

Abstract

Although study abroad is viewed in the United States as *sine qua non*, the study abroad experience is not a panacea to achieve distinguished foreign language speaking proficiency. This qualitative case study attempts to uncover how persistence, study abroad, motivation, and learner autonomy play in pursuit of distinguished speaking proficiency. The literature review addresses the need to investigate the efficacy of the study abroad experience vis-à-vis the students' oral proficiency, types of motivation, and learner autonomy as a means to achieve higher speaking proficiency. Using the theoretical framework of complexity theory and phenomenological design, the proposed study utilized interviews of four educators at an institute in the Western United States as the primary instrument of data collection. This study investigates the roadmaps which successful foreign language educators have utilized to achieve distinguished speaking proficiency through interviews and documentary research. The study revealed four primary themes which are motivation, persistence, learner autonomy, and study abroad. Data analysis of interviews with the participants revealed that distinguished speaking proficiency is a highly personal pursuit, characterized by different motivations based on choice of foreign language, engagement in the target culture, grit, and time. Overall, the participants were highly self-efficacious learners, many married to foreign-speaking spouses, and spent extended periods of time in the foreign culture and community. The present study provides possible roadmaps for students and educators who wish to achieve near-native speaking proficiency in a foreign language.

Keywords: distinguished proficiency, grit, study abroad, motivation.