LANGUAGES
LEARNING

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H ow in the world do you say “band-aid” in Spanish? This thought occurred to one study abroad student who had cut her finger while abroad in Ecuador. As put by Lori Yount, a student from University of Missouri, when trying to speak a foreign language, “It’s the little things that get you.”

Traveling, living, and studying abroad is taxing—orienting yourself in an unfamiliar city or town, remembering cultural etiquette and adjusting to your new "foreigner status" can all be overwhelming, to say the least. Throwing a language barrier into the mix adds yet another bump along the road.

If you’re a student planning to venture abroad to a non-English speaking country, you’re not the only one: approximately two-thirds of study abroad students choose non-English speaking destinations. While abroad, beginners and advanced learners alike often find that the language acquisition process does not go as smoothly as they anticipated; language differences can emerge in unexpected ways.

The Glimpse Foundation surveyed over 250 study abroad students from across the country to ask them about their experiences with language learning, including the activities they undertook to hone their language skills before and during their abroad experience, as well as the mentalities that helped them make progress and maintain a positive outlook. According to our survey respondents, the key to successful language acquisition is simply being able to identify opportunities that are the most valuable to your language learning process, and then taking advantage of them. It’s also important to understand some of the more challenging aspects of language acquisition before you arrive so that you can brace yourself and push yourself as needed.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING HELPED TO IMPROVE YOUR LINGUISTIC ABILITIES WHILE ABROAD?

- Speaking with host family
- Dating
- Speaking with local friends
- Taking classes in the local language
- Partaking in extracurricular activities
- Working/volunteering abroad
- Reading books/newspapers in local language
- Traveling within host country

"Small tasks can quickly become large obstacles. I never considered how to buy stamps in a language I hardly knew. I could ask for food and drink, but couldn’t buy soap at the store. The language barrier makes everything more challenging and potentially frustrating, but the best thing to do is remain open minded and calm. Humor, patience, and politeness will overcome almost any challenge."

Joseph Hoover, Student
University of Colorado, Boulder
Studied in Switzerland through SIT

My host family was somewhat taken aback when I told them one morning that I wanted huevos (bones) for breakfast. They gave me permission to dine on the floor with the dog, but they never let me forget that eggs, or huevos, are a much tastier way to start the day.

Vilas Pathikonda
Studied in Bolivia

Photo by Anna Worthington.
**1. COMMON CHALLENGES TO PREPARE FOR**

* **DIALECTS AND ACCENTS** “Uh, what language is that?” One of the most commonly cited challenges language students abroad face is interpreting different dialects and accents, which can differ both from region to region and person to person within a host country.

  > **TIP** Have you ever watched a Scottish movie? Do you remember that near the beginning, you could barely understand a word that was said? Be patient: understanding new accents/dialects simply takes time.

  “There are so many different Spanish-speaking countries and they all have their own dialects, so it was a challenge to re-learn some things I had learned in school. Another thing was the accent—I went to Sevilla, and the accent there is so thick and different from anything I had ever heard, so it was really hard to understand the people at first.”

  *Lauren Mhlabo, UMass Amherst*

  *Studied in Spain through API*

* **INFORMAL CONVERSATION** Language class accustoms you to a certain speaking pace, but one of the first things you’ll realize is that native speakers talk fast! Mumbled, muffled words can often be difficult to decipher, as well as casual expressions, local slang and colloquialisms.

  > **TIP** Make a concerted effort to learn a few local expressions and incorporate them into your everyday conversations. Locals will be impressed!

  “Speaking Spanish with Spaniards was far different than in a classroom. Slang and fast-paced speaking really threw me for a loop. I realized that I could write Spanish with few grammatical errors but speaking it was a far different and harder task.”

  *Laura Newman, University of Wisconsin Madison*

  *Studied in Spain through API*

* **IMPATIENCE** While most survey respondents generally found locals to be tolerant and understanding of their communication attempts, you should prepare yourself to encounter some degree of impatience. Some locals may not be disposed to continually repeat themselves if you don’t understand them the first time; others will jump into English, not giving you the chance to practice in the local language.

  > **TIP** Don’t take brisk reactions personally; they are par for the course. Also, try to avoid loping into English unless absolutely necessary.

  “People on the street (at kiosks, restaurants, etc...) were less willing to repeat themselves than professors in a classroom. If you didn’t get what they said the first time, that was it.”

  *Alissa Bibb, Lawrence University*

  *Studied in Russia through Middlebury College*
**VOCABULARY** More advanced language learners may find that they can discuss symbolism in literature, but they can’t explain how they’d like their sandwich prepared. Despite the endless vocabulary lists you may have had to memorize in school, you’ll quickly learn that a lot of words won’t be at your fingertips when you need them, and there are many words you never learned to begin with.

**TIP:** While abroad, carry around a small notebook and write down all the new vocabulary words that you learn each day.

“You don’t realize how many words are NOT in your vocabulary. Talking about everything from painting techniques to fashion styles—there are so many small vocab words that you want to use but have never learned. What you’re taught in the classroom doesn’t include half the words you would like to use.”

*Student, Linfield College
Studied in Spain*

**HUMOR AND SARCASM** Ever tried telling a “dumb blonde” joke in Japan? You may not realize the extent to which humor depends on a shared body of cultural knowledge until your new local friends begin cracking jokes and everyone is laughing but you. If you rely on humor as a means of relating to people, you may find yourself feeling socially stunted—it can be hard to make people laugh (with you, not at you) in another language! This is not to mention that certain forms of American humor may not translate overseas—sarcasm, for example. Sometimes your attempts to be funny will baffle your conversation partner, or be interpreted as downright disrespectful.

**TIP:** Jot down local jokes you hear from friends; if you don’t understand them, ask for an explanation. Knowing a good joke or two is a great ice-breaker … but avoid trouble by making sure the jokes aren’t racist or blatantly offensive!

“Oftentimes there was drastic miscommunication with my professors, especially concerning sarcasm and jokes. Many of my side comments were understood as rude when that wasn’t my intention whatsoever.”

*Louise Cobb, Emerson College
Studied in the Netherlands*

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**faux pas!**

When describing our interests to our prospective host families, I said in Swahili, “Ninapendakuchesa,” and did a little gyrating motion. I thought I had simply said, “I like to dance.” My director pulled me aside soon afterward to let me know that the phrase is also slang for “I like to have sex.” Needless to say, I was the last one picked for host families.

*Andrew Waggoner
Studied in Tanzania*

### An American Meets Tranquila

**Learning to Relax in Spain**
by Rachel Tavel

It’s just one word. But within its three syllables, it envelops all the comfort and reassurance that one might need when studying abroad in Barcelona: **tranquila**. That’s right, **tranquila**. You can’t speak the language? Whatever, you’re here to learn. Do you keep accidentally saying you “have a lot of man” (“tengo mucho hombre”) instead of you “are very hungry” (“tengo mucha hambre”)? No problem. **Tranquila** is there to help.

Like a Spanish knight in shining armor, **tranquila** is there to rescue this American damsel in distress. Once I’ve crossed the vernacular line or made some sort of cultural mistake, there is nothing I can do except—for the love of McDonald’s, J Crew and everything American—STAY CALM, please!

**Tranquila** means relax; don’t worry about it; take a big breath. You’re not expected to be a Spaniard just because you are living there for an extended period of time. In the classroom on my first day in Barcelona, our program director, Maika, told us that we were probably going to make some mistakes. Or rather, she assured us that we would. But when those inevitable moments arose, and God knows the word “moment” was going to be plural, the best thing to do was to just smile and laugh them off.

excerpted from glimpseabroad.org
II. ADVICE FOR THOSE WITH LITTLE OR NO PRIOR LANGUAGE STUDY

Survey respondents who studied abroad without any prior language study claim that the most helpful thing they could have done for themselves ahead of time was to learn some of the language, no matter how simple or strategic. Learning directions and directive terms (such as: “turn left/right,” “go straight,” “several blocks,” “street,” etc.) are particularly useful phrases to know. Try to learn the names of the cities or towns around where you will be staying by the terms that the locals use. For example, in English we say “Vienna” but Austrians say “Wein.” For more regular independent study, check out Oxford’s language resources (see page 8).

Once you arrive in your host country, listening to the radio and watching television in the native language on a regular basis can help you familiarize yourself with the new language’s intonations, even if you cannot understand the content of what’s being said. Carrying a local map and food vocabulary sheets when you go out is also a helpful way to prepare yourself for unexpected adventures during the day.

As a student planning to study abroad without any prior language study, you should prepare yourself for some level of mental exhaustion. More so than any other level of language learner, those without previous experience cite fatigue as their number one symptom of culture shock. Amongst beginners with some previous language study (two years or less), the primary culture shock symptom experienced was “insecurity or feelings of incompetence.”

“It’s very difficult to feel human when you can’t really communicate like a normal person. But the more you do it, the easier it is; and with a little creativity, you can probably express more than you think you can.”

Holly Stillman, University of Missouri, Columbia Student.

Studied in Germany with no prior language study

“In my first few weeks, I got on many a wrong bus and was afraid to have any interactions with service people. I was even afraid to get bread at the local bakery. Just be confident, stop thinking about grammatical mistakes and spit out what you’re trying to say. Most people are very kind and helpful.”

Lirra Schlebler, Wesleyan University

Studied in Germany with less than two years of prior language study
II. ADVICE FOR INTERMEDIATE & ADVANCED LANGUAGE LEARNERS
(3+ YEARS OF PREVIOUS LANGUAGE STUDY)

While nearly all intermediate and advanced learners surveyed felt "somewhat prepared" or "well-prepared" to communicate with locals before their departure, 87 percent said that when confronted with the reality of navigating their way through their host country, their language proficiency was lower than what they had previously believed it to be. Many intermediate and advanced learners mentioned that they were able to understand dialogue with increasing ease, but still struggled to speak themselves. Others commented that while they could undergo basic transactions with locals almost effortlessly, more advanced conversations—for example, those that involved telling stories from their past—were much more challenging.

With multiple years of schooling under their belts, intermediate and advanced learners are less prepared and/or willing than beginners to make mistakes and have a tendency to be too hard on themselves. It’s one thing to know the difference between the preterite and imperfect tenses and quite another to properly make this distinction when you’re in the middle of a story about your pet dog. The most popular advice from survey respondents is to take mistakes in stride and push yourself to continue speaking, no matter how badly you feel like you’re butchering the language.

“I was almost fluent when I arrived but for some reason I didn’t use my skills until about a month into my studying abroad. I was nervous that if the locals misunderstood they might laugh or taunt me. I don’t know what gave me that impression but it was wrong. They were so pleased to see me trying, in comparison to my peers who were the typical Americans looking to speak and be understood in English everywhere. Sometimes locals would correct me if I made mistakes but it was always constructive criticism to help me out.”
Fallon Wagner, Stonehill College
Studied in Italy through API

“It was difficult for me to tell detailed stories or to just speak fluidly about random topics. I would get frustrated telling a story or be less likely to tell a story knowing I would most likely struggle. In hindsight I wish I would have taken more risks and been more carefree about speaking and less afraid to make mistakes.”
Heather Keylon, University of Kansas
Studied in Spain through API

“Pushing through your fear of speaking is the best way to learn; in fact, it’s the only way. JUST SPEAK IT!”
Jessica Clark, University of Colorado, Boulder
Studied in Spain through University of Syracuse

fais pas!

One day I decided to be brazen and fully immerse myself in Russian culture, so a few American friends and I went to a Banya, a Russian bathhouse, where it is customary for people to walk around unclothed. It was incredibly hot sitting in the sauna so I said to my friend in Russian, “I am really hot, I am going outside for a minute.” When the Russian woman next to me gave me a very strange look, I quickly learned that there are two words for “hot” in Russian, and only one refers to temperature. Apparently, I had just announced to the entire Banya that I was really turned on!

Doreen Ciavarelli
Studied in Russia

Joining the Ranks
Office Life in France
by W. Dalen Rice

The restaurant I frequented for lunch was set up to take tourists, but I insisted that the servers speak to me in French. My lunch companions also spoke to me in French, which proved to be a bit of challenge. In school, I had learned conversation from a teacher who spoke to students very rigidly, taking care to be grammatically correct. When I found myself in a restaurant with six middle-class French guys, all with different accents and speaking styles, it was borderline overload on my brain.

Toward the end of my stay though, I was able to tell what they were saying and even contribute some of the time. Whenever they made American jokes, I would respond with French jokes. I was initially ridiculed for being a “non-cheese eater,” and when I became rather fond of one cheese, my coworkers chided me for being a “cheese eating American” turned Frenchman. It was all in good fun, and my nickname as “the American” gave me great notoriety.

excerpted from glimpseabroad.org
The Two Sides of Rome
Honoring Italian Vocals
by Jaime Bancroft

Amidst the expectations and setbacks, the most difficult obstacle I faced was the language barrier. I had known people who had traveled abroad and returned home fluent in another language so I thought somehow it would happen by osmosis. Lorenzo, my fiancé, was anxious to introduce me to his friends and with each introduction, I sat nervously smiling and nodding while grasping at words. I concentrated hard on building a good sentence in my head and opened my mouth to utter what I thought was a grammatically sound statement, only to realize they had moved quickly on to a new subject. Normally a social person, I hated being an outsider full of awkward silence. Italian began to blur into a background noise.

In an email to a friend, I said, “I guess it’s less of a culture shock than I was expecting and lonelier than I thought it would be. You end up carrying on a lot of dialogue in your head when you can’t communicate with people around you.”

Then I met another foreigner, who talked to me about the importance of developing a relationship with the city before worrying about human relationships. She explained the two sides of Rome. “There’s the city, with its stratification of civilizations, art and architecture; and then there’s the human side. Trying to get inside a circle of Roman friends is not easy. You have a unique perspective that you should focus on first.”

Here I was, living abroad, something I’d always wanted to do, and I was feeling paralyzed. When I’d traveled in the past I found it so much easier to swallow my intimidation. When you only have a few days to see a city, you don’t have time to let language barriers stop you. Louise led me to the realization that I had to get to know this city my own way, without feeling the pressure of being a tourist.

III. CONTINUED PRACTICE

Many students report that they made great strides in their language learning while abroad, but they worry that much of what they’ve learned is slipping away since their return to the United States. Our survey respondents stress that you should do what you can to continue practicing and speaking the language at home. Some suggestions:

1. Sign up to be a language partner, at your school or in your community
2. Keep in touch with friends in your host country
3. Volunteer with an immigrant group that speaks your host-country language
4. Volunteer to translate at a local hospital
5. Continue taking language classes at your university
6. Tutor other students who are trying to learn your host country language
7. Continue to read books in your host country language, watch TV/movies, listen to music and read online newspapers
8. If you can find the time/resources, keep traveling! Explore other countries that speak your host country’s language.

“I volunteered for an immigrant organization in Seattle called CASA Latina where I helped interview Latin American women about their journeys to the United States. I also lived with two students who I studied abroad with and we practiced Spanish all the time. We put up signs of new words we had yet to learn around the house. A year after studying abroad for the first time, I went back to Ecuador to teach English and I lived there off and on for three years. That really helped my language skills!”

Maret Kane-Panchana, University of Washington
“I started volunteering with a German-speaking playgroup through the Goethe Institut, and I write for their newsletter. I try to do flashcards and study tools, but the best way by far is still conversation and using the language practically.”

Kathleen Geraghty, Alverno College
Studied in Austria through Northern Illinois University

“I’ve made many Japanese friends by going to the Asian Students Association on campus, and I often talk to them in Japanese. In addition, I write letters to my friends in Japan and have continued to take language courses after returning to my home university.”

Tommy Nazawa, University of Colorado at Boulder
Studied in Japan

“I continue to read my Bible in Italian and listen to Italian music. Whatever it is that you like to do (in my case, read and listen to music), keep doing it in your host country language. If you make any good friends while studying abroad, keep writing to them. It is easy to lose touch once you get back, but occasionally reading and writing in another language will help you to remember it.”

Evi Tomeny, Siena College
Studied in Italy through API

ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 5, RATE THE DEGREE TO WHICH YOU THINK YOUR LINGUISTIC ABILITIES IMPROVED WHILE ABROAD.

Improvement (1 = not much, 5 = a lot)

excerpted from glimpsseabroad.org
IV. FURTHER RESOURCES

* **READ THE FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES EXCERPTED IN THIS GUIDE**
  
  An American Meets Tranquila  
  www.glimpseabroad.org/article_226.html

  Lessons in Luganda  
  www.glimpseabroad.org/article_188.html

  Joining the Ranks  
  www.glimpseabroad.org/article_206.html

  The Two Sides of Rome  
  www.glimpseabroad.org/article_347.html

  Codes of Etiquette  
  www.glimpseabroad.org/article_322.html

* **READ DOZENS OF OTHER ARTICLES ABOUT THE CHALLENGES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING ON GLIMPSEABROAD.ORG**  
  http://www.glimpseabroad.org/abroad_3_Language%20Learning.html

* **LONELY PLANET PHRASEBOOKS**  
  If you have little or no prior language study, Lonely Planet Phrasebooks are handy guides to common words and questions that will help you navigate your new home.  
  http://shop.lonelyplanet.com/index/cfm?affil=lpgn-h

* **OXFORD DICTIONARIES**  
  Oxford offers a wide spectrum of quality tools to help you build vocabulary and practice a new language before you leave. Resources include: beginner/intermediate language dictionaries, pictorial dictionaries, cartoon strip vocabulary builders, workbook/audio lessons, grammar guides, pocket dictionaries and more.  
  http://www.askoxford.com/shoponline/bilingual

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