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Language Learning and Acculturation: Lessons From High School and Gap-Year Exchange Students

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Abstract: *This study investigates the relationship between acculturation and language learning during a year-long study abroad program at the pre-collegiate level. The researcher presents the experiences of four U.S. American sojourners to Sweden as case studies. This mixed-methods study looks specifically at students with no prior knowledge of the target language. The researcher compared descriptions of students' acculturation and a measure of their acculturative outcomes to their language development as measured by an unofficial Oral Proficiency Interview after 5 and 10 months. The results indicated that higher levels of acculturation are associated with higher levels of proficiency, while a rejection of the host culture is associated with lower levels of proficiency. The researcher presents the implications for study abroad program designs that support language learning.*

Key words: *Swedish, acculturation, high school, homestay, oral proficiency, study abroad*

Introduction

When it comes to language learning, one often assumes that studying abroad will result in the development of superior language skills. One may often view a semester or year abroad as the capstone experience in one's career as a foreign language learner. Yet great variation in language acquisition exists among participants in study abroad programs. Schumann (1986) and Ward (Ward, 1996; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001) suggest that language learning may be directly or indirectly influenced by acculturative outcomes. How and to what extent an exchange student acculturates seems to be influenced by many variables, including how the program is structured (host community, family, and school), as well as the individual's personality.

To date, much research has focused on college-level programs and the ways in which they build on previous language study to enhance language learning. Yet relatively little attention has been paid to high school and gap-year program parti-

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cipants,[1] and language educators know very little about the experiences of sojourners with no previous exposure to the target language prior to study abroad. This study asks the following questions: (1) What language gains are made by beginners who participate in a high school or gap-year program abroad? and (2) Which acculturative outcome(s) support(s) higher levels of language learning? Furthermore, this study aims to inform our understanding of the roles of program design (such as the families and communities where students are placed and student participation in mainstream classrooms) as well as how the individual personality variables such as assertiveness and sense of humor impact acculturation and language learning.

Review of Literature

Extended and continuous contact with host nationals[2] puts exchange students in a position to experience changes in behavior, values, emotions, and language. The term *acculturation* refers to "the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language group" (Schumann, 1986, p. 379).[3] According to Schumann, "the learner will acquire the second language only to the degree that he acculturates" (1986, p. 379). Schumann's model was created to describe the immigrant experience, but the factors he identified are appealing to researchers of study abroad experiences as well.

In his model, Berry (1997) identified four outcomes that result from cross-cultural contact that describe the extent to which an individual might experience acculturation. First, assimilation occurs when an individual gives up his or her own cultural identity to wholly adopt a new culture. Separation refers to the opposite situation, in which an individual rejects the new or dominant culture and avoids contact with host nationals. Integration refers to a situation in which an individual maintains the first culture while seeking to participate in the social networks of the new culture. Finally, when an individual rejects both the new and the first culture, minimization occurs.

Pre-collegiate exchange students are generally afforded increased opportunity to interact with native speakers of the target language because they reside in a homestay environment and participate in a mainstream high school classroom. As a result, the high school or gap-year student is "submersed" in the target language community in a way that the college-level sojourner often is not (Marriott, 1995). Some programmatic elements seem to support more meaningful, plentiful, and supportive interactions with host nationals, such as the homestay environment (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004). Language educators should examine this contact to inform our understanding of how these interpersonal relationships are supported by program environments and what role they play in the individual language learning experience.

As Lapkin, Hart, and Swain (1995) pointed out, living with host families and attending public school provide students with one-to-one contact, resulting in a more intense cross-cultural experience. In a study of pre-collegiate exchange students, Ward and Kennedy (1993) found that language learning was related to increased time spent with host nationals and less time spent with co-nationals. In another study, students who had language as a specific personal goal of their study abroad experience viewed the host family "as an integral part in achieving that goal" (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004, p. 261).

However, living with a host family does not guarantee a successful language learning environment. In a study looking at exchange students going to Russia, Rivers (1998) found that students residing in homestay environments underperformed their peers who lived in dorms in terms of speaking gains. Rivers noted the importance of matching sojourners with compatible hosts who "will take an active interest in the participant, providing more interaction with the participant" (1998, p. 497). Clearly the positive effect of homestay

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environments relies on a good match between hosts and their students.

Freed explained, "It has long been assumed that this combination of immersion in the native speech community, integrated with formal classroom learning, creates the best environment for learning a second language" (1995a, p. 5). Paige noted that "the less language ability the sojourner possesses, the greater will be the psychological intensity of the experience," and that "lack of language skills can lead to social isolation or frustration" (1993, p. 7). For the pre-collegiate exchange student, formal language instruction is not always guaranteed. Many exchange students are placed in countries where less commonly taught languages are spoken and less of a tradition of teaching those languages as a foreign language exist. Formal instruction is often offered but not necessarily required for many exchange students.

Many studies have looked at the real linguistic benefits of study abroad programs. Students who study abroad make gains in oral proficiency that are more profound than the gains made by students who do not go abroad (Carroll, 1967; Clement, 1978; Gardner, Glickman, & Smyth, 1978; Magnan, 1986; Ryan & Lafford, 1992). For example, in a study comparing study abroad students in Mexico and Spain to a control group back in the United States, Lafford (1995) found that students who studied abroad outperformed their peers at home in terms of communicative strategies usage and were generally better able to converse using appropriate language structures. Similarly, study abroad participants appeared to outperform their at-home peers in terms of fluency development (Freed, 1995b). In particular, rate of speech and the length of fluent speech runs were found to be associated with fluent-sounding speech in study abroad participants. Finally, Freed questioned whether students without prior exposure to the target language should be encouraged to study abroad (1995a, p. 17). It is important to look at absolute beginner language learners in study abroad programs because they represent a large group of exchange students who travel to countries where less commonly taught languages are spoken.

Personality factors are also believed to influence cross-cultural adaptation and language learning. Schumann (1986) noted that an extroverted personality can benefit from acculturation. Similarly, one would expect traits such as persistence and assertiveness to promote successful cross-cultural adaptation. This study also looked at the sojourner's sense of humor as a personality trait that might be influential.

Method

It would be impossible, and even impractical, to investigate naturalistic language learning without taking into account the rich social environment in which it happens. This study uses a case study approach, which allows for a view of language learning and cross-cultural adaptation as a socially mediated process. This study employs the ethnographic methods of observation, interviews, and field notations to understand and describe the personal experiences of the sojourners. Measures of language learning and acculturation further illuminate the individual development of each exchange student.

Participants

The researcher selected four U.S. pre-collegiate students studying abroad in Sweden for an academic year for this study. The students were all participants in a well-established study abroad program henceforth referred to as Exchange Program, or EP. The EP office in Stockholm was instrumental in identifying possible participants for the study, recommending both male and female students, gap-year and high school students, and a mix of urban, suburban, and rural host communities. EP also provided some basic personality descriptions, including student interests, along with recommendations for inclusion in the study (see Table 1). Despite variation in the size of host communities, the schools attended by all participants were similar in size, and all

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TABLE 1

Overview of Participants

Participant*	Age at Arrival	Status	Student Characteristics	Host Community
Faith	18	Gap-year	Friendly, hockey player	Medium-sized town
Elsa	18	Gap-year	Thoughtful, social	Urban
Jenny	16	High school	Outgoing, soccer player	Medium-sized town
Max	17	Gap-year	Thoughtful, quiet, musical	Rural

*Pseudonyms

students were placed in mainstream classrooms. Similarly, all students participated to some extent in a pull-out model Swedish for Immigrants class, called SFI. All students were placed in two-parent host families with children living at home.

Due to delays in obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, the study began in January 2004. However, the students arrived in Sweden in late August and had been in Sweden for about 5 months prior to the first round of data collection. The researcher identified students for inclusion in the study in early September, following a week-long in-country orientation organized by EP. The researcher did not deem previous data regarding the students' oral proficiency levels necessary, as none of the students had studied Swedish prior to arrival.[4]

Data Sources

The researcher gathered both qualitative and quantitative data for this study during the course of 5 months. Data collection took place during January and May in Sweden, and via e-mail between February and April.

Qualitative data included:

1. *Observations of students*. The researcher "shadowed" students during a typical day at school and after school. Each shadow resulted in 8–12 hours of continuous observation. Observations took place in January and in May.
2. *Interviews with students, teachers, and host parents*. On the day of the observation, the researcher conducted interviews to hear about the students' experiences from multiple perspectives (see Appendix A).
3. *Monthly e-mail questionnaires*. Each participant e-mailed answers to questions provided by the researcher in February, March, and April (see Appendix B).

Quantitative data included oral proficiency interviews (OPIs) and the Acculturation Index (AI). The researcher conducted unofficial OPIs with each participant as a measure of their proficiency level in January and again in May. This interview format was originally developed by the Foreign Services Institute (FSI) and later revised by the Interagency Languages Roundtable (ILR).[5] The researcher chose to score the OPIs using the FSI-ILR scales for Swedish because those scales provided a wide range of Swedish-specific descriptors.

The researcher, who is familiar with ACTFL OPI protocols, although not a certified interviewer or tester, recorded and transcribed the OPIs prior to rating.[6] The interviews followed the following format: a warm-up, a level check, several probes, and then two role-play situations. The interviews ended with some general

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questioning, which served as a cool-down. The format ensured that students were led naturally into conversation that evoked as many grammatical forms as possible, including all tenses, adjectives, pronouns, plurals, etc. The OPIs took between 10 and 18 minutes and were conducted by the researcher entirely in Swedish. The researcher transcribed and analyzed the OPI data in terms of oral proficiency. The FSI proficiency grid for Swedish includes 58 language features under the levels of *verbs; nouns, adjectives, and idioms; word order*; and *other*. The researcher analyzed each speech sample in terms of the presence or absence of all 58 features, and for correct usage of each feature. A native Swedish speaker OPI rater[7] provided a global judgment based on listening to the interview. This general impression was used simply to confirm the researcher's own, more thorough judgment. In each case, the native speaker rater confirmed the researcher's judgment of proficiency level.

The researcher used the AI to gauge the acculturative outcome of each exchange student. In May, each student completed the AI using a think-aloud protocol (see Appendix C).

Missing and Altered Data

Please note some exceptions to the data collection. Participant Elsa's second host parent interview was conducted over the telephone, and her second OPI was conducted via telephone following her return to the United States. Participant Faith's host parents were not available for an interview in January, so the researcher did not collect these data.

Student Profiles

The researcher interviewed and observed all the students in this study for the first time in January. The following profiles reflect those initial observations and interviews.

Faith had turned 18 prior to coming to Sweden. She had been placed in a picturesque town in central Sweden. In January, I followed Faith to her first class and noticed that she spoke easily with her Swedish classmates, and I immediately recognized just how good her Swedish was already. Faith had two older brothers who had studied in Europe with EP, so she had known for a long time that she wanted to go abroad. She waited until after she had graduated from high school so that she wouldn't miss out on sports. Faith was from a medium-sized city in the Midwest.

> I wanted to go somewhere I could play hockey. And my brothers went to Switzerland and Finland, so they said "don't go to the same places we went to, you have to go somewhere new."

Faith's host family was very involved in the local hockey scene. Svea, her host mother, was the women's team captain, and their daughter Astrid was the goalie for the team.

> [Hockey's] our main thing together. I mean otherwise we'll go out and walk around with the dogs, or something. But that's our main thing.

Although her family lived outside of town, public buses allowed her to move freely about the community, and her host family often came into town for hockey games. Faith was placed in a first-year mainstream class with 16-year-olds and found that it was sometimes difficult to socialize with her classmates.

Elsa was an 18-year-old high school graduate. My first impression upon meeting her was that she was thoughtful and mature. She was tall, blonde, and slim and could easily pass for a Swede. When I met Elsa at school she seemed happy to see me and eagerly showed me around the building. Elsa told me that she arrived already knowing a little about Sweden because her uncle was married to a Swedish woman.

Elsa was placed in a host family with three younger siblings in an affluent suburb of Stockholm.

> I was so excited when I talked to them on the phone the first time, because I

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> realized I had 3 younger siblings. And my host mother, Linda, is really nice. I really like her, and we get along.

From Elsa's town, one could easily reach central Stockholm in about half an hour. Because of its proximity to Stockholm, Elsa's school was diverse by Swedish standards. Because of the large immigrant population, many languages were spoken. The school also had a strong tradition of hosting EP students, and Elsa was one of six foreign exchange students at her school that year.

Jenny was the youngest participant in the study, only 16 years old. Jenny's school was a short walk from the downtown shopping district, and I met Jenny at the reception desk before school started one January morning. Not only was she talking with another girl in Swedish, but she was also the only participant in the study who initiated our first conversation entirely in Swedish.

Jenny had long brown hair and blue eyes, and she smiled confidently as she walked around the school. She said *hej* [hello] to everyone she knew, and students called out questions to her as if she were just another student. I learned that she was from a mid-sized town on the West Coast, but that she spent much of her life in a small town—smaller than this one. Jenny was the only participant who had Swedish ancestry. Jenny was attracted to the excitement of study abroad and told me that her number one goal was to learn Swedish.

Jenny spoke enthusiastically about her host family, as she was very close to her host parents as well as her host sister Lillan.

> Oh, well they're really nice. My sister is a year younger than me . . . we are really good friends. And in the beginning we did like EVERYTHING together.

Jenny's school was a fairly large high school, and Jenny divided her time between her regular Swedish class and her SFI classes. Jenny's mainstream class was a first-year group with other 16-year-olds.

Max was hosted by a family in a small town in southern Sweden, although he was from a very large city on the West Coast of the United States. He was interested in languages and spoke some Spanish and Italian. Max struck me as shy and thoughtful. When he walked, Max looked at the ground and walked with a quick gait. When we would pass students or teachers he knew, they would exchange a quick *hej* [hello], or more often a "hi" in English, but Max generally did not stop to chat. He told me that he had decided to spend an EP year in Sweden because he had graduated early. At school, Max divided his time between his mainstream class and his SFI class.

Max had an expectation that his year in Sweden would involve a more exciting social life than this town could offer. In January I asked him what the host community was like, to which he replied:

> Well there's not many things to do. To be completely honest with you, it's kind of boring right now.

During our January meeting, I got the impression that Max was generally disappointed with his year thus far. Max's living situation did not provide for much opportunity to socialize in town. There were no city buses, so his transportation was limited to the school bus and asking for rides from his friends and host parents, as his host family lived on a dairy farm about 8 kilometers from the town center.

Findings

The researcher measured participants' oral proficiency in Swedish at the 5- and 10-month marks using an OPI, and the results are presented in Table 2. The scores ranged from 1 + (Intermediate-High on the ACTFL scale) to 3 + (Superior). None of the participants reached the superlative levels of 4 or 5 (Distinguished or Native).

The OPI scores ranged from Intermediate-High (Max) to Superior (Faith) after participants had spent only 5 months in Sweden. By month 10, three of the participants had reached the level of Superior. This is remarkable when compared to

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TABLE 2

FSI OPI Improvement From January to May

	OPI 1 (January)		OPI 2 (May)	
Participant	FSI Score	ACTFL Level	FSI Score	ACTFL Level
Faith	3.15	Superior	3.81	Superior
Elsa	2.94	Advanced High	3.37*	Superior
Jenny	2.81	Advanced High	3.25	Superior
Max	1.81	Intermediate High	1.87	Intermediate High

*Elsa's second OPI was conducted following her return to the United States.

previous studies using the OPI to measure linguistic gains as a result of study abroad, all of which looked at students who arrived in country with some level of proficiency. For example, O'Connor (1988) found that following a year abroad, college students who arrived in France with ACTFL ratings of Intermediate-Mid or High moved to Intermediate-High or Advanced (in Freed, 1995a). In a study of 22 college students with an Intermediate-Mid ACTFL rating in Russian prior to studying abroad, less than half of the participants improved their OPI scores over the course of a semester abroad (Golonka, 2006). While it is not surprising that absolute beginners would make significant strides in terms of language, it is interesting that three of the four participants in this study reached higher levels of proficiency than has been observed in other studies (Freed, 1995a; Golonka, 2006; O'Connor, 1988).

AI

The AI, developed by Ward and Rana-Deuba (1999), measures the degree to which a person has adapted to the host culture. Participants responded to 21 areas of adaptation in terms of how closely they identified with U.S. and Swedish culture. The result was an indication of how strongly the individual associated with home and host culture. Using the AI, each sojourner showed evidence of stronger and weaker acculturative outcomes. The four categories were integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization (Berry, 1990). The AI is included in Appendix C.

The findings of the AI appear in Table 3. Faith identified more with Swedes than with Americans on most items, making her the most assimilated participant. Elsa rated herself as more like a Swede on 9 of the items, and more like an American on 11. Her outcome indicates an identity balancing between two cultures, but not really integrated. Instead, she felt strongly American in many ways, and strongly Swedish in others. Jenny topped the group in terms of items where she felt equally Swedish and American, landing her in the category of integrated. Max rated himself more like a Swede on only 3 items, and more like an American on 13 of the items. His acculturative outcome was primarily that of separation. On 4 of the items, Max felt very dissimilar from both Swedes and Americans. He was the only participant to exhibit traits of marginalization, which Berry described as the feeling of not belonging to either culture (Berry, 1997).

Case Study Analysis

Observation data, e-mail questionnaires, and interviews with host parents and teachers help illustrate the acculturative experiences of these four students during their

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TABLE 3

Acculturation Index Report by Participant

	More Like a Swede (Assimilation)	Equally Like a Swede and an American (Integration)	More Like an American (Separation)	Like Neither an American nor a Swede (Marginalization)
Faith	14	2	5	0
Elsa	9	1	11	0
Jenny	5	12	4	0
Max	3	1	13	4

stay in Sweden. The descriptions provided in the case study analysis exemplify the distinctive acculturative outcomes of each student, as measured by the AI. Analysis of the qualitative data also revealed evidence for the effects of certain personality variables, including assertiveness and sense of humor.[8]

From my very first visit, I noticed how Faith seemed to blend into her school environment and used Swedish readily and easily. In January, she described her cultural identity as shifting depending on whom she was with.

> How Swedish do I feel? It depends on who I am talking with. I'll say something, and I'll feel like "Oh, I am SOOO good at this!" And sometimes I feel like "Ohhh, I'm never gonna get this!" But generally I am feeling more Swedish.

Faith's comments suggested that she was able to balance both cultural identities. Already in January she was "feeling more Swedish" and at the same time working to redefine her American identity. Below, Faith reflected on a situation where her American identity was challenged, and she felt pressure to explain and defend her cultural identity.

> But sometimes, like after [we watched] *Bowling for Columbine*, people said, "Do you have guns at your house?" and I was like "God, I am such an American."

For Faith, embracing the Swedish lifestyle indeed came easily because of the common interests she shared with her host family. Furthermore, Faith seemed genuinely happy and exhibited a sense of humor regarding her own culture and the culture of her hosts. This sense of humor made her popular with her classmates. During our January visit, I witnessed numerous occasions where Faith would initiate or partake in jokes and humor. For example, the following observation note illustrates both her humor and her assertiveness:

> They all move over to look at something that one girl is reading. They are in a big clump, Faith holds one corner [of the paper] and reads through with them, and laughs at one point and reads aloud for the group, then looks up. They all laugh and then hand the paper back to the girl it belongs to.

Faith usually sought support from her host family and classmates rather than from other EP students. She cited playing hockey and watching television together as situations where her language improved. After my first visit to Faith, she informed me that she had stopped attending her SFI courses, stating that she was learning more Swedish by attending mainstream courses than she did in those language classes.

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> It's hard sometimes when we do, like we just did this really big Kyoto project, where we had like the Kyoto protocol, but I wasn't in *that* Swedish class at that time, so when they were in there working on it, I was off in SFI. But now I am in that class, which is sort of nice. And now that I've been able to learn more of the language, I've been able to participate more in what's going on, and understand what's going on. And so I've become more part of the class. (emphasis in original)

Assertiveness served Faith well and allowed her to access Swedes, particularly at school. During the January observation it was apparent that Faith was on equal footing with her Swedish peers. She fully participated in pair and group work and offered comments and assistance to her fellow students, always using Swedish. Even with limited Swedish ability, she consistently put forth the effort to take tests and hand in assignments, despite the fact that she did not need the credit for the class. Faith's teacher offered the following insight regarding her assertiveness:

> I just want to emphasize that she is incredibly ambitious, and she's not afraid of buckling down and doing some work, that's how it seems. Even if she's really here to learn the language, she goes ahead and does other things too.

Faith maximized her contact with Swedes also through her participation in the mainstream classroom, as well as by playing hockey. Her AI score identified her as having largely assimilated, a descriptor supported by the interviews and observations. Faith was the most proficient student in the group, in both January and May. Her case offers support for the notion that increased contact with host nationals and cultural assimilation are associated with language gains in study abroad.

Elsa was an enthusiastic exchange student, and in January she spoke passionately about her EP year thus far.

> [My year in Sweden is] better than I ever could have expected. Yes. 100%! Oh, everyday I think about, or a lot of times when I e-mail home I just say things like "I just can't believe how wonderful it is."

Yet Elsa's experiences in school and with her host family and friends both helped and hindered her ability to learn Swedish. At home, her host mother would often help her with homework, and her very young host sister always wanted to bake cookies and play in Swedish. Yet she had fewer opportunities to use Swedish in school. SFI was an issue for Elsa because some of her courses took her away from her mainstream class and resulted in much more socializing with fellow EP students rather than Swedish classmates.

For Elsa, acculturation, and specifically cultural identity, was something relative and difficult to define. In January, she spoke about her cultural identity changing as a result of her time in Sweden.

> Yeah, I don't think I feel very American. But I don't know, I guess I do feel sort of Swedish now. Now, I don't have *so* many Swedish friends that we do things together . . . . but yeah, I guess I *do* feel Swedish. (emphasis in original)

From the perspective of her teachers, Elsa was seen as "adaptable" but also Swedish in many ways. Here are comments from two teachers in January.

> Teacher 1: She could be taken for a Swede, yes I think so. A very nice young Swedish girl, yes.
> Teacher 2: I would say that she doesn't really fit with what we would consider American [laughing].
> Teacher 1: No, she doesn't. She's very interested in the environment, interested in things that *we* consider to be very Nordic. And she's a little timid. Which one doesn't usually associate with Americans. (emphasis in original)

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She also exhibited a healthy sense of humor about learning and speaking Swedish, and in school she was even celebrating personal triumphs.

> And then, I tried to take a test in psychology in Swedish, I wrote about a page in Swedish . . . I was *so* happy, but then I got an IG (fail), because *of course* it's all wrong (laughs). But *that* didn't bother me a bit! Because I had written in Swedish. (emphasis in original)

Elsa's sense of humor was apparent during both observations and prevalent in all her interviews. She did not mind being judged as silly or strange, as evidenced by her story about her psychology test. In addition, she told me that her host family thought it was "a riot" that she took notes from the subtitles as they watched television together.

In January, Elsa noted that being assertive about making Swedish friends was something she found challenging, because she felt she was primarily responsible for putting forth the effort necessary to make meaningful connections.

> Well, partly I think it's my fault, I guess. If I want to do something, I have to be forceful: "Can I come?" and "What's *your* number?" "Can I come over?" "Will you come to my house?" So what I have to go through is just, to pick someone and do that. I just have to force myself. (emphasis in original)

By May, Elsa had come to a realization about assertiveness and the role it played in her language learning. When I asked her what made for a good recipe for learning Swedish, she said:

> You have to speak it, I mean you have to be really frank with them and say, "I really want to speak Swedish." They think they're being polite . . . that's been really frustrating. I want to speak Swedish.

In January Elsa was hesitant to speak Swedish with her peers, but by May she had overcome her fears and indicated a desire and willingness to fully participate in classroom interactions. Elsa's experience illustrates the importance of assertiveness and persistence. Had she not made the effort, she would not have been afforded opportunities to use her Swedish at school. By the end of the year, she indicated that she often felt Swedish, although she continued to feel American in many respects. This assertion mirrors her AI score, which showed her assimilating in some ways and separating in others.

Jenny was Swedish American and said she had always felt a sense of pride over her Swedish heritage. Jenny's open and outgoing personality served her well and allowed her to forge close relationships with her host family as well as her peers at school.

Jenny participated in sports back home and was purposefully placed with a family involved in athletics in Sweden. She described her first days in Sweden:

> And at the beginning he [my host father] was my soccer coach. So I could play soccer the second day I was here—I was on the team and I played soccer. That was awesome!

Jenny's host father recalled the first days with Jenny:

> The first day, we met her at the train that afternoon. And she was really nervous then. Or maybe I should say she was excited. Of course she was, in a new country, new family, and she sat and looked at us. And then we had a lot of soccer to play that weekend. And all Saturday we had "soccer day" and then we played a "friendship game," and she played too. Everything I've suggested, she says "sure, sure." Immediately. She's *always* game. (emphasis in original)

Jenny's teacher also noted how easily she blended into the classroom, even from the first day of school.

> I mean you wouldn't know, she has a Swedish name, and she looks Swedish. If I didn't know her and know who she

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> was, and if I didn't hear her talk, if I only saw her in the hallways, I would think she was Swedish.

Jenny's cultural adaptation was evident already during her January visit. When she spoke in January about her cultural identity she said, "I'm probably 50/50." It was also apparent from the interviews that she had gained a more worldly perspective on current events, noting that she had learned much more about other countries than she had back in the United States.

Jenny spoke warmly about her Swedish host family, and it seemed that from her first days in Sweden she felt supported and accepted by her family. Jenny was also assertive in forming strong relationships with Swedes. While she spoke about the challenges of making friends, she also said that she felt her actions played a critical role in building relationships. Language, she felt, was critical for gaining access to her peer group. Jenny's strong relationship with her Swedish hosts was instrumental in her language development.

Jenny's assertiveness allowed her to gain access to her Swedish peers in the school environment, while her nurturing host family supported her emotionally as well as linguistically. Her AI score indicated integration as her primary acculturative outcome, meaning that she was feeling as Swedish as she felt American. In Jenny's case, integration into the target culture is associated with strong relationships with Swedes and an ability to use Swedish effectively to forge those relationships.

When I first met Max, he struck me as quiet and a bit shy. He said he chose Sweden because it seemed rather "adequate": it was in Europe, it was peaceful, and he thought it might have some good night life. His primary motivation for studying in Sweden was "to fill up a year so I could go to college with my friends." In January, Max was only somewhat interested in learning Swedish. He summed up his efforts as follows:

> I thought it'd be nice to learn Swedish, but I'm not really trying that hard. Like, I don't know, just get through the year, I guess.

For Max, survival became the primary focus of life in Sweden. In his January interview, Max's outlook seemed fairly balanced between negative and positive comments when asked about his linguistic, home, and school experiences. In May, he indicated an overwhelmingly negative view of his year in Sweden. Despite a good relationship with his host mother, many of his biggest challenges seemed to stem from his host family.

> Max: I have nothing to compare them [my family] to. Except I've talked to other exchange students and their families sound a lot more fun.
> Researcher: What are you most frustrated with right now?
> Max: Mmm, my brother. My brother and the lack of transportation. I would really like to go somewhere.

Max appeared less assertive than the other participants, with regard to seeking meaningful contact with Swedes. During his January observation it seemed that Max's introverted nature was preventing him from initiating contact with Swedes. The following notes are taken from an observation:

> Max watches as the math is done on the board. He doesn't take notes. The other students comment on the math, help the teacher etc. . . . She goes over to Max and points to something in the book to help him get started. He reads in the book. He is silent. He just works alone. Either Max already knows how to do this, or he just doesn't want to ask for help.

While his stated goals for his EP year were vague, Max did at one point express a goal to learn Swedish. However, his Swedish proficiency was markedly lower than the other three participants. In February Max wrote, "There's no incentive to speak Swedish. Everyone at least understands English and I can understand Swedish, so there's no need to speak it." Max's teacher

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also commented on his lack of assertiveness and shed light on the day-to-day reality of Max's year in Sweden.

> He's a little bit mistreated. And coupled with the fact that he's not exactly the type who takes initiative, no. And I think that the teachers sometimes forget to support him, to give him some extra help. But with me, he doesn't try to speak Swedish with me; he starts out in English directly.

Max had been placed in both a mainstream classroom and an SFI class. When I visited with the teacher again in May, he was very surprised to hear that Max had not attended any classes since March. The mainstream teacher assumed he was in SFI, while the SFI teacher had assumed he was in the mainstream classroom. This avoidance of class reflects a level of disenfranchisement from the school setting. However, Max also expressed that his strongest support system came from fellow cultural "outsiders," namely, immigrants.

Max's final e-mail correspondence in April included many negative comments concerning Swedes in general as well as Swedes he knew personally. Max distanced himself from Swedes by aligning himself with the immigrants in his school, in the following comments taken from his May interview.

> Oh, if there was another fight like that, and I was nearby, I would fight on the side of the immigrants. I just feel more connected to the immigrants. I guess since most of my friends are immigrants.

Max retained, and perhaps even strengthened, his American identity during his EP year. For Max, there were very few meaningful relationships with Swedes. Besides his host mother and his teacher, Max did not appear to have any Swedish friends. In many respects Max's environment created challenges that proved insurmountable. Being hosted in a rural community in a challenging homestay environment created a situation in which rewarding contact with host nationals was difficult to attain. Max did not receive the kinds of programmatic and social supports he needed to integrate or assimilate, and instead he experienced significant stress associated with his acculturative outcome: separation.

Summary

The findings of this study support the notion that language learning is indeed influenced by acculturation and, more specifically, relationships with host nationals. The first research question asked what linguistic gains were made by exchange students without previous target language ability. This study shows that absolute beginners can make gains comparable to and even surpassing those made by sojourners with a formal background in the target language, as shown in previous studies (Freed 1995a). All four students reached ACTFL level Intermediate-High or higher after only 5 months in Sweden, and three reached the level of Superior by the 10th month. Interestingly, the study did not find formal instruction in Swedish to be the only predictor of language gains. While SFI seems to have benefited some participants in the study, Faith, who ultimately reached the highest level of proficiency, noted that the mainstream classroom offered a richer linguistic environment. This suggests that some absolute beginners participating in high school and gap-year programs can reach high levels of oral proficiency even without ongoing formal instruction; this highlights a need for educators to take a closer look at how formal language instruction can support sojourners. Rather than formal instruction, a supportive host environment and meaningful relationships with host nationals appear to be the most influential elements of the study abroad experience in terms of language learning.

The second research question asked which acculturative outcomes were associated with higher levels of language learning. The acculturative outcome of assimilation

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appears to be most strongly associated with high levels of oral proficiency. The more Faith assumed a Swedish identity, the more her Swedish improved. And as her Swedish improved, her identity shifted even further. An integrative outcome was also associated with good language learning, and overall well-being, as illustrated by Jenny's experience. Elsa's mixed outcomes of assimilation and separation appear to also support language learning and may reflect a balance between two cultural identities rather than an integration of the two.

In contrast, the outcome of separation on its own appears to be associated with distress and a rejection of the new language and culture. Max's experience provides a powerful illustration of separation. The statement he made about fighting on the side of the immigrants against the Swedes offers a striking example of just how disenfranchised he felt. He also stated that he did not see any reason to speak Swedish, as he did not think it would help him communicate with Swedes. His acculturative outcome and language ratings support the notion that separation from host nationals is related to less successful language learning.

The personality factor of assertiveness emerged as particularly important for successful cross-cultural adaptation and language learning. All four participants noted that opportunities to use Swedish did not always come naturally but required effort on their part. The data suggest that the more assertive exchange studens are about using the target language, the higher their level of ultimate language proficiency will be. The other personality factor studied, sense of humor, appeared to assist both Faith and Elsa in risk-taking behaviors related to language. These two students also made the greatest language gains, suggesting that humor may have a positive influence on language learning.

Programmatic variables such as the ability to remain in a mainstream classroom and access to public transportation also appear to play an important role in affording sojourners opportunities to form relationships with their hosts. Clearly, Max's host environment was not a good match for his personality or emotional needs. Exchange programs should attend carefully to placing students in supportive environments and should strive to match students with families and communities that engage sojourners academically, socially, and emotionally.

Implications for Future Research

While this study was limited in terms of the number of individuals studied, it provides a detailed description of the lived experiences of adolescent sojourners. More research is needed to further educators' understanding of what advantages exist to studying abroad prior to college, both socially and psychologically. The findings of this study support the promotion of study abroad opportunities for pre-collegiate sojourners as well as for learners without previous language study. More studies on greater numbers of absolute beginners in study abroad are needed to further investigate how these programs facilitate language learning and what role formal instruction plays in that process.

The study points out the importance of supportive host environments in study abroad. The data also show how a poor match between student and host community can severely impede cross-cultural adaptation and language learning. Additional research on this subset of study abroad can aid an understanding of the roles of the host family and of teachers and peers in mainstream classrooms and can help study abroad program designers improve their programs to support student language learning and well-being. Finally, the roles of humor and assertiveness appear to warrant further study as pertinent personality variables. Individual sojourner experiences are certainly complex, yet through further study of both programmatic and individual variables, a clearer picture of ways in which educators can optimize language learning abroad will emerge.

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Notes

1. Gap-year programs refer to programs for recent high school graduates who have not yet begun postsecondary studies. These programs follow the model of traditional high school exchange programs, including homestay and attendance of high school in country. Students are usually placed in classes with peers of the same age, and because national curricula differ, the instruction students receive is often novel, rather than a repeat of what they have completed in the United States.
2. Host nationals are residents of the hosting community—in the case of this study, Swedes. Co-nationals are members of the sojourner's native community, in this case, U.S. Americans.
3. While work in the field of cross-cultural adaptation has revealed much complexity related to the concept of acculturation, this study uses the term *acculturate* to describe the specific phenomenon of an individual adapting to a new culture by adopting the customs of that cultural group.
4. Jenny and Elsa reported minimal exposure to the Swedish language prior to arrival. Jenny reported having used Rosetta Stone computer software to study vocabulary before coming. Elsa's uncle was married to a Swede, so she had heard some Swedish on occasion. Neither student reported any working knowledge of Swedish, and thus should be regarded as absolute beginners in terms of language learning.
5. The FSI and ILR scales provided numeric ratings from 0 to 5. In 1986, ACTFL made modifications to the FSI and ILR interviews and scales and replaced the numeric scale with a series of descriptive labels, intended to be more user-friendly to the everyday user (Yoffe, 1997).
6. The researcher's qualifications for administering and scoring the OPIs include (1) very high proficiency and fluency in Swedish as evidenced by a passing score on the *Rikstest*, the highest level Swedish language test in Sweden; (2) formal training in OPI protocol as used at the University of Minnesota for students of Swedish; and (3) 3 years of experience administering and scoring OPIs at the University of Minnesota.
7. The native speaking rater was also trained in unofficial OPI protocols at the University of Minnesota and was an experienced administrator and rater, although not a certified OPI tester.
8. This article focuses on just two personality traits. A more extensive set of individual traits was examined as part of the larger study and appears in the author's dissertation (Spenader, 2005).

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guides

Student Interview 1 (January)

Background information: Tell me about yourself.

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you from?
3. Tell me about your family in the U.S.
4. What is your background in terms of foreign language study?
5. What did you know about Sweden before you came to Sweden with EP?

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6. Had you ever traveled or lived abroad before your EP experience? If so, where and when?
7. Are you a Swedish American? Scandinavian American?
8. Why did you become an EP exchange student?
9. Did you choose Sweden? Why or why not?
10. How did you feel about Sweden before you came here with EP?
11. What were your goals for your year in Sweden? To learn a new language? Adventure? Get away from your parents?

Questions about the Host Family

1. Tell me about your Swedish host family.
2. What sorts of activities do you do together?
3. Do you enjoy spending time with your host family?
4. What members of your host family do you feel closest to? Why?
5. Does your host family help you learn Swedish?
6. What things does your host family do that you find somewhat strange?
7. What things does your host family do that you really enjoy?
8. Can you tell me about a situation in which you had a cultural misunderstanding with your family?
9. Can you tell me about a situation in which you had to adapt to a new behavior to fit in with your host family?
10. Do you think that your family is a "typical" Swedish family? Why or why not?
11. How much of what is going on around you at home do you understand?
12. Do you feel like a member of your host family? In what way?

Questions about School

1. Tell me about your *gymnasium*.
2. Tell me about your class.
3. Tell me about your first day of school.
4. Do you enjoy attending classes? Why or why not?
5. Have you been successful at making friends at school? Tell me about the process of making friends at school.
6. Do you tend to speak mostly Swedish or mostly English with your friends? Why?
7. Are you getting grades in your courses? Why or why not?
8. What classes do you enjoy most? Why?
9. What teachers do you enjoy most? Why?
10. Are you involved in any extracurricular activities? Tell me about that.
11. Can you tell me about a situation at school in which you had a cultural misunderstanding?
12. Can you tell me about a situation in which you had to adapt to a new behavior to fit in with your classmates?
13. What would you say are the biggest differences between Swedish *gymnasium* and American high school?
14. How much of what is going on around you in school do you understand?
15. Do you feel like a member of your class? Why or why not?

General Questions

1. All in all, how do you feel your year is going in Sweden?
2. How "Swedish" do you feel at this point?
3. How "American" do you feel at this point?

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4. What are you most frustrated with? Why?
5. What do you enjoy most about living in Sweden?

Student Interview 2 (May)—Additional Questions

1. Are you still living with the same host family? If not, tell me why you switched families, and tell me about your new family. (host family question)
2. Are you attending the same *gymnasium* as before? If not, tell me about your new *gymnasium*, and your class. (school question)
3. Do you tend to speak mostly Swedish or mostly English with your friends? Why? (school question)

Host Parent Interview 1 (January)

1. How do you think things are going for your EP student?
2. Can you tell me about how it went when _____ first came to live with you?
3. What have you done as a family in order to help your student adjust to Swedish culture?
4. How much Swedish do you speak with your student? How much English?
5. What do you think has been the most difficult for your student?
6. Can you tell me about a situation in which your student misunderstood something about Swedish culture? What happened?
7. How much Swedish does your EPer know? Do you think they are really trying to learn Swedish? Why or why not?
8. How much time does your EPer spend with Swedes? With other exchange students? With Americans?
9. Has your student been able to adapt to Swedish culture? Why or why not?
10. Do you think your EPer seems "Swedish"? Why or why not?

Host Parent Interview 2 (May)—Additional Question

How do you think things are going for your EP student now?

Teacher Interview Guide (used in January and May)

1. How do you think things are going for the EP student in school?
2. Can you tell me about how it went when _____ first came to your class?
3. What have you done as a class in order to help your student adjust to Swedish culture?
4. How much Swedish do you speak with the student? How much English?
5. What do you think has been the most difficult for the student?
6. Can you tell me about a situation in which your student misunderstood something about Swedish culture? What happened?
7. How much Swedish does the EPer know? Do you think they are really trying to learn Swedish? Why or why not?
8. How much time does the EPer spend with Swedes? With other exchange students? With Americans?
9. Has the student been able to adapt to Swedish culture? Why or why not?
10. Did the student get grades in their classes last term? (Do you think they will get grades next term? [Question asked in January only]) Why or why not?
11. Do you think the EPer seems "Swedish"? Why or why not?

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APPENDIX B

E-Mail Questionnaire

1. In general, how do you feel your year in Sweden is going?
2. What are your biggest challenges living with your host family right now?
3. What is the biggest challenge you face with Swedish friends?
4. What are the biggest challenges you face at school right now?
5. At this point in the year, how many hours a day are you spending speaking Swedish?
6. Where are you learning the most Swedish? What is it about these contexts that helps you learn?
7. In what contexts are you still using English at this point?
8. What are your feelings toward Swedes in general right now?
9. Have you learned anything new about "Swedishness"?
10. How "Swedish" do you feel at this point? Why?
11. How "American" do you feel at this point, and why?

APPENDIX C

The Acculturation Index (adapted from Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999)

This section is concerned with how you see yourself in relation to other Americans and Swedes. You are asked to consider two questions about your current lifestyle. Are your experiences and behaviors similar to Americans? Are your experiences and behaviors similar to Swedes? Use the following scale to indicate how similar your various experiences of daily life are compared to Americans and Swedes.

Not at all similar 1- - - - - -2- - - - - -3- - - - - -4- - - - - -5- - - - - -6- - - - - -7 very similar

Enter your response (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, or 7) in the parentheses. Please respond to all items.

	Americans	**Swedes**
1. Clothing	( )	( )
2. Pace of life	( )	( )
3. General knowledge	( )	( )
4. Food	( )	( )
5. Religious beliefs	( )	( )
6. Standard of living	( )	( )
7. Recreational activities	( )	( )
8. Self-identity	( )	( )
9. Family life	( )	( )
10. Accommodation/residence	( )	( )
11. Values	( )	( )
12. Friendships	( )	( )
13. Communication styles	( )	( )
14. Cultural activities	( )	( )
15. Language	( )	( )
16. Perceptions of Americans	( )	( )
17. Perceptions of Swedes	( )	( )
18. Political ideology	( )	( )
19. Worldview	( )	( )
20. Social customs	( )	( )
21. School activities	( )	( )

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