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## **FROM PERFORMANCE TO MULTILINGUAL BEING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY: LESSONS FROM L2 STUDENTS ABROAD**

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**Abstract:**

This essay offers a critical examination of communicative language teaching as well as proposals for rethinking language pedagogy, in order to foster the development of “translingual and transcultural competence” as framed by the 2007 MLA report. The pedagogical implications at the center of this contribution derive from an analysis of three aspects of multilingual being, exhibited by a group of students while studying abroad in Germany: day-to-day language choice, uses of digital media, and participation in social networks. Insights from this multiple-case ethnographic study are brought to bear in formulating implications for foreign language teaching in the US university setting.

**Keywords:**

Multilingualism ♦ digital practices ♦ study abroad ♦ language teaching ♦ instructional environments ♦ code choice

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[T]he nature of the study-abroad has changed, and in fundamental, dramatic ways, along with the increase in global reach, accessibility, and flexibility of social networks. Although the ease of global communication, travel, and even access to English have the obvious benefits, for American language learners abroad these changes mean that “immersion” is increasingly a matter of choice, and perhaps in some cases a locus of struggle.

—Celeste Kinginger (2008, 105)

This essay aims to problematize one of the central conundrums of foreign language (FL) education, namely how the classroom can or should ‘simulate’ multilingualism in the world outside the classroom. In pursuit of this question, this essay offers a critical treatment of the aims of communicative language teaching (CLT). The main body of this piece then traces the narratives and experiences of a group of US students in Germany, in order to get at the differences between language use as an academic and linguistic performance and as “multilingual being” (Phipps and Gonzales 2005) during students’ stays abroad. These insights are then brought to bear in the third section, which details implications for FL curricula.

### **The Bath Water: Constraints and Potentials in Communicative Language Teaching**

In language classrooms, teachers and students use the second language (L2) in a range of communicative contexts. But likewise we find that the learners’ first language (L1) or socially dominant language is used for a range of purposes. Thus the FL classroom should be regarded as a multilingual social and

pedagogical space, rather than as a poor facsimile of some imagined monolingual L2 environment (Levine 2009a, 2011, 2012, 2013; see also Blyth 1995; Cook 1999). As a small but growing number of researchers argue, there is indeed an imperative to ‘simulate’ a multilingual rather than a monolingual setting to the greatest extent possible, if only to prepare students to function in the world as multilingual users of their L1 and their new L2 (e.g. Antón and DiCamilla 1999; Liebscher and Dailey-O’Cain 2004; Levine 2009a, 2009b; Swain and Lapkin 2000; Turnbull and Dailey-O’Cain 2009). In addition, recent critical treatments and expansions of our understandings of CLT include new attention to the social, affective, and emotional dimensions of L2 learning (Firth and Wagner 1997, 2007; Kramersch 2009; Kramersch and Whiteside 2007; MLA 2007; Pavlenko 2002, 2006; Swaffar 2006) as well as wider acceptance of the employment of task-based language teaching and learning (see Brandl 2008; Ellis 2003; Robinson 2011). Through these means, many university-level language professionals have worked to achieve a ‘post-methods’ sophistication, at least in pedagogical design if not in classroom activity (Kumaravadivelu 2002; Reagan and Osborn 2002), rooted in humanistic inquiry and with a strong focus on language learners as “multilingual subjects,” rather than as “talking heads” acquiring forms and skills (see Kramersch 2009, 28).

Yet despite these advances in the scholarly debate, which do indeed make their way into curricula and classroom practice at times, mainstream discourses about FL teaching and learning—and in particular about what it is students in US language classrooms should be doing, or should be becoming—remain rooted in an impoverished, limited imagining of the overall aims of language learning, oriented in the main toward academic performance, the demonstration of mastery of lexical and grammatical learning, and the use of interactive skills (Kramersch 2009; Schulz 2006; Swaffar 2006). My observations about “mainstream discourses” in foreign language education derive from three main sources, two of which are admittedly anecdotal. The first is an examination of the programs of the ACTFL yearly conventions over the last ten years or so. Apart from a consistently heavy emphasis on linguistic skills development, the fact that teachers and scholars of FL pedagogy continue to regard the “integration of culture” as something in need of attention indicates the presence of a discourse that regards culture as something somehow separate from language.

A second source for my observations about “mainstream discourses” in foreign language education is the hundreds of class visits that I have conducted over the

past two decades, both in my own German program, itself based primarily on conventional CLT tenets, as well in many other language classes in numerous different languages. The third source is the 2006 Perspectives essays in *The Modern Language Journal* 90(2), edited by Heidi Byrnes, which is a critical interrogation of communicative language teaching. Many of the contributors argue strongly that today's CLT approaches tend heavily toward skills and mastery of grammatical forms, and that overall FL education as a field has missed the mark set by earlier humanistic formulations of CLT based in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology (Hymes 1972; Breen and Candlin 1980; Kramsch 2006; Swaffar 2006).

And yet, when viewed in terms of skills and grammatical learning, mainstream CLT pedagogy does achieve what it sets out to do for many if not most of its students, despite an overall "social expectation of failure" that appears to obtain in US foreign language education (Reagan and Osborn 2002, 2-7). To be sure, in many CLT classrooms students do achieve some degree of success in the following areas:

- They learn vocabulary, at least a few thousand lexical items in 1-2 years of university level instruction;
- They develop basic or even more advanced knowledge of grammatical structures and norms of usage in the L2;
- They function in simple or even more sophisticated verbal interaction contexts, such as those that involve talking about one's self, obtaining information from others about themselves, and describing physical environments;
- They obtain interesting declarative knowledge about the history, life, and cultural products of L2-speaking countries;
- They successfully demonstrate their acquisition of the aforementioned, primarily through summative assessment instruments.

In a word, many CLT classrooms by and large succeed at achieving the benchmarks and rubrics of many of the ACTFL proficiency guidelines (ACTFL

2012) and the ACTFL Standards (National Standards 2006). Indeed, because of the Guidelines and the Standards, we have or can create valid measures to assess whether students have acquired the targets we set in our various programs. All appears to be well, so what is the problem?

The problem is that these areas in which the language profession currently demonstrates some measure of success are likely insufficient or inadequate when viewed in relation to the demands of what Phipps and Gonzales (2005) call “intercultural being”—in a globalized, super-complex world that demands people be able to communicate within and across cultural divides, and in which the stakes of successful cross-cultural understanding and communication are more important than ever. In terms of the argument put forth in the much-debated 2007 MLA report, the problem is also that the very existence and success of collegiate language programs may depend on achieving a more capacious, humanistic-inquiry and critical reframing of the very targets of instruction, a curriculum that would allow L2 learners to engage with new ways to make meaning and connect with people in the L2 society (e.g. Byram 2008; Firth and Wagner 1997, 2007; Kumaravadivelu 2002, 2007; Kramsch 2003, 2009; Pavlenko 2002; Phipps and Gonzales 2005; Phipps and Levine 2012; Reagan and Osborn 2002; van Lier 2000, 2004; Urlaub 2012; Warner and Gramling 2012).

The achievement of even ACTFL skills benchmarks is barely sufficient in the face of the limited amount of instructional time language teachers have, and the fact that students often do not begin the study of a new language until they are in high school or undergraduates in college. If language teachers must make do with a dearth of instructional time to help students achieve the sorts of broader capacities necessary for multilingual being and translingual/transcultural competence, then we may need to rethink what we teach students (and how) from the beginning of introductory classes, focusing more on the learner as a developing “multilingual subject” than an effective “talking head” who can process and generate accurate utterances based on (primarily) quotidian themes and topics.

Apart from the complicated issue of implementing such reforms, I believe this trend does not mean we should throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water and abandon the advances brought about in language teaching through the range of approaches that come under the heading of CLT. Clearly students in our classes are learning well through these approaches and techniques, and there

is no denying that CLT in its current mainstream manifestations, even at the secondary educational level, represents a clear improvement over earlier approaches, such as audiolingual methods or traditional grammar-translation. It means, however, that an imperative exists to move language teaching into the directions outlined, which entails a fundamentally multilingual and culturally expansive view. Here the connection between needed reforms in language education and the central question of this essay come together: namely, whether and how multilingualism can be simulated in the classroom. The language classroom is always a simulation of imagined 'real worlds' outside the classroom, a safe training ground where, to employ the central term of van Lier's (2004) ecological-linguistic model, affordances for various forms of development can be facilitated by the curriculum, the instructor, and the students in tandem with all aspects of social, cultural, linguistic, and educational contexts. The classroom environment should afford resources for students to become successful multilingual users of their L1 (or L1s) and L2 in ways that allow them to participate in various social networks in the L2 society.

Two questions should be considered at this point, pertaining to a multilingual approach in language curricula and teaching. These are: *Whose multilingualism?* and *What sort of multilingualism should be simulated?* If language professionals are to serve language learners, it should be learners' own subjectively held multilingualism and not only some externally determined understanding of it, though aspects of authentic or real-world multilingualism in the L2 culture always should be brought to bear. But it also must be an educationally feasible sort of multilingualism, not a new pedagogical holy grail attainable only in the ideal case that the student becomes an ex-patriot in a new society. In the following I aim to explicate what may be meant by "the learner's own multilingualism" in pedagogical context. To develop an appropriate framing of multilingualism for the US-university FL classroom, the focus is shifted away from the US classroom, toward observations and reflections of study abroad students in Germany. Thereafter these observations of and discussions with students are linked back to three crucial implications for FL pedagogy.

### **Foreign Language Pedagogy Goals: Study Abroad and Its Discontents**

The literature on L2 learning and learners in study abroad settings has grown significantly in recent decades. The focus of empirical studies has encompassed the range of topics and issues addressed by second-language acquisition studies

(SLA). Studies have focused on language gains, or lack thereof (Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg 1995; Dewey 2004; Kinginger 2008; Lapkin, Hart, and Swain 1995; Milton and Meara 1995; see also Kinginger 2009 for a review), socialization, or failure thereof, in the L2 culture/society (Kinginger 2008; Pellegrino Aveni 2005; Regan, Howard, and Lemée 2009), and the subjective experiences of students abroad (Jackson 2008; Isabelli-García 2006; Pellegrino Aveni 2005). These more recent studies of learners' subjective experiences (i.e. not looking just at language gains or other linguistic factors) reveal great diversity among students, such that generalizations or predictions of what factors lead to successful L2 learning or acculturation and socialization are made quite difficult, yet they underscore the basic reality that some, or perhaps many students do not succeed at acquiring the new perspectives and ability to critically regard both the new culture and one's own, which Byram (1997 and elsewhere), Guilherme (2000), and others have described as part of "intercultural communicative competence" and which the MLA report picked up and reframed for the US university context as "translingual/transcultural competence":

The idea of translingual and transcultural competence [...] places value on the ability to operate between languages. Students are educated to function as informed and capable interlocutors with educated native speakers in the target language. They are also trained to reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture. They learn to comprehend speakers of the target language as members of foreign societies and to grasp themselves as Americans--that is, as members of a society that is foreign to others. They also learn to relate to fellow members of their own society who speak languages other than English. (MLA 2007, 4)

This admittedly idealistic casting of what it is a FL student should achieve is part of the endeavor to orient FL instruction toward helping students not just perform well in the classroom, but to "function as informed interlocutors" with people in the L2 society. Implicit in this definition of translingual and transcultural competence is the expectation that L2 learners abroad would participate in L2-speaking social networks toward the achievement of translingual/transcultural competence. In an earlier examination of students' language use while studying abroad in Berlin (Levine 2008), I identified and analyzed several sorts of "intercultural moments" in the lives of the students, shedding light on some of the conflicting and conflicted discourses with which L2 learners must struggle. In

that study I did not, however, consider in detail the students' social networks or their beliefs about the goals and desired outcomes of their experiences abroad. That study also did not look specifically at US FL students, as it included participants from several different countries. Because the study raised questions about how students' experiences abroad related back to their experiences learning the language in the classroom, I was subsequently interested in seeing whether or how US students who moved from instructed German FL classes to the 'authentic' environment abroad would make use of English, German, or other languages they had learned, and in what sorts of social networks they would choose to participate while abroad. Because it is clear that at home our students engage with multiple social networks face-to-face as well as via digital media, and through my anecdotal awareness that many study abroad students stay in regular contact with friends and family back home, I was additionally interested in whether and how digital media play a part in both everyday language choice and in engagement with German social networks or circles of friends. I also sought a greater understanding of students' own perceptions about what they were doing abroad relative to what language educators often imagine their students to be doing. In other words, I wanted to know how important it was to the study participants to develop aspects of translingual/transcultural competence and involve themselves in German-language social circles. From my perspective as an instructor rather than as a researcher, I assumed going into the investigation that the students would place these competence goals fairly high on their priority list and that—in addition to basic linguistic gains—they all would ideally like to connect with Germans in face-to-face social circles while abroad, using the German they had learned in real-world situations whenever possible.

To investigate these assumptions, I spent time with students in a study abroad program in southern Germany during the fall of 2011 and again in the spring of 2013, using a range of ethnographic methods to learn all I could about the ways they used their languages and employed digital media in their day-to-day lives, as well as about the circles of friends they chose while studying abroad. These methods included the following:

- One-on-one and face-to-face interviews;



- Surveys requesting information about students' language background and their goals for participating in the study abroad program;
- Surveys called "Language and Digital Media Use Logs," which asked the students to estimate how much German, English, or other languages they had used in the previous 24 hours and for what purposes, as well as how they had used digital media in the same time period.

In the 2011 visit I also asked for volunteers who would grant me access to Facebook wall postings. Five of those 13 students consented. In the 2013 study I asked the participants to make additional recordings of their day-to-day encounters.

All 16 of the students who agreed to be part of the different parts of the study (in 2011 and 2013) were participating in a long-standing program based at a small university in the US Midwest. Eight men and eight women between the ages of 19 and 22 had come from different colleges and universities around the US. All participants reported being monolingual speakers of English prior to learning German. All but one reported initially learning German as adults in an instructed setting; the one student who did not learn in a classroom reported having learned German auto-didactically as an adult, apparently through a self-guided grammar-translation approach.

The research questions for the first visit in 2011 were as follows:

1. When and how do the students use German, English, or other languages?
2. How do they use digital media, how often, with whom, in what contexts, and what languages do they choose when using digital media?

Two additional questions were added in 2013:

3. In what social networks (face-to-face and digital) do they choose to participate?

4. What implications can be drawn from data on RQs 1-3 for language pedagogy?

The last question is the one with which I am most concerned here. I will discuss it in the next section, after a summary of some of the findings from the first three questions.

*Question 1: Uses of German and English*

The “Language and Digital Media Use Logs” asked the students to estimate how much time they had spent using German and English in the previous 24 hours. 109 log entries by 13 students showed that the mean amount of time they reported speaking German in the previous 24 hours was 3.1 hours (SD=2.05), and the mean amount of time they reported speaking English was 4.1 hours (SD=1.78) (Levine, in press). While the amount of German each individual used varied notably from day to day, it is clear that students were using both languages frequently over the course of the semester, and that they nevertheless tended to use more English than German on average.

In the same surveys, students also were asked to describe in prose text boxes the sorts of things they did with language in the previous 24 hours (likewise described in detail in Levine, in press). While many aspects of the students’ choices and behavior over the semester varied, there were also remarkable patterns. Some examples of students’ descriptions of German use in the previous 24 hours included:

Mostly only used in my German class about society and literature around the turn of the century (Amelia)

I had 3 hours of class, as well as a meeting for my program and speaking with friends while we were in our student center (Liz)

Reading ‘Ein fliehendes Pferd’ for class, and writing a paper on it. Also spoke some German last night going out (Miles)

used it obviously in class and for the afternoon to work on referat and papers (Sam)

(orthography as provided by the participants, given here with pseudonyms; Levine, in press)

There were of course indications that the students used German socially, either with fellow program participants or with native Germans, in bars, at church, or at social events, but by and large their use of German was determined by their coursework, the German-only rule at the program's center, their internships when German was called for, or other instrumental purposes. Based on the students' self-reports, it appears that German use was regarded primarily as part of the educational experience rather than the social experience of study abroad.

The students' reported use of English contrasted noticeably with their reported use of German, but they likewise evidenced just as much of a general pattern across the responses:

watched a james bond movie, talked to my friend in english, and wrote some things on facebook also skype'd a friend back home in english.

(James)

I talked a little bit with some of my classmates before and after class in English, and spoke to my boyfriend later on at night in English, and watch TV / movies in the evening in English. (Amelia)

Spoke mostly english last night, also watched a few youtube videos in english (Miles)

spoke some english with my friend at the bar, read for a bit before bed. Worked on a personal essay for a few hours. Watched Sex and the City.

(Susan)

(Levine, in press)

English, then, appeared to be the primary language of social activity, in conversations with fellow program participants and others, in digital entertainment (especially YouTube and other video sites), and for talking by Skype with people back home.

To summarize, all of the students in my study appeared to use English and German in highly 'fluid' ways, in that all of them used both languages daily. It must be noted that they viewed the two languages as important for doing what they wanted or needed to do in their daily life, but German was characterized more as a 'foreign' language particular to educational contexts, while English was seen as a key part of the students' socialization.

*Question 2: Digital media/communication*

Turning to the question of how digital media played a part in their daily lives, a few interesting consistencies emerged from the survey data:

Texting: The students did not make frequent use of texting, in part because all of them appeared to have non-smart phones with pre-paid minutes and texts. Thus they were almost all extremely minimal in their texting.

Gaming: The students were not spending time gaming.

Watching videos: Almost all of them reported watching YouTube, movies, and TV shows with regularity in English. Very little German video or TV watching was indicated.

Digital interlocutors/social networks: With almost no exceptions these students interacted digitally in English, and almost exclusively with fellow program participants and family and friends back home.

Media of choice: Almost without exception the students communicated primarily by email and through Facebook. They communicated largely by email to family members and friends back home, and through Facebook to friends in Germany, as well as with friends and family back home.

A final word about the students' Facebook postings: the ways the five students who allowed research access to Facebook made use of that medium while abroad do not at first glance appear to differ from how people generally use Facebook at home in the US. A fuller comparison study would be in order, but there is no doubt that most or all of them used the medium frequently during their time abroad. The students posted primarily pictures, with text postings consisting of single phrases or sentences. Most postings also conveyed to viewers that they were having a lot of fun; many of the pictures depicted excursions to other cities in Germany and around Europe, parties, etc. Text postings, when they did appear, seemed to serve two main purposes: to clarify plans for study abroad student trips or parties, or to comment on each others' photos. In addition, the pages showed fairly frequent contact from family and friends, in which they asked the student how it was going, and expressed that he or she was missed.

Finally, I noted that almost all of them “friended” the others in the program in the first weeks of the term.

I had hoped to analyze how and when the students chose to use German in their Facebook posts. Unfortunately, with the exception of single words and proper nouns here and there, there was only a single posting written exclusively in German among the five students who gave me access to their Facebook pages:

Ich wohne in Europa-Haus drei. Ich habe jetzt ein Handy aber keine Minuten, Hoeffentlich, werde ich ein Paar Morgen kaufen. (Aug. 26, Sam)

(I live in Europa-Haus three. I have now a cell phone but no minutes, hopefully I will buy a few tomorrow.)

This posting, it should be noted, appeared during the student’s first week in Germany and it suggests a desire to write in German on Facebook. Among the participants, Sam and one other student I will introduce in the next section were the most highly motivated to use German as much as possible. Yet no further German posts appeared on Sam’s Facebook wall. What is perhaps most interesting about the students’ Facebook communications was not so much how they were using the medium, but rather how they were *not* using it. They were not using it for reporting in detail about what they were up to, except through copious photos. They were not using it for networking with Germans, or for communicating with fellow program participants in German, or even for writing or communication practice in the language they were trying to learn.

Regarding language choice, it must be noted that their social use of digital media overall took place almost exclusively in English. By and large, as a group the students clearly formed social bonds with one another, including through digital media, which contributed to what Papatsiba (2006) in his study of French Erasmus students abroad in different European countries calls a “cocoon.” Kinginger (2008) also describes this tendency among students to seek out social networks of compatriots abroad, and indeed, digital media appear to play a part in the ‘choice’ to immerse oneself in the culture abroad—or not, as suggested in the epigraph to this article.

### *Question 3: Social networks/circles of friends*

My discussion of students’ social networks here stems primarily from anecdotal observations rather than primary data collection during the 2011 visit, as well as

from face-to-face interviews with three US students in 2013. Even in my small sample group I had anticipated observing some sort of linkage between highly motivated students and reports of avid German use and active engagement with German-language social networks, yet—with one exception—the experiences of the students did not meet that expectation. Except for one student I will introduce in this section, the participants who both reported high motivation and little difficulty adjusting to life in Germany appeared just as likely to use a great deal of English daily as those who reported low motivation to acculturate and who reported a good deal of homesickness and difficulty connecting with Germans.

To be sure, almost all of the students did view it as important to make German friends or spend as much time as possible with Germans while they were abroad, even though by and large the data do not reveal extensive face-to-face interaction with Germans on a day-to-day basis. Sam reported strong motivation to connect with Germans but did express some frustration with the noncorrespondence between his ideal and the reality he experienced when making friends.

I think it is very important for me because it is the best time to practice my german while I am in Germany. It is frustrating to hang out with mainly other americans from our exchange program and speak mainly english because they don't want to speak german and mess it up. I think we are here to make mistakes and be corrected so we should speak it way more. (Sam)

While many of the responses were consistent with the sentiments Sam expressed, there was one notable exception. Amelia, who also reported the lowest degree of motivation to master German, or to make German friends, wrote:

At first, I really wanted to meet people and make friends with a lot of Germans, but then I realized how unfriendly Germans can be to people, and then I realized I'm most likely better off on my own or sticking with the few friends in the program I do have. I just don't trust people very much for various reasons. (Amelia)

With one exception (Mike), the students in this study did not tend to make a connection between their daily uses of English or German and the goal of interacting socially with Germans. Isolated comments reveal some awareness of the relationship between these linguistic and social practices—such as Sam's remark about meeting Germans in order to practice German, or the blanket

negative judgments made by Amelia. But they also suggest that when students did think about this connection, they tended also to idealize it, which is what led to disappointment in Amelia's case. This overall, unresolved tension between the students' daily language use and their social engagement choices has implications for language pedagogy, especially for language pedagogy that purports to prepare students to live and work abroad.

This relates to the distinction already suggested between 'performative' uses of language and 'multilingual being.' In the current study, the discussion of linguistic and academic 'performance' and of a 'performative' orientation of the students abroad, as well as the accompanying critique of communicative language teaching, draws upon Lyotard's (1978) critique of education overall, in which he claims that knowledge "ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its 'use-value'" (5). After a treatment of the issue of pragmatics and performativity in science and the tensions between the society and scientific inquiry, Lyotard turns to a similar tension between education and society, asserting that the goal in our postmodern society "becomes the optimal contribution of higher education to the best performativity of the social system" and that "universities and institutions of higher learning are called upon to create skills, and no longer ideals [...] The transmission of knowledge is no longer designed to train an elite capable of guiding the nation towards its emancipation, but to supply the system with players capable of acceptably fulfilling their roles at the pragmatic posts required by its institutions" (48). Later on, Lyotard offers the central claim of this "performative" notion of education:

The question (overt or implied) now asked by the professionalist student, the State, or institutions of higher education is no longer 'Is it true?' but 'What use is it?' In the context of the mercantilization of knowledge, more often than not this question is equivalent to: 'Is it saleable?' [...] What no longer makes the grade is competence as defined by other criteria true/false, just/unjust, etc., and, of course, low performativity in general. (51)

During my second visit in 2013 I interviewed each of the three students and asked questions about their course work, living situation, day-to-day language choices, experiences interacting with Germans and others, and their involvement in various circles of friends. Two of the students, Elizabeth and Alissa, reported that they primarily maintained friendships with fellow US students and that their primary interactions with Germans was with a tandem partner, with whom

each person met each week for an hour or two. Alissa explained her choice to socialize primarily with fellow US students in this way:

I mean (.) I feel like if I had been here for a year [...] it I this sounds really bad I would have tried to like like put myself out there more? maybe because I'm like I'm here for a whole year [...] but I mean like I love these guys they're awesome um and like [NAME] and like [NAME] speak EXTREMELY good German and so: like whenever like whenever I have them around I'm like what's this word what's this word what's this word like I just point at things [...] cause like my my vocab is really not up to par so I'm like you can tell me what every word is in German (laugh) and I just kind of point to things so they're really good about that they're really patient with me

In our three interviews, Alissa never spoke about connecting with Germans in anything but a performative and language-learning context; speaking with Germans appeared to be solely about learning and practicing German and about making oneself understood. To be sure, complex anxieties about using German with Germans were involved in these perceptions. At the end of her semester abroad, Alissa said this about the beginning part of her sojourn:

I really like it here and I'm very comfortable here now [...] I used to have like panic attacks every time I had to like y'know like talk to someone in German in a store or something [...] the first like month month and a half was pretty nerve racking to me [...] I didn't want to talk to people in stores I'd be like no someone else can do it u:m but I'm like I feel more comfortable like I know I'm not gonna get everything right and I've accepted that but I think I can communicate to a point that they can understand me and that's fine with me (laugh).

In our interviews it became clear to me that Alissa was “very comfortable here now” not because Germans could understand her, but because she had resigned herself to the fact that her most important social connections were with fellow program participants; for her it appeared to be a matter of course that she had primarily or exclusively superficial social contacts with Germans.

Similarly, Elizabeth, a student from a small liberal-arts college in the Midwest, was also in Germany for one semester. She reported socializing for the most part with fellow US students, and her most frequent companion was her roommate, a woman from her college back home. In fact, in all anecdotes narrated in the three



interviews about socializing with Germans, she only ever used the first-person plural pronoun “we” when describing her experiences interacting with Germans. In our first interview, Elizabeth, like Alissa, reported feeling anxious about using German in social situations, though her first experience in Germany had been a one-month internship with a German organization, in which Elizabeth apparently had to use German frequently. She reported having had difficulties making social connections with Germans from the beginning, however. She did not end up forming friendships or even regular acquaintances with Germans and continued to feel apprehensive about using the language. Toward the end of her semester, she reported feeling more confident in her German abilities, though she still did not become involved with any German social circles. Yet unlike Alissa, she did enjoy intermittent contact with German students. For example, she described a day in July when she went skim-boarding on a lake with a German acquaintance, along with a few friends of his. When I followed up with questions about how it was to speak German with them, she stated that

It was funny because we would start in German and then they would like switch to English and then I would like switch it back to German so it was like back and forth the whole day.

This was a frequent occurrence with all of the students in this study, and is apparently also common among (at least US) study abroad students overall. When I asked further questions about whether she had sought out further contact with that German acquaintance or other Germans, she reported that she had not. Similar to Alissa, Elizabeth did not appear to place great importance on connecting with Germans in anything more than an intermittent way.

Mike, whom I interviewed three times over the course of the spring semester 2013, was in many ways anomalous among all of the study abroad students I have met and worked with. Mike had first learned German in high school and through a youth exchange during which he lived with and became very close to his host family. He considered them his “deutsche Familie” and remained in touch with them. So his overall approach to his study abroad sojourn was influenced by his prior experience in the country and his close relationships with his German family. He was in Germany now for two semesters and did all he could to avoid contact with fellow program participants. He reported using English only when he spoke by Skype or phone with family and friends back home, which he admitted he did almost daily. Even in our interviews and other

interactions he never used English. Furthermore, Mike approached the development of his 'Freundeskreise', or circle(s) of friends, quite consciously and purposefully, and indeed appeared to have oriented his entire time in the country more toward social activity and networks than academic achievement, often to the concern or frustration of the program's administrators and his instructors. When I asked Mike to describe his circles of friends, he launched into a detailed description of his "teams," as he described them:

ich hab drei oder vier Freundkreise, ne? [...] und die heißen dann em team wartburg (.) die leute die in wartburg wohnen fast alle die leute da es ist dann circa zwanzig also fünfundzwanzig leut [...] team physik und (NAME) ist physikerin sie studiert physik (.) und es gibt fünf oder sechs oder sieben leute die IMMER in unserer WG sind und xxxxx xxxxx und dann kochen wir alle zusammen [...] ja sie sind jeden tag da [...] das macht auch spaß

([...] I have three or four circles of friends, right? [...] and they are called then em team wartburg (.) the people who live in wartburg almost all the people there it is then about twenty twenty-five people [...] team physics and (NAME) is a physicist she studies physics (.) and there are five or six or seven people who ALWAYS are in our apartment and xxxx xxxx and then we cook all together [...] yes they are there every day [...] that is also fun)

Mike went on to name and describe the other two circles of friends/social networks, "Team Germanistik" and "Team Bouldering," as one of his hobbies is rock climbing. Mike's stated objective was to meet and become close to fellow Germans. It might be asked, then, whether Mike's orientation to the tension between language use and participating in social circles manifested in the opposite way from Alissa, Elizabeth, Sam, and the others, because he was centrally concerned with socializing and only secondarily—if at all—with using German for improving his German. The ultimate answer to this cannot be gleaned from the interviews I conducted with him, nor from the recordings made of his day-to-day interactions with his friends. But I can say, based on anecdotes about his social circles on campus back home, that his approach to social networks in Germany was by comparison much more purposeful, even organized, given that the realization that his time in the country was limited. So in a sense, Mike could be said to have taken a performative approach to socializing, rather than to language use. Put another way, Mike appeared to

approach his social engagement with Germans similarly to how many of the other students approached linguistic achievement.

There are of course a few notable individual differences between Mike on the one hand and Alissa and Elizabeth on the other, with the situations of Alissa and Elizabeth being more “typical” of most of the students in this study. It must be noted that Mike had a higher language proficiency (Common European Framework of Reference level B1 at the start of the program, compared with Alissa and Elizabeth’s A2 level; Council of Europe 2001). He had had previous experience in Germany, was on a two-semester program, and had a self-described outgoing personality, which contrasted with both Alissa’s and Elizabeth’s lower language proficiency, lack of prior experience in Germany, one-semester stays, and repeatedly expressed anxieties and shyness. These factors, several of which cannot easily be impacted by instruction, appear to influence a student’s choice to participate in social networks either made up of people from the L2 society, or rather primarily with compatriots. Yet despite these individual-difference factors, the findings of the study do point toward a distinction we should make between a ‘social’ use of language and an ‘educational’ use of language, perhaps as two different ways for learners to “be” multilingual. This crucial tension has implications for language teaching—in classroom environments as well as in study abroad contexts. In the next section, I explore some of these potential implications.

### **Implications: A Performative Orientation toward L2 Use and Socialization**

In visiting, interviewing, and getting to know these students during my two visits I often noted that so much of the students’ choices and behaviors with regard to learning and using German remained rooted in what Phipps and Gonzalez (2005, 4, 11), drawing on Lyotard (1984) and Barnett (2000), have called “performative” language learning and use. This means that the central concerns did not appear to revolve around or be oriented toward connecting with the Other, nor, to draw from the MLA report’s concept of translingual/transcultural competence, toward functioning “as informed and capable interlocutors with educated native speakers in the target language,” reflecting “on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture,” or grasping “themselves as Americans—that is, as members of a society that is foreign to others” (MLA 2007, 4). Their central concern regarding German was often about

saving face, or in Pellegrino Aveni's (2005) terms about control, validation, status, safety, and crucially, about performing well in their academic courses.

Indeed, all of them succeeded in their coursework, and all of them but one (Amelia) had a positive, exciting experience abroad, in which they learned a lot about Germans, German society, history, and even cultural products. But that threshold of involving themselves in German social networks was seldom crossed—with the exception of Mike, who made that his core activity over two semesters.

From my observations during this multiple case study (see also Levine in press), as well as my earlier work with study abroad students (Levine 2008) I develop here three main implications for curriculum and teaching: the problem of students as “talking heads;” problems of assessment; and the “inert knowledge problem,” all of which link the students' orientation and approach to language use and socialization back to the discourses and pedagogical models of, primarily, Communicative Language Teaching.

### 1. Talking Heads

In her book *The Multilingual Subject* (2009), Claire Kramsch observes that language learners are not merely receivers of input and producers of output, or “talking heads”:

[M]any researchers and teachers still consider language learners as talking heads that have to be taught from the neck up, so to speak [...] From most of the descriptions given in SLA research, one would think that learning a language was predominantly an intellectual, disembodied exercise in problem-solving and strategic thinking, accomplished inside the head or between two or several heads in concert with one another. (28)

Anyone who has taught a foreign language with a CLT approach knows that a great deal of the very limited instructional time is spent dealing with students as if they were talking heads, performers who learn to carry out the tasks the teachers gives them. Teachers bring in target forms, teach them, and then have students practice them, often using an initiation-response-evaluation discursive pattern. Sometimes these target forms or words are couched within functional and ostensibly contextualized situations, like describing what one did over the

weekend or expressing likes and dislikes. I would stress that I do not deny that students should be learning these things; they certainly do need to learn the names of everyday objects or days of the week, and they need to know how to put together sentences that L2 speakers will understand.

Yet the findings of these case studies above suggest integrating overt consideration of the subjective dimensions of language learning—involving learners' sense of self, their emotions, their use of language as a physical and social act that includes the whole body, as well as critical dimensions of translingual competence. This means moving away from the “talking head” as the primary nexus of instructional activity, for it appears that this performance and largely information-exchange-oriented approach to human communication becomes deeply engrained in students before they go abroad, and it may be impacting the choices they make to connect to other L2 speakers abroad.

Moving away from the talking-heads model means seeking ways to design curriculum and then teach by way of communication in which the learners have a personal stake. As I describe below, this could involve integrating ‘authentic’ communication with speakers of the L2 beyond the classroom early on in the instructional sequence, such that learners confront communication that moves beyond the trivial and the contrived, with less of an emphasis on the acquisition of specific target forms at particular times than is currently the norm. Digital tools and media could also help learners to perform beyond their current proficiency levels, such as through textual online media or even the purposeful use of machine translation as a facilitator of communication. This would entail teaching students how to use digital tools strategically in order to participate in German-speaking social networks in new ways and potentially well in advance of in-person experience abroad. The question must remain open whether this would mitigate a strongly linguistic-performative orientation while abroad, but it implies a more authentic ‘simulation’ of multilingualism beyond the scope of current, conventional CLT pedagogies.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Assessment**

Integrating a subjective orientation also holds important implications for how we assess students. All teachers know that when we assess knowledge and performance we presume that the resulting scores will distribute in something like a normal bell curve. Yet we teach as if everyone would be getting 100%. To

be sure, this is the basis for assessment in most educational settings. As with the “talking head” problem, it is of course not sensible to start encouraging students toward learning only 75% of what we teach, or that we stop assessing students through summative instruments. In the work world after college students must also be prepared to compete and perform in a range of assessments. But it would be helpful to keep in mind that this approach to assessment is unique to the educational setting, for the purpose of evaluating acquisition of particular types of knowledge and also for assigning grades. This primary model of assessment may not be the most appropriate for fostering translingual/transcultural competence or what I referred to in the opening section as “students’ own multilingualism.” With conventional, summative assessment the students’ focus is understandably on that higher stakes component of their classes. From these case studies it also appears that they take this mindset with them when they go abroad, in that the comments made by the learners—such as Sam’s remark that his fellow program participants “don’t want to speak German and mess it up”—suggest that the students routinely measure their language use against a perceived or imagined superior norm, which is the way they’ve been assessed and graded since the first week of introductory German.

There are many ways to assess and evaluate performance and language use, and even social interaction in an educational setting, which may be more suitable to capturing students’ own multilingualism. For example, Poehner and Lantolf (2005) suggest a dynamic approach to language, which is based on a model of development and learning rooted in Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of learning as a socially mediated activity that occurs in the “zone of proximal development” (see also Sercu 2004; Smith, Teemant, and Pinnegar 2004). In this model learners are provided assistance in completing communicative acts and tasks, and the assessment is not only of the outcomes of the task, but rather also on the ways in which they make use of the assistance. Based on several empirical studies of L2 learners obtaining scaffolded assistance from peers or native speakers (e.g. Antón and DiCamilla 1999; Levine 2009b; Swain and Lapkin 1998), as well as the findings of a large body of research supporting interactionist approaches to language learning (see Gass and Mackey 2007), we can say that learners using the L2 do routinely and necessarily make use of all sorts of interactive assistance. Approaches to assessment that take this aspect of multilingual language development and use into account, assessing both the process along with or

perhaps at times instead of specific outcomes, may help move students away from the strongly linguistic-performative orientation described here.

### 3. The Inert Knowledge Problem

The third implication highlighted here is what Diane Larsen-Freeman (2003) described as the “inert knowledge problem”: that gap between the language as it was learned in the classroom and the way the language is used in the ‘real world.’ Most often, CLT syllabi are so interactive-skills and grammar/target-form oriented, and the curricula so compartmentalized into “manageable” pieces, that the student may inevitably feel overwhelmed when she or he arrives in that fabled ‘real world’ abroad. But the student testimonies in this study point toward new approaches to closing the inert knowledge gap, of facilitating affordances for communication that accord with or truly simulate the multilingual and fundamentally translingual and transcultural reality that awaits students when they go abroad. In instructional practice this implies curricular approaches that move beyond linear, structured, pre-determined communicative situations toward more “authentic” ones that have students interact with “real” people in the world, through digital media or face to face, in which they must confront and work through insufficient lexical and grammatical knowledge to nevertheless connect with those people. This does not mean throwing students into the deep end of the linguistic pool, so to speak, without assistance or support needed to succeed. It means, instead, that the curriculum should not always be about target forms and words determined by the instructor or the textbook, but by the demands of meaningful and complex communicative settings themselves.

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All three of these pedagogical problems are interrelated and implied in the “performative” orientation that appears evident in all of the students in my study. (Even with Mike there is an indication that his approach to his social circles adopted a very pragmatic or even performative orientation, that is, viewing it as something concrete to be achieved.) All of the students in the study went to Germany with the primary goal of “mastering German”, having all stated this in their initial interviews or surveys. But when we look at the patterns of their daily language use, and their choices and actions in engaging with different social networks, a disturbing line can be traced back to our classrooms.

Those students who dwelled primarily in US social networks, used English daily and extensively (even Mike, through digital media with people back home), and yet performed extremely well in their classes at the German university, were doing what our educational paradigm trained them to do and be: Good talking heads, good at assessments, and generally remaining on ‘this’ side of the inert knowledge gap. In essence, they have exported our pedagogical paradigm into the fabric of their daily lives in Germany.

Does this mean these students failed to acquire the translingual/transcultural competence framed by the MLA report, while abroad? Perhaps. But they did all succeed at striking a balance between what Pellegrino Aveni (2005) calls their “ideal” selves and the reality of their situations, in order to maintain their sense of wellbeing. The seamless, porous nature of digital and nondigital social networks between the being-in-Germany and the being-at-home served to make this balance all the easier to strike, in my view. Their FL classes at home trained them to regard language learning with a language-performance orientation, rather than viewing it as integrated with their very subjectivities; and the data indicate that this is precisely what they did.

## **Conclusion**

Returning to the critique of CLT offered in the opening of this article, the multilingual approach implicated by recent sociocultural, ecological orientations appears to follow from the tensions between language use and social engagement among the students who participated in this study. Whether or not FL students end up studying or working abroad, the education we provide should be oriented toward teaching multilingual subjects, people who connect—during their on-campus courses or afterward—with real people in the real world, where interaction in which L2 users participate is frequently if not always oriented toward the performance, not ultimately of linguistic accuracy, but rather of multilingual subjectivities, of who the learner is or could become through that interaction. To date our curricula largely do not integrate this important dimension of multilingual being in any systematic way. This is the sort of multilingualism that can and should be simulated in language classrooms.

In closing I would like to highlight the stakes that are involved, which my descriptions of and reflections on the experiences of the students in the study have brought into relief. It was said best by one of the German instructors I



interviewed toward the end of my second visit. During a discussion of the relationship between classroom learning and the students' experiences outside the classroom, she said:

...ich glaube die Studenten, also was wir oft sagen, sie wollen gesehen werden, sie wollen gefühlt werden, sie wollen nicht irgend einer aus bla bla bla sein, sondern sie wollen, dass man versteht wer er ist oder sie ist, und auch sie wollen auch gewertschätzt werden sowie jeder von uns. Also ich glaube das ist was ganz Normales....

(...I believe the students, as we often say, they want to be seen, they want to be felt, they do not want to be just someone from bla bla bla, rather they want that one understands who he is or she is, and also they want to be valued just like any of us. So I think that's something quite normal...)

This insight compels us to remember that thousands of language teachers all over the world are already teaching according to some or all of the observations and ideas outlined here. The challenge for language teaching is how to bring this very personal dimension of learners' developing multilingualism into our curricula and our classrooms. As Kinginger (2010, 225) observed:

There are [...] a lot of American students who approach study abroad with bright hope and deeply felt desire for a multilingual and cosmopolitan future steeped in global humanism. In defense of these students, the profession needs an activist stance in relation to learning and language in study abroad. Professional folklore would have us believe that the benefits of study abroad are evident to all, and they are not. Received wisdom also sustains the assumption that study abroad offers unlimited learning opportunities in which students are confronted with difference and learn from it. [...] Our students are at increasing risk of failing to notice their own ignorance of the communities they join through study abroad. As educators, we need to upgrade our ability to argue in favor of meaningful study abroad experiences explicitly including an emphasis on language learning as negotiation of difference. (Kinging 2010, 225)

I hope that in offering these observations of student language use and experiences abroad, and reflections on implications for classroom teaching, I have moved us a bit further toward helping students confront difference and learn from it—before, during, and after their sojourn abroad.

### Author's Note

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<sup>1</sup> To be sure, as Belz (2003, 2007), O’Dowd and Ritter (2006), and Kramersch and Ware (2005) observed, telecollaborations with speakers abroad are fraught with pitfalls and potentials of miscommunication, including the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes, telecollaborative communication also can contribute to the development of intercultural competence (e.g. Lee 2009; Thorne 2013; Tudini 2008; Ware and Kramersch 2005).