

## INTEGRATING THE “GUEST,” CONSTRUCTING THE SELF: CHALLENGES OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN SECONDARY STUDY ABROAD

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Every year, thousands of American high school students travel abroad on student exchange programs. Such programs operate on a model of “natural” language/culture acquisition, and often include an extended homestay with a “host family,” which is then understood to act as the conduit of the host student's acquisition of competence in the ways of the host culture. Exchange students are further expected to develop lasting ties to the host community outside of the family, through school, social groups, and other host country events. The goal is an “authentic” host country experience, which, in this context, is understood to refer to the coherent whole of host family institutions with which the exchange student comes into contact.

I have explored this acculturation process by writing a German-language play, which depicts the experiences of Laura, an American exchange student living with a host family in Germany. As a “natural” language learner, Laura is forced to contend with a multifaceted and decidedly fragmented German language, in which how she speaks denotes not only how “integrated” she is in her “host culture,” but also where she stands socially *within* that culture. Laura is thus progressively exposed to the fragmented nature of the language, as well as the society around her. Ultimately, she has to reconcile her developing L2 (second language) self with her strong, if underexpressed, L1 (native language) self, which holds abiding notions in its own right about language, culture, and the attendant social status the two would confer on her<sup>1,2</sup>.

In this play and accompanying research, I seek to understand the effectual processes through which second language learners conceptualize and utilize their understanding of the target language, in the context of the very arduous and demanding environment of continuous “natural” immersion.<sup>3,4</sup> I investigate the psychosocial/cultural factors that affect students' performance abroad, paying special attention to the ways in which conventional models of student exchange recognize or fail to recognize these realities.<sup>5,6</sup> Finally, given that much of the discourse in “interkulturelle Germanistik” revolves around the experiences of the “other” in German society, I unpack this notion vis-a-vis high school exchange students. In what ways are they perceived or not perceived as “other,” and how does this affect their psychosocial adjustment to life abroad?<sup>7</sup>

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7 Zeuschel, Ulrich. "Austauschforschung: Ihre Entwicklung und Beiträge für die Praxis." *Forscher-Praktiker-Dialog zur internationalen Jugendbewegung*. (2001): 1-9.