Student Motivation and the Successful Integration of the Study Abroad Program (SAP) into the Arabic Curriculum

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Abstract

In this paper I examine students’ differing motivation orientations in the selection of and preparation for the USMA study abroad program (SAP). I then look at best practices for the successful pre-travel preparation and post-travel reintegration of SAP students into the broader Arabic curriculum. The Department of Foreign Languages (DFL) Center for Languages, Cultures, and Regional Studies (CLCRS) is responsible for pre- and post-SAP language and culture assessments. Its work is not the subject of this paper and will be referenced only when necessary to examine Cadet performance while on SAP and how Cadet motivation can or should be more rigorously assessed in the selection process to improve results.

It is taken as a given that SAP programs provide substantial benefits to students. In their article “Student Outcomes Associated with Short-Term and Semester Abroad Programs” in the Spring 2018 edition of Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad,¹ Coker, Heiser, and Taylor note that SAP is positively associated with how students rate their overall educational experience. SAP participants reported improvement in numerous categories, including “contributing to class discussion, including diverse perspectives in discussions and assignments, synthesis of ideas, (and) empathy.” The study also validates the idea of both short- and long-term abroad options – analogous to the USMA model of three-week advanced individual academic development (AIAD) and SAP. Where possible, students should be given the opportunity to study in both short- and long-term settings, because iterative learning that allows for reflection is more productive than a single prolonged exposure. For students who cannot spend an entire semester abroad, AIADs are still beneficial, with these students also indicating gains in the categories indicated above. Coker, Heiser, and Taylor also note that SAP students also report gains in categories such as “intercultural sensitivity, global perspective, linguistic ability, and lifelong friendships with host-country nationals.” These categories are particularly important for Army officers who need to understand foreign cultures and diverse perspectives in an increasing complex and interconnected operating environment.

CLCRS research confirms that West Point SAP programs are successful as measured by both linguistic and cross-cultural assessments. In their article “Assessing Gains in Language Proficiency, Cross-Cultural Competence, and Regional Awareness During Study Abroad,”² Watson, Siska, and Wolfel show that “66% of study abroad participants demonstrated a gain of
one half-step or more on the listening section” of the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT). 69% improved a half-step on the reading section, and fully 88% of participants improved a full step on the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) oral proficiency scale. Similar gains could be seen on the Intercultural Development Inventory IDI, CLCRS’s main tool for assessing Cadets cross-cultural learning. By the end of a single semester abroad, almost two thirds of participants were in the minimization mindset – the third of six steps in Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) on which the IDI is based.

Their learning and assessment model includes language, culture, and a third category that is not generally included in SAP learning models: regional expertise. What they try to measure is whether a Cadet’s knowledge transcends traditional aspects of culture (e.g. values, beliefs, norms, and customs) to include the physical world, agriculture, climate, terrain, resources, transportation, etc. This focus on regional expertise is important because it requires a “spatial synthesis” that demonstrates higher-level learning and is measured through the Assessment of Regional Knowledge (ARK) and General Regional Aptitude Network Test (GRANT) – regional expertise assessment tools developed specifically by the United States Military Academy. Cadets now also participate in the DoD’s Regional Proficiency Analysis Tool (RPAT), which will provide researchers with a baseline from which they can measure Army officers’ gains in regional proficiency over the long term.

These tools are all rigorous measures of cadet learning. However, they do not analyze motivational and personality factors that influence cadets’ decision to study abroad, whether foreign language instructors’ pre-SAP preparation affects cadet success while on SAP, and how cadets can be most effectively reintegrated into the foreign language curriculum after completion of their abroad programs. The rest of this paper will examine research on these topics and how foreign language instructors can augment the work CLCRS is doing to ensure SAP experiences are being maximized in both the pre- and post-SAP curricula.

The Arabic Language Classroom

As much as possible, DFL assigns a cadet’s foreign language based on his or her preference. Cadets who did not request Arabic sometimes land in the Arabic classroom because his or her first preference is unavailable, and they have a Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) score over 110. This means that the majority of cadets in the Arabic classroom are either 1) motivated to learn the language, or 2) possess a demonstrated ability to learn languages. Slotting students in their preferred language is an implicit recognition of the importance of motivation in SLA.

However, our Arabic students are not assessed for motivation once they start class. In the first week they are asked only to complete a learning style inventory to help them identify their strongest modalities (e.g. visual vs. auditory). They are not asked why they selected Arabic. Did they choose it because they think it will help them in their careers? Or did they select it because they are fascinated by Arabic culture? Perhaps they want to help fix what they see as the region’s myriad issues. Or maybe a family member who learned it during their own period of service
convinced them to pick it. These distinctions are important. Without them, there is no way to assess a connection between motivation and 1) whether the cadet eventually selects Arabic as a major, 2) whether they apply to SAP, or 3) how they perform in their courses, or 4) whether motivation or natural-language skill as measured by the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) is more important for success in the language classroom.

This should not imply that instructors do not recognize the importance of motivation. We are constantly looking for ways to increase motivation in the classroom by introducing cultural topics and encouraging cadet exploration beyond just the language. In our classrooms, we spend approximately 20 minutes each Friday discussing military and cultural issues relating to the Middle East. This time is sometimes structured, with instructor-provided topics; but often it is an open-ended Q&A. Instructors generally enjoy this time because it allows them to convey their experiences to their students, thereby making the students’ learning relevant to real-world examples in their chosen profession. Students frequently reference this block as their favorite part of the course.

We also present Foreign Language Learning Objectives (FLLOs), addressing 1) why we study foreign languages, 2) understanding the role of different learning styles and strategies in language learning, 3) the use of proper grammatical terminology, and 4) the relationship between language and culture. These last lectures link language to a culture’s values, behaviors, beliefs, and norms and then further examine the “interrelatedness” of a culture’s characteristics by examining things like geography, political-military interests, and religion. The “military-culture” time and the FLLOs are not random additions to the course; they acknowledge established research showing that tying language to culture increases motivation and improves learning.

One “drawback” of this cultural learning is that it sparks intense interest in the SAP programs. Consequently, the Arabic section tends to have about twice as many applicants as we have SAP slots. The current process of culling applicants is to rank order them according to a formula that includes Academic Program Score Cumulative (APSC), Military Program Score Cumulative (MPSC), PPSC (Physical Program Score Cumulative), and a final equivalent score based on the Arabic faculty’s agreed-upon criteria. It is this last input where we try best to assess the candidate’s personality and motivation factors and generally include a one-page essay and a personal interview.

The process is inherently fair, and I am not proposing any change to the methodology. However, I believe that we should better understand student motivation and personality factors in the pre-SAP selection process; and once selected, we should utilize class time and engage in extensive pre-SAP preparation through independent study to ensure students maximize their SAP experiences. Finally, when cadets return from SAP we should integrate them more fully into lower-level language courses. This will allow the post-SAP cadets the opportunity to reflect upon their own experiences and consolidate their cultural gains, but it will allow increase our beginning students’ motivation and market the SAP program more effectively – a critical first step to encouraging a larger cadre of applicants from whom those with the most favorable motivation and personality factors can be selected for future SAP iterations.
Research on Motivation and Personality/Attitudinal Factors Affecting SAP Applicants

In her article “Study Abroad Social Networks, Motivation and Attitudes: Implications for Second Language Acquisition,” Christina Isabella-Garcia summarizes previous studies showing that student motivation to learn on study abroad falls into five broad categories:

1. Integrative: Belonging in a group, receiving affection, and identifying with the foreign language community (Gardner, 1985; Gardner and Lambert, 1959).


3. Resultative: people who experience success or failure in learning and become more or less motivated to learn (Hermann, 1980; Savignon, 1972; Strong, 1984).

4. Intrinsic: learners who learn because it arouses their curiosity and tend to be more or less motivated on certain topics (Dornyei, 2001).

5. Extrinsic: learners learn to receive a reward or avoid a punishment (Dornyei, 2001).

There have been many attempts to link these motivations to program success, but there are so many confounding factors it is nearly impossible to draw even weak correlations between these variables and their assumed outcomes. Several people have developed metrics that attempt to measure these motivations. In “The MSA: An Instrument for Measuring Motivation to Study Abroad” from The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, in Fall 2015, Anderson and Lawton observe that although there is substantial research showing the benefits of semester abroad using a wide variety of language and cultural assessment tools, there is less research examining why students choose to study abroad. Of those who do study abroad, the authors discovered that personality or attitudinal factors such as “achievement motivation, neophilia (the love of new experiences), migrant personality and (the) desire to help” discriminate between high versus low desire to study abroad.

To address this lack of data, Anderson and Lawton developed a self-assessment tool called the “Motivation to Study Abroad” (MSA). This questionnaire asked students whether their desire to study abroad was driven primarily a desire to experience 1) world enlightenment, 2) personal growth, 3) career development, or 4) entertainment. Each of these broad categories included several ratable subcategories that were compared to other researchers’ efforts to look at similar factors. Not surprisingly, students in their study rated their motivations as they are presented above.

The authors note that one problem with the MSA is that students might be providing what they perceive as the most socially acceptable answers rather than the truth. This could potentially be avoided by proposing criteria that are less value-laden. This may exclude or undercount some students whose motivations are sincerely about advancing cross-cultural understanding, but it will also present a more honest portrait of students’ various motivations for studying abroad. Another limitation is that while it addresses instrumental and integrative motivations, it is more
difficult to address resultative (i.e. people for whom success inspires more motivation) and intrinsic/extrinsic learners (i.e. people who study a subject just out of curiosity and people who study to receive a reward or avoid punishment).

As a result, the authors are not making any claims about the MSA’s predictive ability; they are simply proposing it as a potential research tool that other academic institutions could use to build a broader data set from which to draw conclusions. To its credit, the MSA does account for both motivation and personality factors despite not being a perfect distillation of the factors that go into abroad study.

In their article “Student Motivation to Study Abroad and Their Intercultural Development,” from the same Fall 2015 issue of from The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, Anderson, Hubbard, and Lawton also looked at whether the MSA is positively correlated with student intercultural learning as measured by the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI). Although the authors found a correlation between students who chose “world enlightenment,” “personal growth,” or “career development” as their primary motivation and the program difficulty and living arrangements selected, it failed to correlate pre-travel motivation with improved GPI. This is an interesting result, as it suggests that either 1) the students in this study started at a higher GPI than average SAP applicants, 2) the MSA is not an effective measure of student motivation, or 3) pre-SAP motivation is less important to program outcomes than researchers might assume. However, the study does provide credence to the idea that pre-SAP preparation and effective mentorship during the experience are more important than stated motivations on self-reported surveys. The authors cite Bennett, who talks about the importance of having a “cultural mentor” during SAP about how pre-SAP preparation can help prime a student to learn.

The idea that pre-SAP motivation is not an effective measure of success is troubling, because it calls into question whether the Arabic section’s selection process for SAP participants is measuring the correct criteria. Admittedly, concepts such as world enlightenment, personal growth, and career development are vague and likely have significant overlap. Other pre-SAP selection criteria such as personality factors may be better indicators, especially at a school like USMA where a significant percentage of the students are driven, results-oriented personalities that are not easily measured by tools like the MSA.

Research on Integrating SAP into the Undergraduate Curriculum Before and After SAP

In her book chapter “Embedding Preparation in Language Courses,” Jennifer Redmann proposes that foreign language program managers must move beyond language skills and focus on cultural competence. Redmann notes that beginner language courses tend to focus on trivial cultural points (“food and festivals”), while higher-level courses focus on “Big-C” culture though the study of literature and famous figures. There is a great deal of cultural knowledge between these foci that are missing. Redmann theorizes that this gap is one of the reasons that so many SAP students go abroad unprepared. There is a huge body of cultural knowledge that is simply being ignored by programs and textbooks that cannot keep pace with the dynamic changes occurring in abroad sites.
She recommends changes to the undergraduate foreign language curricula that can address some of these shortcomings. They incorporate ideas about SAP, even though the instruction is applicable to both SAP and non-SAP students. These ideas include personal portraits, stories, news reports, film reviews, and advertising that reflect aspects of daily life in the host country. Course material should focus on the city in which the students will reside, looking at its physical layout, geography, buildings, history, industry, institutions, and residents. Redmann talks about how she uses the abroad sites as her course examples for introducing grammatical concepts like comparative, superlative, etc.

Reading Redmann, I can think of several other ways that the Arabic section could incorporate abroad sites into our curriculum. We could introduce a SAP Facebook page with weekly student updates; these updates could then be integrated into our Friday military-culture time in the beginner courses. We could provide extra credit to students who ask their abroad counterparts questions on the Facebook page. As we learn the vocabulary to describe our environment, we could have assignments that describe the home stays and dorms; we could have geography exercises where students print out a city map (using Google maps) and overlay it with place names in Arabic with help from their abroad counterparts. We can write about important sports or political figures, conduct film reviews, ask students to follow important social media profiles and write summaries for extra credit. Students can ask previous abroad participants about situations in which they felt linguistically unprepared or other summative observations.

Redmann also suggests another pre-SAP preparation that is simply administration: students who took more language courses prior to SAP show larger gains. The reason for this is logical: students who possess more knowledge of the language are more confident and are more likely to go out and engage with the host population. To account for this, the Arabic section requires all first-year SAP selectees to go in the Spring of the following year after they have taken a third semester of Arabic. Second-year selectees go in the Fall after having taken two full years.

We also need to target pre-SAP preparation to the students going abroad. In their article “Preparatory Courses for Students Going to Divergent Sites” in the book Integrating Study Abroad into the Undergraduate Curriculum, Brewer and Solberg look at various undergraduate pre-travel programs from around the United States. Like Anderson, Hubbard, and Lawton, the researchers cited by Brewer and Solberg found that study abroad program results were not as promising as anticipated. In response, they created a two-semester hour elective SAP preparation course that met once weekly over the course of a semester. The course “employed comparisons between the United States and the students’ anticipated study abroad sites to help the students understand abstract and concrete differences between these; develop the ability to recognize, analyze, and understand multiple perspectives; and negotiate different modes of communication. Reflection helped the students understand their own assumptions and values.”

Research on Social Network Analysis and Its Incorporation into Pre-SAP Preparation

In her chapter “Study Abroad Social Networks, Motivation and Attitudes: Implications for Second Language Acquisition,” in Language Learners in Study Abroad Contexts, Christina
Isabelli-Garcia talks extensively about how social networks affect learning abroad. She notes the various factors influencing student motivation, referring mainly to Dornyei’s characterizations of instrumental, integrative, resultative, and intrinsic/extrinsic motivations. These factors greatly impact whether a student applies to study abroad, but Isabelli-Garcia believes that these categories are inadequate to determine whether a student will succeed in practice. She notes that “such conceptions of motivation do not capture the complex relations of power, identity, and language learning.” In other words, students on study abroad are not just conveying information. They are engaging in a process of identity formation, forming and reforming their social identity within a specific cultural context. For this process to be successful, students must progress through Bennett’s six-stage Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) mentioned in the overview to this paper:

1. Denying the existence of cultural differences
2. Recognizing the reality of cultural differences but insisting that one’s own culture is superior
3. Minimizing cultural differences in order to deal with this recognition
4. Acknowledging the possibility of differences in adapting to the environment
5. Adapting to the host culture, wherein a sense of understanding and pluralism arise
6. Accepting differences and entering a state in which these differences are essential to identity

Isabelli-Garcia then proposes the use of diaries to document students’ social networks while abroad. Research shows that second language learners tend to stay within their language groups when new to an environment, as would be expected. Over time, these learners develop relationships with native speakers that are instrumental or transactional (e.g. with a colleague or a host family). These relationships tend to focus on conveying critical information within a limited vocabulary [I personally witnessed this in the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) oral proficiency interview seminar. To practice rating interviews, we spoke with several immigrants from Latin American countries who came to the United States as adults. In some cases, they were rated as novice speakers despite being in the country for more than 20 years; we learned that they lived in communities with fellow expatriates and worked in jobs that required little interaction with English speakers]. Real learning occurs when students make “second-order” relationships. For instance, a friend of the host family invites a student to a party. The friend now gives the student access to his or her social network, which is a “high density closed network” with potentially dozens of new contacts. What Isabelli-Garcia makes clear is that further research is needed to show what kinds of learners succeed in developing these second-order relationships.

Her sense is that students with “resultative” motivation are more likely to persevere in the face of social setbacks, but more research is needed to test the theory. What was consistent across her own study is that students frequently missed opportunities to expand their social networks.
Requiring students to do social network analysis while on SAP could be beneficial; so too could be explaining to cadets the importance of developing second-order social networks long before they travel. Today, students can develop these friendships months in advance through pen pal websites, highly localized social media chat applications (apps), popular Facebook pages, etc. Understanding the research on social networks will help students prepare for the experience; they can overcome setbacks more easily when they understand that frequent setbacks are common and are not indicative of personal failure. Exposing students to native speakers early will give students the confidence to approach locals early in their abroad experience. Isabelli-Garcia’s research shows that students who do not develop a social network within the first month are far less likely to make the progression from an ethnocentric to ethnorelativist viewpoint.

Research on Post-SAP Integration

Kalamazoo College has a program called the “Integrative Cultural Research Project.” Its purpose is to require students to “select an activity (a service or volunteer project, a cultural internship, the collecting of life histories, etc) requiring them to work with local people on local projects of local importance using the local language and employing local means and methods in a locally acceptable manner.” In theory, the program enables profound changes in the students’ cultural perspectives through a “structured process of observation, interaction, research and reflection.” These experiences make a great opportunity to reintegrate these students into on-campus courses and cocurricular events at which the students can reflect on their experience in seminars that can draw a variety of majors from across relevant disciplines.

In their chapter “Who Studies Abroad and Who Does Not,” in Study Abroad in a New Global Century, Twombly and Salisbury rehash many of the same attitudes and motivations that predispose students to study abroad that are covered elsewhere in this literature review. However, they make a couple of important observations that have implications for my section’s teachers and our management of our SAP program. Firstly, students expressing a desire to study abroad tend to come from foreign language majors, social sciences, humanities, and fine arts, and applicants tend to be disproportionately female (although the data do not break down gender preferences by abroad region).

Secondly, they note a lack of role models among upperclassmen who can talk about their own semester abroad experiences and help departments recruit new participants. Thirdly, they discuss how departments do not always market their SAP programs well. Integrating post-SAP students into these activities addresses these issues but it also ensures the students solidify their learning through reflection and exposition.

These findings are supported by other research. In their chapter “Study Abroad Outcomes”, Twombly and Salisbury talk about many of the same themes of intercultural competence, language gain, and personal growth among many other positive factors experienced by study abroad students. However, their chapter makes a key observation that others tend to ignore: how universities must help study abroad students “maintain their hard-won language skills when they return from study abroad.” Language improvement is one of the only areas where students show
significant improvement compared to their peers in non-travel control groups. All other assessment metrics are less empirical and subject to controversy. Language teachers should be careful and ensure that SAP returnees continue to take language courses all the way through their senior year.\textsuperscript{12}

These findings also corresponds with what Pablo Toral writes in his chapter “Synthesis and Career Preparation,”\textsuperscript{13} in \textit{Integrating Study Abroad into the Undergraduate Curriculum} about how students can incorporate their study abroad experience into their senior theses. He notes that “Students should have an idea about their senior thesis before they go abroad and use the opportunity to conduct original research using primary sources.” This is an excellent idea, and especially relevant to West Point now that our capstone projects are being uploaded to the Digital Commons. The capstone can be the Cadet’s face to potential employers, demonstrating that he or she capably navigated a foreign culture and produced meaningful research. To do this successfully though, it may be best to enroll SAP students in a one- or two-credit pre-SAP course in which the Arabic teacher can guide the cadet on the selection of a topic that is both relevant and feasible.

\textbf{Conclusion and Applicability to West Point}

Broadly speaking, USMA’s SAP program is very well developed. However, there exist numerous opportunities to integrate SAP with the language curriculum in a more coherent manner. Doing so will allow for more effective pre-SAP preparation and successful reintegration of SAP students back into the curriculum. These students can not only inform their peers’ perceptions of the Middle East, they can influence the beginner classes with their experiences. This exchange of cultural knowledge will increase younger cadets’ motivation in the language learning classroom and potentially increase the available pool of SAP applicants in subsequent years. Finally, the SAP cadets can more effectively integrate their abroad experience into their department’s Firstie integrative experience (“The Capstone”) by developing the topic \textit{prior} to travel and conducting extensive primary source research via written texts and oral interviews. This will produce better products that are more relevant to this university and its mission.
1 Coker, Jeffrey, Heiser, Evan, and Taylor, Laura (2018). Student Outcomes Associated with Short-Term and Semester Study Abroad Programs. *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 2, 92-105


7 Redmann, Jennifer (2012). Embedding Preparation in Language Courses. *Integrating Study Abroad into the Undergraduate Curriculum*. 85-101

8 Brewer, Elizabeth and Solberg, Jan (2012). Preparatory Courses for Students Going to Divergent Sites. *Integrating Study Abroad into the Undergraduate Curriculum*. 41-62


10 Brewer, Elizabeth and Solberg, Jan (2012). Preparatory Courses for Students Going to Divergent Sites. *Integrating Study Abroad into the Undergraduate Curriculum*. 41-62


12 Best Practices in Study Abroad: A Primer for Chairs of Departments of Foreign Languages (2008). *The Association of Departments of Foreign Languages*