

Foreign Language Study Coupled with Internship Experience as an Entrée to Professional Opportunities

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Introduction

Today's global age presents its share of unique challenges, not the least of which is communication. Whereas in past centuries, fossil fuels played a central role in driving economies and influencing policy decisions, "language is the new oil" in the twenty-first century.¹ Some forward thinking individuals and organizations have responded to the times and teamed up with universities and government agencies to develop new and innovative foreign language programs. Consider, for example, the U.S. federally funded National Flagship Language Program that offers upwards of nine months to one year of intensive language instruction in the target language culture and experiential learning in the form of an internship, the objective of which is to produce Level 3 speakers, referring to the federal Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale, or the equivalent of Superior level, according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency scale. Immersion-type programs, such as the Flagship Programs, reflect a response to a shortage of highly proficient learners of foreign languages in corporations, nongovernmental organizations, militaries, diplomatic services, and universities. The Flagship programs guarantee extensive contact with a target language over a concentrated period of time, while simultaneously responding to a growing demand among university students nationwide to pursue pre-professional experience in their respective target languages. Findings presented in this article focus on the professional goals and language gains

¹ Speaking at Brigham Young University's Symposium "Humanities Plus: Advancing Global Dialogue and Initiatives through Experiential Learning" on 30-31 January 2014, GALA's CEO Hans Fenstermacher asserted that languages today must be a core competency of every organization that seeks to remain relevant (<https://plus.google.com/+BYUHumanities/posts/McL5H2QxDj3>).

demonstrated by students at Brigham Young University (BYU) participating in the Moscow Internship Program.

Review of the Literature

Traditionally, students pursuing foreign languages have participated in study abroad programs that offer an immersion experience living in a target language culture. Such intense exposure often leaves an indelible impression on young minds and influences the way they perceive themselves and others. Yet as the global economy has expanded and demand for foreign language credentials grown², students increasingly have sought to supplement their study abroad experience with actual pre-professional experience.

In the decade between 2000 and 2010, the number of students who traveled abroad for a credit-earning internship program ballooned from 1,700 to 16,400, with another 8,700 working abroad on a non-credit basis (Simon 2013). Perhaps this shift could most accurately be described as one of augmenting existing study abroad programs and, thereby, providing students with “work-study abroad” (Ibid.). Recognizing the added value of working and studying abroad, many humanities programs around the U.S. have retooled their study abroad course offerings and built a practicum-like experience into them that gives students an opportunity to work in the target language culture. Administrators from the College of Humanities at Brigham Young University refer to this bridging of a liberal arts education with pre-professional experience as Humanities+™³ and provide students important support in the form of advisement and program discounts.

But expanding global markets are just one of many factors that have influenced college administrators to rethink their study abroad curricula. For years, the humanities have had to defend their place in the university amidst skyrocketing demand for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors. With shrinking

² Annalyn Kurtz, reporting for *CNN Money*, writes that between 2010 and 2020, jobs for interpreters and translators are expected to grow by forty-two percent (not including the military sector).

³ Humanities+™ represents an initiative designed “to provide ideas and resources for bridging the traditional humanities major to the professional work world” (see blog at <http://humanitiesplus.byu.edu/>).

university budgets in a flaccid economy and calls for trimming or altogether cutting programs that seemingly contribute to unemployment rates, administrators have targeted the humanities, which often are perceived as “soft” sciences and expendable. To counter this misperception of the humanities, in recent years, many foreign language departments across the U.S. have articulated clear learning outcomes by drawing on ACTFL proficiency guidelines to define expectations of their curricula.⁴ For this reason, foreign language instructors have made important strides in the way of implementing rigorous proficiency testing that aligns with other STEM fields and that makes foreign language graduates more attractive to employers.

The question of return on investment (ROI) with regard to foreign language study and, by extension, experiential learning, remains a disputed and even polarizing one. Advocates of education for the personal growth that it provides often encounter resistance from individuals who view a degree as a means to an end – a golden ticket, so to say. Naturally, there also are those who espouse a centrist position on the issue and recognize that a college education entails some of both and that conceding such a point does not imply selling out to either extreme. After all, asks Lane Greene of *The Economist*, “What is the return on investment for history, literature or art? Of course schools are intended to do more than create little GDP-producing machines” (Greene, 2014). Greene goes on to argue that, aside from the non-economic benefits of learning a foreign language, there are many economic advantages to learning them, particularly in a world in which the number of English speakers is not growing as fast as some would like to think (Ibid.).

Although the issue of ROI has vexed academe for many years, the combination of rising tuition costs coupled with mounting student debt and a weak economy has driven home its acute nature (Carlson 2013). Some U.S. universities, such as the Texas A&M International University, have sought to streamline costs by offering a bachelor’s degree that does not require registering for a foreign language course (Riley 2010). However, such a model fails to take into consideration the

⁴ In their full report to the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, George Kuh and Stanley Ikenberry point out that “Another indicator of the growth of the assessment movement is the sharp increase since 2000 in the range of assessment tools and organizations devoted to some aspect of assessment” (2009, 6).

linguistic disadvantages that graduates will face when competing for international education opportunities, U.S. government work (the Foreign Service, the Intelligence communities, the armed services, e.g., ROTC candidates must now have some foreign language coursework), and the like.⁵

Indeed, as the authors of a nationwide Russian language survey soberly concluded: “The pre-occupation with preparing a generation for the globalized economy of the 21st century in the foreign affairs community of the U.S., and in virtually every world center today from Beijing and Brussels to Moscow, Shanghai, Seoul, and Tokyo appears to have left most of the American heartland untouched” (Davidson and Garas 2009, 17). However, programs, such as the American Graduate School of International Management at Thunderbird, require that students complete the equivalent of four semesters of foreign language study, which far outstrips foreign language requirements at most MBA programs in the country (Grosse, Tuman, and Critz 1998).

Program development

Most students enrolled in upper-division Russian courses at BYU have spent eighteen months to two years living in a Russian-speaking country where they gave volunteer service. Upon returning, many opt to test out of first- and second-year Russian and matriculate directly into third-year advanced grammar. Consequently, the gradual attrition that normally occurs over the course of four years of foreign language study does not apply to foreign language study at BYU. Conversely, the numbers swell at the third year and stay consistently high through fourth year. Students in the Russian program have the option of going on study abroad to Nizhny Novgorod, but the program caters to those who are completing second-year Russian and do not have prior immersion experience in the target language culture. Even though most students in upper division courses have lived in a Russian-speaking country, they lack professional language skills and it is precisely these types of language skills that many want to develop.

For these reasons, in 2005, the researcher surveyed a cross-section of upper-division students at BYU ($N = 190$) to ascertain, on a scale of

⁵ Correspondence with William P. Rivers in regards to the announced closing of the Russian, Italian, and French language programs at SUNY Albany, 17 October 2010.

one to five, the degree to which they considered pursuing an internship in Russia important to their overall undergraduate education and future professional development. Figure 1 illustrates students' responses, with one being not interested and five being very interested.

Figure 1: Level of Interest

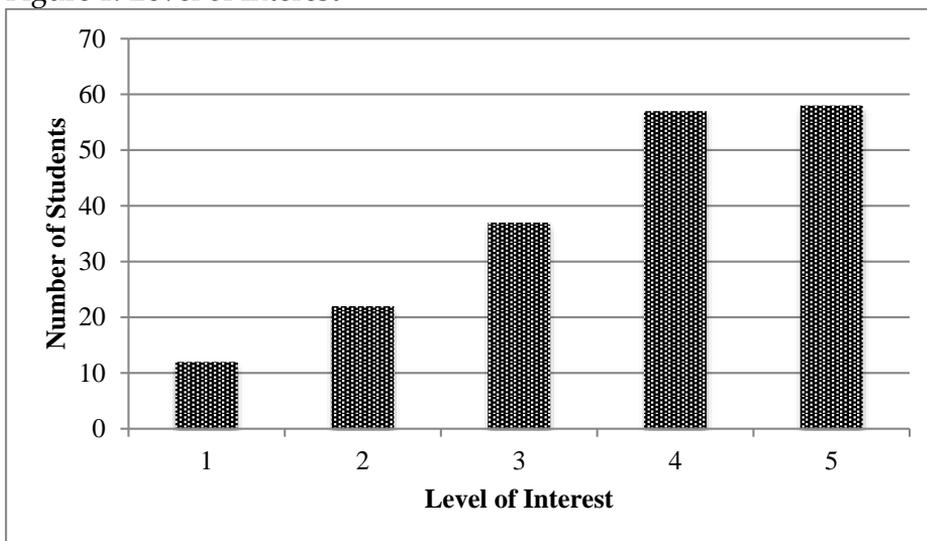
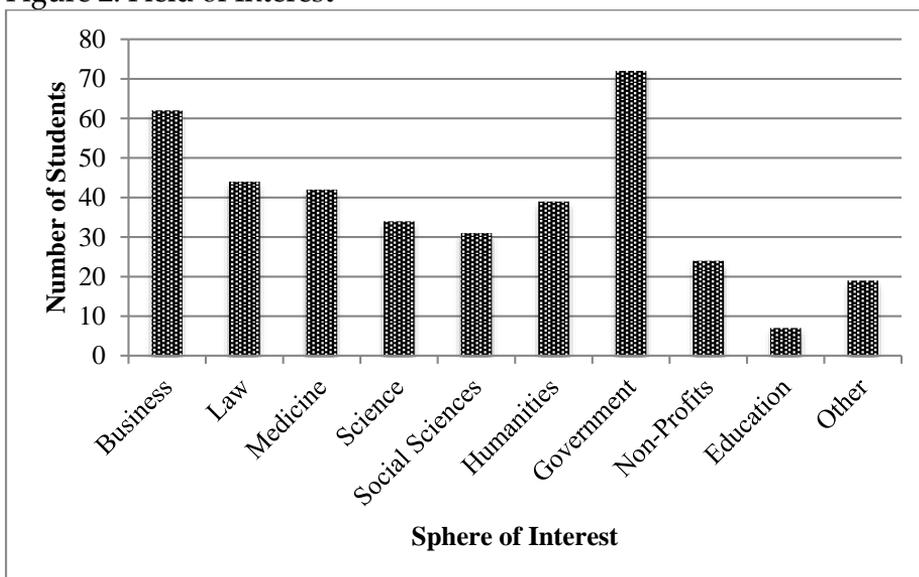


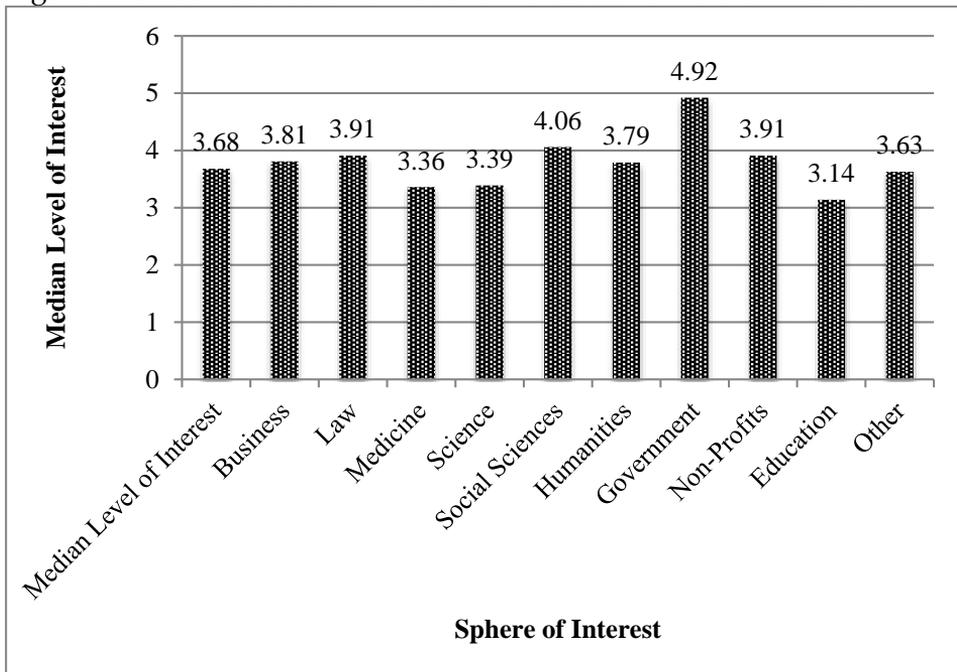
Figure 2: Field of Interest



Furthermore, they were asked to indicate their desired field of interest by checking one or more boxes next to the following options: business, law, medicine, sciences, social sciences, humanities, government, non-profit, teaching/education, and other (specify). Responses to the aforementioned question are illustrated in Figure 2 above.

Combining data from the previous two questions provided additional insight into the students' level of interest by their reported field of interest (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Cross-Tabulation of Level of Pursuit and Field of Interest



As illustrated in Figure 3, the overall median level of interest was 3.68 (out of 5) with business, law, social sciences, humanities, government, and non-profits all exceeding the average.

Such findings suggested that students, indeed, desired to couple their classroom learning with in-country experiential learning. Furthermore, they provided the basis for the creation of an internship program in Russia, which eventually resulted in a collaboration between

Brigham Young University and the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA) in Moscow.⁶

Language Development

Since 2007, BYU students have interned in Moscow with a number of prestigious non-governmental organizations, political and economic think tanks, hospitals, law firms, businesses, investment banks, consulting firms, and news media organizations. In its infancy, the program spanned summer semester; however, as demand grew, program dates likewise expanded to include fall and spring semesters.

In addition to pursuing full-time internships, students attend advanced foreign language courses twice a week (six hours total) where they analyze and discuss readings dealing with global issues, review grammar topics, and resolve language-related questions that arise at their respective internships. Consistent contact with and feedback from a native speaker trained in teaching Russian as a foreign language lends structure to their otherwise informal study of the language on the job.

Prior to going abroad, students complete an ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), or as of winter 2013, a computer-adapted ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPIc).⁷ Shortly before returning to the states, they complete a post-OPI in order to ascertain the degree to which their language skills improved while participating in the program. In order to clarify what constitutes a speaker at the Advanced and Superior levels, the researcher discusses the ACTFL proficiency guidelines and distributes them to students prior to their departure. With such criteria in hand and having received their pre-OPI ratings, students are able both to pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses and target specific areas on which to focus.

Findings

Over the course of eleven twelve-week programs encompassing fall, spring, and summer semesters, 61 students completed a pre- and post-

⁶ Focusing on Moscow rather than outlying cities reflected a conscious effort to take advantage of the immense influx of capital into one city, translating into increased work opportunities for students.

⁷ Rather than distinguishing between the two instruments throughout the article, henceforth, the OPI and OPIc will be referred to as the OPI.

OPI. Figure 4 presents a comparison of their ratings. The data in Figure 4 indicate a definitive departure from the Intermediate level and a solid entry into the Advanced and Superior levels. Results of performing a t-test of the mean gain reveal statistical significance in terms of gain at the .01 level.⁸ Results from the aforementioned analysis are provided in Table 1.

Figure 4: Comparison of Pre- and Post-OPI Ratings (*N* =61); IM = Intermediate-Mid, IH = Intermediate-High, AL = Advanced-Low, AM = Advanced-Mid, AH = Advanced-High, and S = Superior

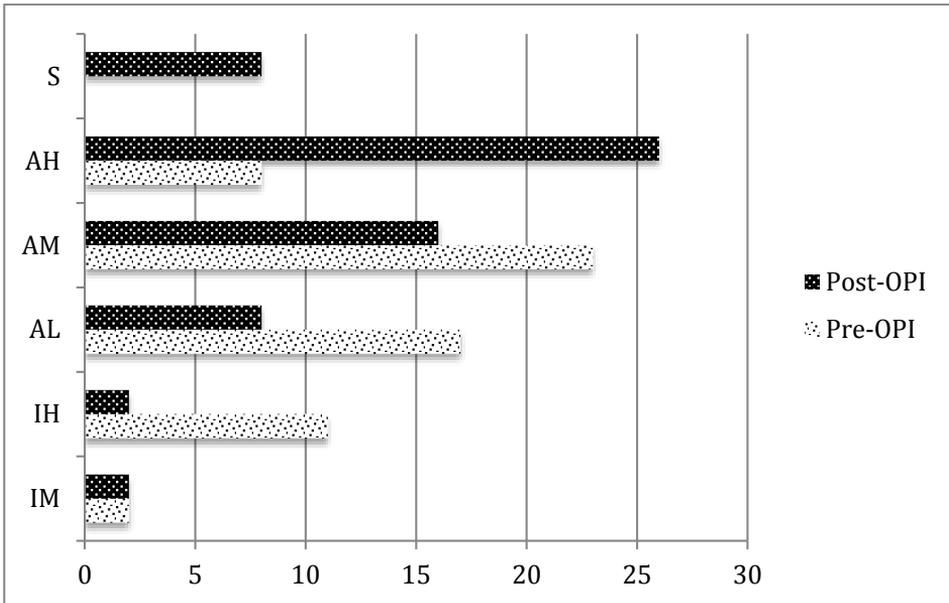


Table 1: Post-hoc t-Test for Russian Pre- and Post-OPI Ratings

	Mean	SE	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Russian Post-OPI – Pre-OPI (ACTFL scale)	1.05	.112	9.48	60	<.0001

Discussion

Overall, students who participated in the Moscow Internship Program demonstrated either sublevel (e.g. AL to AM) or threshold (e.g. IH to AL

⁸ All analyses were done using SAS 9.2 (SAS Institute, Inc.).

or AH to S) gain over the course of twelve weeks. ACTFL depicts its proficiency scale as an inverted pyramid in order to show that one can progress from Novice to Intermediate on the scale much more easily than from Intermediate to Advanced and beyond. By the time one reaches the Advanced level, noticing gain becomes increasingly difficult, particularly for the learner, hence the added value of outside testing in order to objectify one's progress.

Pushing beyond AM to AH typically presents an enormous challenge since learners at the AH level already demonstrate skills indicative of a Superior-level speaker, albeit inconsistently. Thus, a sublevel gain from AM to AH arguably represents an even more difficult leap than from AH to S. Yet, of the 17 students who started at AL, 6 of them progressed to AM and beyond to AH, while 9 of them moved up to AM and 2 remained at AL. Of the 23 students who received a rating of AM on the pre-OPI, 14 demonstrated gain (10 with sublevel gain from AM to AH, and 4 with threshold gain from AM to S). Eight students rated at AH on the pre-OPI, and of those, 2 crossed over into S. Such improvement suggests that coupling professional development in the target language with scaffolded classroom instruction provides the needed structure and application to make rapid gains at the Advanced level.

Conclusion

As demand grows for Advanced and Superior-level foreign language proficiency, so too does demand for work-study programs that offer professional development in the target language and formal language instruction. Such programs build on university foreign language curricula and prepare students to pursue advanced degrees, enter government service, and find employment in the private sector. Foreign language study can thus lead to greater professional employment opportunities for graduates by increasing their overall marketability in this global age.

Implications for Future Research

Findings from this research represent an important step in demonstrating the added value of coupling foreign language study with pre-professional experience. Future research that tracks career paths of

past participants on the Moscow Internship Program stands to substantiate preliminary findings presented herein and offer valuable insights into the marketability of foreign language study.

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