life history typology

- 2741 willing participants
- To interview as wide and representative range of survey participants as possible

- Developed with Multiple Correspondence Analysis (Greenacre & Blasius, 2006)

A typology of study abroad (SA) participants’ life pathways
# Operationalizing SA participants’ life pathways

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Variable (survey question number)</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants’</strong></td>
<td>L2 use</td>
<td>Number of L2 activity types (Q17)</td>
<td>&lt;25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>present</em> (MCA I)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Number of L2 interlocutor types (Q19)</td>
<td>25-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Type of organization (Q38)</td>
<td></td>
<td>31-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work sector (Q40)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Position (Q39)</td>
<td></td>
<td>36-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural capital</td>
<td>Undergraduate institution’s admission rate (Q49, Q56)</td>
<td></td>
<td>41-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Highest degree (Q50, Q57)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants’ past</strong></td>
<td>SA experience</td>
<td>Top reason for SA (Q22)</td>
<td>51-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(MCA II)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Duration of first SA program (Q23)</td>
<td>&gt;60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA)

• A multivariate exploratory statistical technique that analyzes the pattern of relationships among several categorical variables based on associational frequency (Greenacre & Blasius, 2006)

• Mapping associations:
  • Proximity of points = greater association between the variables

Applying MCA to the project survey

• MCA maps as a descriptive tool to identify different groups of participants (Purhonen & Wright, 2013)

• Conducted two MCAs within each of the seven age groups

• Steps:
  • Cross-tabulate sets of variables with one another
  • Map the associations between variables (“modalities map”)
  • Map participants into the same space (“individuals map”)
  • Randomly select participants from each quadrant of the final combined map
An example of *modalities map* created from MCA

An example of *individuals map* created from MCA
Highlights from qualitative data

Younger participants are more career-focused than older participants.

Younger participants are learning languages in the “digital wild.”

The homestay is more memorable than other housing arrangements.

Study abroad often provokes discovery or revision of vocations.

What matters is the ontogenetic significance of study abroad in a lifetime of experience, students’ socio-economic horizons.
Implications of this research for CLAC practitioners...

- The outcomes observed in this study are the result of thinking about language learning through a cultures and languages across the curriculum lens
- Integrating study of language into the curriculum (as was done in the study abroad experiences of the participants surveyed and interviewed) amplifies the values and outcomes of the experience for students/alumni
- Compelling evidence that CLAC works
Practical Implications for Education Abroad...
Career - Integrated Global Learning: before, during, and long after

Language skills and study abroad experiences impact alumni's career decisions and satisfaction long after they return home. Give them the tools to incorporate education abroad into how they present themselves as professionals.

Suggested Resources:
• GoinGlobal Career Guides
In language and cultural competency development, deep engagement and outside-your-comfort-zone applications of their nascent skills leave a lasting impact.

- Homestays vs. apartments or dorms
- Internships
- Community engagement activities

Suggested Resources:

- *Prompts for Self-Assessment*
Don’t “phone in” the re-entry phase

Despite career focus early on, over the lifespan of a person, Study Abroad can have many other benefits and impacts. Don’t limit reflection work or program design to catering to the short-term wants and needs of students who are career-oriented. Take a whole-person approach.

Suggested Resources:

• Leading Short-Term Education Abroad Programs: Know the Standards, 2nd Edition (2022)
• https://students.tufts.edu/tufts-global-education/prepare/returning/life-after-study-abroad
• https://www.studyabroad.gsu.edu/_customtags/ct_FileRetrieve.cfm?File_ID=75073
Project partners: Universities

Arizona State University
Dickinson College
Indiana University
Michigan State University
Northwestern University
University of Kansas
University of Michigan
University of Oregon CASLS
University of West Georgia

Bentley University
The George Washington University
James Madison University
Northern Arizona University
Tulane University
University of New Orleans
University of Minnesota
University of Rochester
Yale University
Project partners: International Education Organizations

Amideast
API Academic Programs International
CAPA Global Education Network
CEA Study Abroad
CET Academic Programs
IFA Institute for Field Education
IFSA Future Focused Study Abroad
ISA International Studies Abroad
ISEP International Student Exchange Programs
Spanish Studies Abroad
WYSE Travel Confederation
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Thank you!