Language Learning Behaviors
Outside of the Study Abroad Classroom:
an Analysis of ACTR Program Participants At The Semester, Academic Year and Flagship Levels

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Recent research in the field of second language acquisition is reconsidering the relationship between learning context and language gain, and is reevaluating study abroad programs compared to home-based immersion programs (Collentine and Freed 2004; Freed *et al* 2004, Segalowitz *et al* 2004). These researchers and others (Pellegrino 2005, Rivers 1998, Davidson *et al* 1995) point out that learners in study abroad programs often do not achieve expected language gains across major thresholds as measured by ACTFL oral proficiency standards, and a large proportion of students make no measurable gain, even after four months of study abroad in Russia (Davidson 2007, 2005). In order to shed light on such findings, research offers a host of possible explanations, including variations in learning strategies (O'Malley and Chamot 1990, Garner 1990), individual learner differences (Leaver 1997), motivation (Gardner 1985), risk-taking behaviors (Pellegrino 2005), and access to target language communities (Norton and Toohey 2001), to name a few. Admittedly, the complex nature of language learning prevents researchers from determining precisely why some students make more progress than others in acquiring language during study abroad. However, we can extrapolate some general learning behaviors exhibited by successful language learners, such as those who participated in the Russian Flagship Program, and can compare them to behaviors that emerge among learners in other semester and academic year programs through American Councils.

More specifically, this article considers the demonstrated ability to cross major gain thresholds shown by learners of Russian who participated in the

Russian Flagship Program, many of whom crossed the major threshold from Advanced (2) to Superior (3/3+) level in oral proficiency, according to pre- and post-program Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPI). Given the extensive amount of language gain required to move from the Advanced to Superior level, this marked achievement suggests that the Flagship Program might usefully be examined to uncover factors that could be emulated by other study abroad programs. A group of Flagship students are therefore compared to a similar group of students who participated in American Councils' Russian Language and Area Studies Program (RLASP), many of whom had the same opportunities to access the target language as their Flagship counterparts, yet did not cross a major threshold during the course of the program. While it is true that Flagship students are older, more highly self-selected, and enter the program with more proficiency in Russian than their RLASP counterparts, this study shows that the few RLASP students who crossed major thresholds share similarities with Flagship students in terms of learning behaviors outside of the classroom. Although the sample sizes for each of these two groups are too small to afford statistically significant data, this article concludes by recommending ways in which the Flagship Program might serve as a model for other study abroad programs wishing to enable more language learners to cross major thresholds in oral proficiency.
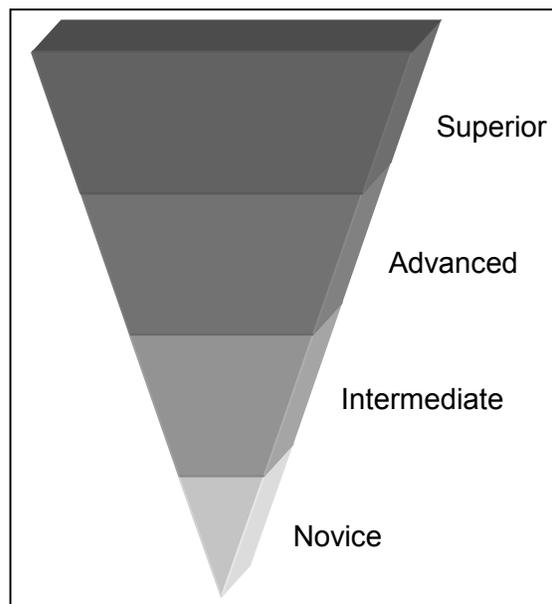
ACTFL Proficiency Standards

This study focuses on major threshold gains in oral proficiency as described in the ACTFL proficiency standards and illustrated by the inverted pyramid. The inverted pyramid depicts the exponential increase in language learners' proficiency as they cross each subsequent major threshold. The ACTFL scale includes six categories of proficiency: Novice (0), Intermediate (1), Advanced (2), Superior (3), Distinguished (4), and Educated Native Speaker (5). Some of these categories are further subdivided into Low, Mid, and High levels of proficiency. The learners who are considered in this study performed at

Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior levels of oral proficiency in pre- and post-program Oral Proficiency Interviews.[i]

The structure of the inverted pyramid suggests that the amount of language that must be acquired in order to cross from the Intermediate to the Advanced level is less than the amount needed to cross from Advanced to Superior. Thus, any major threshold crossing indicates an exponential increase in the learner's vocabulary, grammar, and complexity of syntax constructions, as well as fluency of expression. However, this fact also indicates that it should generally take less time or less effort to cross from Intermediate to Advanced than it would take to cross from Advanced to Superior.

The Flagship Program and RLASP

The Flagship Program, an education initiative funded by the National Security Education Program (NSEP) and implemented through American Councils, is designed to raise language proficiency among learners of Russian from the Advanced level to at least the Superior level. The program ultimately aims to prepare students to reach the Distinguished/4 level, in an effort to meet "the critical need for U.S. professionals able to speak, read, write, and understand Russian at the highest levels of functional proficiency."[2] Applicants to the Flagship Program must demonstrate Advanced proficiency in two or more skills, such as reading, listening, or oral proficiency, in order to gain admission.

Flagship students attend formal classes 16-18 hours per week and practice with individual tutors 3-4 hours per week. Instead of compartmentalizing language components, such as grammar, phonetics, and conversation, the innovative curriculum design integrates skills development and content instruction. Students are placed in homestays with Russian native speaker hosts, and are monitored by a resident director, who supervises their progress in class and assists them in finding opportunities to use Russian outside of class, for example, by helping them find internships with local museums, corporations, or non-governmental organizations.

Students admitted to the Flagship Program receive full funding through the NSEP, and with this funding comes the expectation that they achieve the language-learning goals described in the program's mission statement. Non-

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[2] http://www.russnet.org/flagship/page.php?page_id=1

native Russian speakers who can operate at the Superior level are in high demand, not only to work as translators, but because they are highly trained professionals who can function in multiple languages without the aid (and extra expense) of translators. Flagship students are aware that if they acquire more language skills, their future job prospects will be better. Therefore, these students tend to be highly motivated language learners, and their ability to express and demonstrate such motivation serves as a component of the selection process for entry into the Flagship program.

The Russian Language and Area Studies Program (RLASP) through American Councils is designed to improve participants' overall proficiency in Russian language and to develop their knowledge of Russian history, politics, culture, and society. Although American Councils does not have specific language proficiency prerequisites, the organization requires that applicants have taken two years of college-level Russian or its equivalent prior to studying Russian abroad. Students who have taken two years of college-level Russian typically enter the program at the Intermediate oral proficiency level (Davidson 2005).

Like their counterparts in the Flagship program, RLASP students attend formal classes 16-18 hours per week and practice with individual tutors 2-4 hours per week. In contrast to the Flagship program's integrated content curriculum design, the RLASP curriculum is structured in a way that compartmentalizes various aspects of Russian language learning, so individual classes are dedicated to phonetics, lexicon, or conversation practice, to name a few. RLASP students may choose to live either in a dormitory with other international students or with host families who have agreed to speak only Russian with their guests. Upon request, RLASP students may participate in internships or take part in volunteer opportunities. A resident director supervises their progress through the program and, at students' request, helps them to find internships with local organizations and businesses.

Common among learners in study abroad programs, including RLASP, is their desire to increase their proficiency in a foreign language, to grow intellectually by experiencing another culture, and to fulfill requirements for their major. Students who are earning college credit are generally required by their home institutions to pass their study abroad courses, but they are not necessarily required to attain a certain level of proficiency. The absence of such

requirements or expectations could diminish students' motivation to seek opportunities to use Russian and ultimately, to cross major thresholds in oral proficiency.

The Study Participants and Data Collection Tools

Eighteen Flagship students completed the academic-year programs that began in Fall 2004 and 2005. Fifteen began the program at an Advanced level in oral proficiency. The remaining three began their academic year at the Intermediate-High level in oral proficiency but demonstrated Advanced levels in other modalities. Twenty-two RLASP students completed their respective programs. Fourteen of them studied for one semester, and the remaining eight attended courses for the academic year.

Both Flagship and RLASP students regularly completed Language Utilization Reports (LURs) that serve as records of their language use over the course of the semester or academic year. The LUR comprises five sections. Section I requires students to record the number of hours they spent per week using Russian outside of the classroom (see chart below).

Table I: Part I of Language Utilization Report

How many hours during the past seven days did you spend using Russian in the following activities?

Activity	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
a. In language tutorial session							
b. Host family							
c. Internship or academic course work (various)							
d. In public transportation or while shopping							
e. With friends							
f. Cultural events							
g. Russian radio or television							
h. Reading the press							
i. Professional or academic reading							
j. Reading for pleasure							
k. Other _____							
TOTAL							

Section II of the LUR elicits narrative accounts about the challenges students encountered during the past week whenever they were operating in Russian. Students were also asked to reflect on the linguistic and cultural resources they would need to deal more effectively with similar situations in the future. Section III requires students to describe a linguistic interaction in Russian which characterized their command of Russian at its best. Section IV asks students to identify 2-3 personal language learning goals for the month ahead, for example, developing their skills in making requests, understanding recurrent colloquialisms and references to contemporary Russian culture, improving phonetics and intonation, or maintaining conversations about complex topics. The final section asks for additional comments or observations about their use of Russian.

The participants' narratives were analyzed using the grounded theory technique (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This technique begins by comparing narratives to identify core concepts within the data, a process referred to as open coding. The next stage, called axial coding, involves finding the relationships between categories. These concepts and the relationships between them are used to construct a theory which is grounded in the data. In addition to this qualitative analysis, outcomes are also presented in quantitative terms. However, as this article reports the findings of a pilot study, these figures are not robust enough to provide a statistically significant analysis.

Post-Program Outcomes in L2 Gain

After nine months of intensive language study, 17 out of 18 participants who completed the Flagship program crossed a major threshold in their acquisition of Russian. Among the three students who started the program at Intermediate-High, two reached the Advanced level and one attained Superior. The remaining 14 crossed from Advanced to Superior in oral proficiency. Only one student was rated at an Advanced level of oral proficiency at the beginning and end of the program.

Among the 14 semester RLASP students, all with the exception of one crossed at least one minor threshold from Intermediate-Low to Intermediate-Mid or -High in oral proficiency, but only three students crossed the major threshold from Intermediate to Advanced-Low. Not surprisingly, the academic year students attained higher levels of proficiency than the semester

participants. By the end of their program, six out of eight academic year students crossed the major threshold from Intermediate to Advanced, and one student, who had a pre-program OPI rating of Advanced-Low, reached Advanced-High, although he did not manage to cross the major threshold to the Superior Level.

Table II: OPI Levels for FLAGSHIP Participants

	PRE-Program OPI	POST-Program OPI
Intermediate High (1+)	17% (N=3)	0
Advanced Mid (2)	39% (N=7)	11% (N=2)
Advanced High (2+)	44% (N=8)	6% (N=1)
Superior (3)	0	44% (N=8)
Superior High (3+)	0	39% (N=7)

Table III: OPI Levels for SEMESTER students (RLASP)

	PRE-Program OPI	POST-Program OPI
Intermediate Low (1-)	57% (N=8)	7% (N=1)
Intermediate Mid (1)	43% (N=6)	21.5% (N=3)
Intermediate High (1+)	0	50% (N=7)
Advanced Low (2-)	0	21.5% (N=3)

Table IV: OPI Levels for ACADEMIC YEAR students (RLASP)

	PRE-Program OPI	POST-Program OPI
Intermediate Low (1-)	50% (N=4)	0
Intermediate Mid (1)	37.5% (N=3)	0
Intermediate High (1+)	0	12.5% (N=1)
Advanced Low (2-)	12.5% (N=1)	62.5% (N=5)
Advanced Mid (2)	0	12.5% (N=1)
Advanced High (2+)	0	12.5% (N=1)

Despite similarities between Flagship and RLASP students in terms of the amount of time spent per week in formal class settings, the availability of tutors to supplement formal instruction and the opportunity to live with host families, post-program OPIs indicate a considerable difference in the proportion of students who successfully crossed major thresholds. Davidson (2005) points

out that on average 33 percent of RLASP students who start the academic year program at an Advanced level of oral proficiency cross the major threshold to Superior, and only seven percent manage to do so in the course of a single semester. Among those who begin the RLASP program at an Intermediate level of oral proficiency, like the students in this study, 58 percent cross the major threshold to Advanced or higher. Although the RLASP academic-year students in this study achieved greater-than-average gains, Flagship students were much more likely to cross major thresholds, despite, as noted earlier, the greater degree of difficulty. The finding that 83 percent of Flagship students ended the program at the Superior level stands in stark contrast to the outcomes achieved by the average RLASP academic-year student. In addition to differences in program curriculum design, the LURs suggest that the distinct dissimilarities in the ability to cross thresholds between these groups may lie in their behaviors outside of the classroom, which reveal the strategies they employ (or fail to employ) as they progress through their courses of study.

Potential Factors Facilitating the Crossing of Major Thresholds

Flagship Students

This article examines the language use of Flagship students outside of the classroom, where differences in opportunities to acquire and use Russian might bring to light factors that help learners cross major thresholds in oral proficiency. However, it quickly became clear in the narrative data that Flagship participants strongly linked their formal and informal learning environments as they worked to gain proficiency in Russian. One factor mentioned in Flagship students' LURs that might explain the higher occurrence of crossing major thresholds is rooted in the program's accountability structure. In addition to regularly testing Flagship students, instructors and the resident director monitored their overall progress throughout the program and counseled students on their language development. According to their LURs, Flagship students understood the attributes of a Superior level speaker and were keenly aware of the expectation that they reach the Superior/3 proficiency level by the end of the academic year. They made regular references to this expectation in their reports:

> I helped a friend by calling a travel agency on her behalf to chew them
> out about how they had mishandled her registration…I remember on

the level three test in December, we were supposed to scold an employee, which was difficult – so I guess I've improved in complaining.

When I converse with a native, I find myself trying to figure out whether or not we're having a 'level three discussion.'

I would like to improve my listening skills. Also, I am terrified that I will not pass the level three test, so I am going to spend the next few weeks preparing for that.

I was able to clearly explain a… theory on language development… I was quite pleased with my apparent ability to explain an abstract concept. If I remember correctly, that was one of the criteria laid out for level-three speech.

Well, I'm digging out those old favorites – all of my grammar books…for one last go around before level three testing… Hopefully, this extra practice will make the practice exams that I am going to complete prior to level three testing seem like a piece of cake. Well, if not cake, then at least not so terrible as I thought them to be the first semester.

Clearly, Flagship students had been instructed on the qualities of Superior/3 level speech, which was presented as the minimum proficiency goal, and their awareness of this level led them to self assess their own performance, a practice found in Rivers' 2001 study of experienced language learners. Moreover, the explicit requirement that Flagship students reach the Superior level fueled students' motivation to hone their Russian in all skills (oral, writing, comprehension, and reading) both inside and outside of the classroom. The support they receive in the environment around them clearly plays a strong role in their motivation to reach level 3. This motivation informs the next two factors to be discussed that facilitated their acquisition of Russian.

A second factor that potentially helped Flagship students cross major thresholds in oral proficiency is rooted in the nature of their relationships with their peer tutors. In their narrative accounts, Flagship students clearly distinguished their peer tutors from other native speaker peers and

characterized tutors as an extension of classroom instructors who could help them achieve their language learning goals.

> I talked to my tutor about the 'scripted' phrases that people in kiosks and stores say and expect to hear back.

> I'm working on endings with my tutor.… I plan to work on CB/HCB [verb aspect] with my tutor as well.

> My tutor and I spent a lot of time together working on grammar material, and our efforts definitely paid off. I was able to answer the teacher's questions confidently (and correctly!).

> My tutor has been a big help with this [internship assignment] – she proofreads my translations and helps me correct them and explains my errors. I will continue to use her as a resource in this respect.

Because Flagship students perceived their relationships with their tutors as professional ones, they tended to voice complaints when tutors were not performing to their satisfaction and providing the quality of instruction that Flagship students demanded:

> I had a frustrating time with my tutor this week. She has a tendency to finish my sentences for me and interrupt in a way that I feel is unhelpful for my Russian…. I need to get better at interrupting her to tell her, calmly, what I want to do with her, and ask her not to interrupt… I think we can work together to make this situation better.

> I'm not talking enough. My tutoring sessions are falling apart … basically 3 of the 4 times a week are useless…. I think my tutor and I should move to another room…my tutor has gotten distracted quite often by whatever [another student] is doing or saying [in the same room with another tutor].

> In the past week I have, unfortunately, had some new problems with my tutor. I feel like her attention has been waning and that I have a hard time getting her to pay attention to me.

Flagship students understood the roles of their peer tutors as instructors with a specific job, namely, to supplement formal classroom instruction and help Flagship students reach their language learning goals. Their efforts to guide and improve the instruction given by tutors reveal how Flagship students were not passive recipients of instruction. Instead, they became agents of their language learning experience. RLSAP students perceived their relationship with tutors differently, a point which will be discussed later. Flagship narratives show that interactions with other native speaker peers (not tutors) always took place outside of the academic setting, for example, in homes, cafes, and at concerts, but relationships with peer tutors remained categorized in the academic domain. Although Flagship students do not mention socializing with their tutors outside of a formal academic setting, there appears to be little, if any, overlap between social peers and peer tutors.

A third factor that possibly contributed to Flagship program participants' crossing major thresholds, which also likely grew out of the expectation that Flagship students reach the Superior level, lies in their stated learning objectives and their descriptions of strategies to reach those objectives. Their language learning strategies often reflected their efforts to create opportunities for themselves to practice Russian outside of class.

Flagship students described their language learning goals on part IV of the LUR and repeatedly coupled their stated goals with extra-curricular tasks they thought would help them reach their aims. Students very often incorporated their tutors into their plans and objectives:

> To deal with challenges that arose during the writing class, I need to practice writing formal letters… I will also try to pay more attention to the way specific texts are structured while I'm reading different kinds of literature… To improve my reading comprehension I will try to work with my tutor on identifying themes and breaking apart texts.

> I want to make sure that my comprehension skills continue to improve, so I am going to try to either have a discussion (with either my host family or my tutor) at least twice a week about something I hear in the news or a movie or a show that I watch, so that I can activate the vocabulary that I am able to understand (but still not using) and make sure that I listen actively all the time.

I really want to focus on listening….I plan to buy a radio with a tape deck so that I can record news or talk shows every night and listen to them as I walk to and from school every day.

Beyond our *spetskurs*, I've found postings for open discussions on political topics at the university, and I mean to begin attending them fairly regularly.

One of my teachers has written the comment that I need to read more in Russian… I have started reading for at least 20 minutes each night before bed…
I know that I need some serious work with my grammar, so I plan on starting to do some extra exercises every night (or at least several times a week)…

I am going to get better at reading Russian… I am going to try to spend a few minutes at the beginning of each tutorial session retelling my tutor about some articles I have read.

Every example above shows how Flagship students identified an area of language development that needed improvement and then described how they might achieve that goal. This effective pattern of goal-setting and strategy implementation occurred with high frequency on their LURs. A number of studies also find that learners who choose strategies appropriate to their learning goals (Chamot *et al* 1988), who take an active role in self-assessment and self-management of their learning (Leaver 2003, Rivers 2001), and who use strategies to elicit opportunities to practice what they have already learned (Cohen 1998) demonstrate greater success as language learners.

Instead of remaining passive and waiting for opportunities to present themselves, Flagship students actively used Russian as often as possible. For example, Flagship students regularly participated in Russian discussion groups at a neighboring university and, whenever appropriate, initiated conversations with native speakers in shops or cafés. Several students reported taking a vacation to Egypt together with a Russian tour group, in order to have opportunities to use Russian during their time out of country. Flagship students also reported making consistent efforts to maintain Russian as the language of conversation in mixed groups of native and non-native speakers.

When Flagship students found themselves in situations with Russian native speakers who were highly proficient in English, they resisted the temptation to switch to English. They did their best to maintain conversations in Russian and reported these moments as successful interactions that "characterized their command of Russian at its best":

> I was at a get-together of translators – most of whom translated from Russian to English – and almost everybody complimented me on my Russian; notably, not one tried to speak to me in English.

Even in one-on-one situations, if Russian native speakers tried to speak English, then Flagship students reported having to negotiate, albeit subtly, the language of conversation:

> [A Russian woman] discovered that I was American, and then told me she had lived in the U.S. for some ten years. She tried a bit of English with me, but quickly deferred to my Russian…

> I had coffee with a recently met acquaintance who is fluent in English – her English, from what little I've heard, is better than my Russian. At first, she tried to conduct the conversation in English, but I responded in Russian and the conversation remained in Russian quite naturally. This 'battle for language time' happens quite frequently in situations with Russians who speak English well…

Although this student assessed his acquaintance's proficiency in English higher than his proficiency in Russian (the subtext suggesting that the language in which both interlocutors were *most* proficient would serve as the language of conversation), he succeeded in sustaining the conversation in Russian and gaining another opportunity to practice his L2 skills.

According to their narratives, Flagship students felt an immense pressure to achieve their language learning goals. Knowing exactly what was expected from them, understanding the potential consequences of success or failure, and having their progress continually monitored by teachers and program officers, Flagship students planned and implemented language learning strategies and actively created opportunities for themselves to use

Russian outside of class in order to meet the expectations of the program and maximize their chances of success.

RLASP Students

The three factors that contributed to the general success of Flagship students in crossing major thresholds occurred much less frequently in the LURs of RLASP students, less than half of whom crossed major thresholds during their course of study. First, the high expectations for major threshold gains were not deeply embedded in the accountability structure within which RLASP students operated. Although RLASP students were periodically tested by instructors to monitor their progress, there is no evidence to suggest that periodic testing or grades served as a motivating factor in language learning for RLASP students, who never mentioned test anxiety or the fear of failing to reach a particular proficiency level. They did not mention specific language proficiency requirements necessary for them to achieve, and there was no evidence to suggest that RLASP students received guidelines or requirements from their home universities regarding expectations for language gain. Unlike Flagship students, they did not compare their performance in Russian with the performance with that of fellow students or report feelings of competitiveness.

In contrast to their Flagship counterparts, who perceived peer tutors as adjunct instructors, RLASP students appeared to have a different kind of relationship with their peer tutors, who were often perceived as friends rather than as instructors. In Section I of their LURs, in which they accounted for the number of hours they spent "using Russian" in various activities, the RLASP students reported "using Russian" with friends approximately 8-9 hours per week, and with peer tutors 3-½ hours per week. Yet in their narrative accounts, RLASP students often cited casual interactions with peer tutors, but rarely mentioned interactions with other native speaker peers. Follow-up interviews revealed that RLASP students perceived peer tutors and other native speaker peers as one and the same. Peer tutors often served two roles: an official role as "tutor" and an unofficial role as "friend" to RLASP students. Thus, when RLASP students reported spending three hours with their tutors, this reflects the "official" one-on-one tutoring session. When the RLASP learners reported spending time with NS friends, the interactions usually took place in mixed groups of native and non-native speakers, "usually a group of Americans and one of the tutors." During these times RLASP students could opt out of active

conversation in Russian and take more passive roles as listeners or speak English with each other, something they could not do in their official one-on-one meetings. One RLASP student reported that when she spent time in mixed groups, she often took on the role of listener and allowed other fellow students to take turns holding conversations in Russian with their native-speaker tutor/friend. This passive behavior allows for language input but signifies an avoidance strategy that threatens to hinder language gain.

RLASP students seem to perceive the official tutoring sessions as informal conversation practice that may or may not take place in academic settings:

> I spoke with my tutor for over four hours during our trip to Kronstadt. In general, I find my conversations with my tutor and host family to be satisfying because we can talk openly and joke around …

> Talked with my tutor on the phone for 30 min, happens every day.

The informal relationship between RLASP students and their tutors was reflected in their narrative reports about L2 learning objectives. When these students reported their language-learning goals on section IV of their LURs, they never mentioned their tutors or the roles their tutors could play in helping students achieve their goals. RLASP students never complained about the performance of their peer tutors in their narratives, a further indication that peer tutors were perceived more as friendly acquaintances than as supplemental instructors who provided a service.

RLASP students very rarely described their learning strategies and did not report that they were actively seeking opportunities to use Russian outside of class. On the one hand, this lack of reporting learning strategies indicates a lack of deliberate self-management in their language learning agenda. On the other hand, the short responses generally given by RLASP students might simply reflect their haste in completing the questionnaires, so findings concerning this point are inconclusive. However, according to the LURs, Flagship students report spending an average of 48.6 hours per week using Russian outside of class, whereas academic-year RLASP students report spending 64.8 hours per week; and semester RLASP students report spending 61 hours per week. Although the number of cases is not high enough to

conduct a reliable statistical study, clearly these numbers show a large discrepancy between L2 use outside of class and anticipated post-program language gains.

Other findings also revealed inconsistencies between LURs and post-program OPI scores. For example, the charts below illustrate and compare the average number of hours per week students spent using Russian in specific activities that may have involved interactions with native speakers or with texts and media.

Table VI: FLAGSHIP students, weekly average of time spent using Russian

	Friends	Internship	Host Family	TV & radio	Tutor	Shopping	Pleasure reading
Avg. hours per week:	9.82	9.80	8.1	5.3	3.32	3.32	3.3

Table VII: RLASP Academic Year students, weekly average of time spent using Russian

	Host Family	Friends	TV & radio	Academic reading	Internship	Shopping	Tutor
Avg. hours per week:	19.4	9.0	7.7	6.6	5.4	3.8	3.5

Table VIII: RLASP Semester students, weekly average of time spent using Russian

	Host Family	Friends	TV & radio	Internship	Shopping	Cultural events	Pleasure reading
Avg. hours per week:	15.95	8.55	8.1	6.48	6.15	4.2	3.5

Upon first glance, it appears that Flagship and RLASP students spent similar proportions of time outside of the classroom "using Russian" with host families, friends, working at internships, and watching TV or listening to the radio. In fact, RLASP students reported using Russian outside of class 10-15

hours more on average than Flagship students. Given students' post-program OPI scores, these findings beg the question: *If Flagship and RLASP students spent similar amounts of time using Russian outside of class, then why didn't more RLASP students cross the major threshold from Intermediate to Advanced (as Flagship students crossed from Advanced to Superior)?* Indeed, if students are spending an average of 8-9 hours per week using Russian with friends and 16-19 hours per week with host families, then one would expect to see greater outcomes in terms of language gain among RLASP students.

This incongruity can be explained in part by the differences in students' interpretation of the phrase "time spent using Russian" on the LUR. As is often the case with self-reported data, participants may interpret items on a survey in different ways. In this analysis, the Flagship students recorded their hours of language use with extreme accuracy (sometimes down to the minute), and interpreted the phrase "time spent using Russian" in terms of their own language production, with more emphasis on output and less on input. For example, if a Flagship participant spent three hours with Russian friends on a particular day, but they only spent one hour talking (and watched a movie the other two), then the participant reported "using Russian with friends" for one hour. In contrast, the RLASP students interpreted the concept "using Russian" as the number of hours they spent doing an activity *when native speakers were present*, rather than how many hours the students themselves spent producing Russian. For example, if RLASP students spent two hours with their host families watching TV, then they tended to record "using Russian" for two hours with their families and for two hours watching TV. In fact, several RLASP students noted on their LURs that many of the activities overlapped. It would seem that these inconsistencies would render any data analysis unreliable. However, the fact that the Flagship and RLASP students interpreted the LURs differently brought out different, richer angles from their narrative data that otherwise would have gone unnoticed.

RLASP students who did not cross a major threshold treated their language learning goals differently from the way Flagship students treated their goals. In their narratives RLASP students often stated desired outcomes but rarely described a plan to reach those goals. For example, the following excerpts were taken from the reports of RLASP students who did not cross any major proficiency thresholds:

I want to feel comfortable in just about any situation. I want to be better at using all the vocab I know … I want to understand slang and speech patterns better.

Using right case, increasing vocab (esp. verbs), listening skills.

Holding my own in an argument/discussion; phonetics; learning new vocabulary.

I would like to improve my intonation and get better at asking questions.

Use a correct case every now and then.

Improving phonetics, being quicker and more accurate with declensions, using idioms and new vocabulary correctly.

These RLASP students all express a desire for improvement, but they do not describe how they might achieve their goals. The absence of concrete plans to improve their spoken or written Russian and the lack of measurable growth in post-program OPIs coincide with findings on "deliberate practice" (Ericsson *et al* 1993) and metacognitive self-management (Rivers 2001) in the acquisition of skills. According to Ericsson, becoming an expert performer in a particular area, such as music or sports, is not necessarily rooted in genetics or natural talent. Rather, the development of expertise in a skill results from deliberate participation in relevant activities in an effort to practice and hone that skill. Rivers supports this claim in his study of experienced language learners, who regularly assess their own progress, evaluate their learning environment, and consciously employ learning strategies to reach their proficiency goals. It should be noted that one of the RLASP students who crossed a major threshold described his goals as well as a strategy for reaching them. He wrote, "I will continue to build my vocabulary by reading in Russian instead of listening to English music or reading in English." Coincidentally, this student managed to cross the major threshold from Intermediate-mid to Advanced after four months of study in St. Petersburg.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Given the widespread opportunities for L2 use in study abroad programs, how can students best utilize their time abroad to achieve major threshold gains in oral proficiency? The Flagship program student reports on their study abroad experiences reveal two factors that encourage such gains:

(1) Students have a clear understanding of the various levels of language proficiency, and therefore, realistic expectations for language gain, and an accountability structure that encourages language use and monitors their progress.

(2) Students state explicit language learning goals and deliberately plan ways to achieve those goals. In their effort to implement language learning strategies and to cross major thresholds, they become the agents in their own language learning process and actively pursue opportunities to use Russian outside of class, which includes the use of tutors as valuable resources for linguistic input.

Flagship students entered the program with a keen awareness of its objectives and of its highly structured nature that was designed to encourage and monitor their progress. Their motivation to use Russian is rooted in their desire to meet the requirements of the program and, by meeting them, to enjoy certain benefits, such as increased professional employment opportunities or more meaningful relationships with native speakers. The curriculum design, with its emphasis on integrated content, pushed them to incorporate their skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking in all subject areas and to use Superior level language both inside and outside of the classroom.

The unambiguous accountability structure of the Flagship program parallels that of U.S.-based immersion programs that encourage language use by requiring students to sign a contract or to take a pledge in which they agree to use their foreign language as their only means of communication. Failure to abide the terms of the contract could result in expulsion from the program and the loss of a valuable language learning opportunity. Although Flagship students are not required to take a Russian-only pledge, perhaps they are, in part, motivated by their awareness of the consequences, usually in the form of reduced employment opportunities, should they fail to use Russian as much as

possible, and to cross major thresholds. By contrast, data from the RLASP reports indicate that the absence of a clear accountability structure could decrease motivation to engage in more L2 use and, consequently, delay learners from crossing major thresholds. RLASP students did not mention specific expectations or language gain requirements set by their home universities, and their personal language learning goals remained vague. U.S. colleges and universities might consider incorporating curricular policies that would clearly define language learning goals during study abroad and perhaps award more credit for crossing major thresholds.

Knowing the expectations of their home institutions and understanding the potential rewards of language gain, learners in study abroad programs might benefit from weekly meetings with peer tutors, who serve not only as resources for friendships but as an opportunity for language practice. Focusing their attention on the latter point, Flagship students treated peer tutors as formal language instructors and considered them a means to achieving their language learning goals. Their LURs indicate a strong relationship between the extra hours of one-on-one instruction and their ability to cross the major threshold from Advanced to Superior. Although RLASP students reported spending similar amounts of one-on-one time with their peer tutors, their meetings were characterized as less formal. Because RLASP students tended to perceive tutors as friends, rather than as instructors, they might not have made the same demands of their tutors as did Flagship students. Perhaps if they had actively negotiated for more explicit instruction from their tutors, a higher percentage of these students would have crossed major thresholds.

The expectation that Flagship students reach the Superior level in multiple skills drove them to become autonomous agents of their own learning and to develop clear strategies that would help them meet this expectation. These strategies often involved generating opportunities to practice Russian, deliberately maintaining Russian as the language of conversation (even in the presence of proficient English speakers), and consciously assessing their own proficiency level during interactions with native speakers. The active behavior on the part of Flagship students who assumed agency in their language learning, resulted in more opportunities to use Russian and in subsequent major threshold gains. By contrast, RLASP students on the whole did not describe language learning strategies on their LURs, and at times exhibited passive behavior when opportunities to use Russian presented themselves.

Unlike Flagship students, RLASP students reported opting out of conversations with native speakers when other English speakers were present, and did not demonstrate self-awareness of their own proficiency levels in relation to language learning objectives or to the standards outlined by ACTFL. The passive behavior reported by RLASP students might have afforded them opportunities for observation and input, but their lack of practice in terms of output may have hindered their ability to cross major thresholds. Students' descriptions about personal language learning goals reveal a clear distinction between those students who deliberately planned and implemented learning strategies, which resulted in major threshold gains, and those learners who did not report strategies that might help them obtain their desired outcomes. Training in metacognitive learning strategies, combined with clear language learning objectives and unambiguous expectations for language gain, could enable learners in study abroad programs to cross major thresholds in oral proficiency. Although the relationship between curriculum design and outcomes falls out of the scope of this particular study, the integrated content curriculum employed by the Flagship instructors may have also played a significant role in the proficiency gains made by their students and deserves further research.

The Flagship Program and its students, by incorporating the above-described factors into the study abroad experience, serve as a clear model for other study abroad programs that wish to achieve similar outcomes in major threshold gains. Although not all study abroad programs have the same demanding requirements or curriculum design as the Flagship Program, nonetheless, they might consider incorporating these factors as strategies toward enhancing language learning achievements. Likewise, learners who wish to become proficient speakers of a foreign language might usefully emulate the behavior of Flagship students in order to maximize their study abroad experience.

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[i] "Low" indicates the ability to perform at a particular proficiency level but an inability to sustain it due to marked errors in grammar, pronunciation, syntax, or fluency; "Mid" indicates that a learner can function consistently at that level; and "High" indicates the ability to function at the next highest proficiency level but an inability to sustain performance at that level over a variety of topics.

Intermediate-level oral proficiency is characterized by a speaker's ability to (1) create with the language by combining and recombining learned elements, though primarily in a reactive mode, (2) initiate, minimally sustain, and close in a simple way basic communicative tasks, and (3) ask and answer questions.[1] Intermediate-level speakers can produce Russian on a sentence-by-sentence basis, and learners at Intermediate-High begin to show evidence of paragraph-length discourse, which is characteristic of Advanced-level speakers.

According to ACTFL standards, learners who can speak at an Advanced level of proficiency are able to (1) converse in a clearly participatory fashion, (2) initiate, sustain, and bring to closure a wide variety of communicative tasks, including those that require an increased ability to convey meaning with diverse language strategies due to a complication or an unforeseen turn of events, (3) satisfy the requirements of school and work situations, and (4) narrate and describe with paragraph-length connected discourse.[1] However, in order to progress from the Advanced to Superior level of oral proficiency, learners must acquire the ability to speak about diverse topics in a highly sophisticated manner, one in which errors in speech production might occasionally occur but would not be noticed by native speakers. The Superior Level is marked by a speaker's ability to (1) participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics and (2) support opinions and hypothesize using native-like discourse strategies.

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