

Summer Language Study : Middlebury or Study Abroad

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About the Author

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Making a Good Choice

Students considering studying language in the summer should ask themselves some important questions to clarify their goals and determine what program would be their best choice.

Questions to Ask

- What are my goals for studying a language?
- What are my objectives for studying a language this summer?
- What do I know about my learning styles and preferences?
- Do I have any special personal concerns about summer study?

Language Study Goals

Some students choose to study a particular language in order to learn more about their own ethnic heritage. Other students choose to study a particular language in order to read ancient or modern texts. Still other students choose to study a particular language in order to gain fluency to take a job that demands language skills.

Summer Language Objectives

Students with different language learning goals may have different objectives for studying language over the summer. Some may want to complete a foreign language requirement, while others want to make rapid progress towards fluency. Some want to immerse themselves in the culture, while others want to read a particular work in the language.

Learning Styles and Preferences

Every student has a unique set of learning styles and preferences. Some students are impulsive, others reflective. Some students are reserved and find it difficult to talk in certain social contexts, while others are extroverted and thrive in those very contexts. Some students need to see everything they are learning, while others need to *hear* everything. It's important for you to know your own styles and preferences.

More Information

For more information about learning styles and preferences, see

Achieving Success in Second Language Acquisition

By Betty Lou Leaver, Madeline Ehrman,
and Boris Shekhtman

Personal Concerns

Some students have special concerns that they must keep in mind during summer studies, whether it means remaining in close contact with a loved one at home or being able to continue training for a sport or practicing a musical instrument. All of these are an important part of any student's life.

Answering the Questions

As you consider the questions posed on the previous slide, you should think about your own goals, objectives, styles, preferences, and concerns. What language programs will work best for you given this complex matrix of factors?

Your Expectations

Next you should consider what your expectations of summer language study are? What do you think you will get out of a summer studying a foreign language?

Language Gain

Many students prioritize “language gain” or “language improvement” as their most important goal for summer language study. Unfortunately, some students have unrealistic expectations for summer language study.

Realistic Expectations

Research on language learning outcomes shows that the most important factor for predicting language learning outcomes is the level of language skills going into the language study program. In other words, your language learning gain will be related to your language goals when you start.

Measuring Language Gain

In the United States, the most widespread scale for measuring language skills is the Proficiency Scale of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). See www.actfl.org, but also see the next few slides here.

The ACTFL Scale

The ACTFL Scale has four major levels for measuring listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They are defined briefly here in speaking only as an example.

Oral Proficiency: Novice Level

Novice level speakers can only speak in memorized phrases. Sometimes they can speak a whole sentence, but it is usually something they have memorized. They have no functional proficiency in the language.

Intermediate Level

Intermediate level speakers can ask and answer questions and can create with the language to talk in sentence-length discourse about themselves and their immediate needs in an informal context. They can get in and out of a predictable situation using their language skills (e.g., ordering a meal in a restaurant from a menu.)

Advanced Level

Advanced-level speakers can speak in paragraphs in all time frames as they describe and narrate. They can get in and out of situations with complications (e.g., recovering a lost item).

Superior Level

Superior-level speakers can argue and hypothesize in extended discourse (multiple paragraphs) without any patterned errors in both informal and formal contexts. They can talk their way around specialized vocabulary they don't know by using more general words they do know.

Jobs that Require Language

The minimal working competency for using language on the job is the advanced level. Students who attain advanced level proficiency are competitive for entry-level jobs in the federal government and business sector, but there are, of course, many jobs that require even higher level language skills.

What Can Students Achieve?

My research has shown that students who neither go abroad nor go to Middlebury typically finish a four-year college foreign language program with intermediate skills. Students who go to Middlebury *and* go abroad have the best chance of attaining advanced-level skills in their foreign language studies.

Summer at Middlebury or Abroad?

Research has shown 40% of students with intermediate-level proficiency who go on study abroad to Russia for an academic year typically make the breakthrough of intermediate to advanced-level proficiency. Other research suggests this pattern is typical of other European languages; data for Arabic and Asian languages suggest they are harder.

Comparative Language Gain: Summer at Midd or Abroad

Research on language gain during a summer at Middlebury or a summer abroad shows that students gain more language at Middlebury (see Rifkin, 2005 and Brecht, Ginsberg and Davidson 1993). We recommend that most students will use their time most efficiently if they come to Middlebury for a summer and then go on study abroad immediately following their summer at Middlebury.

Why Better Gain at Middlebury?

Middlebury provides students with a learning environment they understand (American college dormitory, dining hall, health center, fitness center, and so forth) so students can focus their attention on learning language and using language. Teachers at Middlebury (and their families) create a warm and caring community for learners to experiment with language use.

Why Better Gain at Middlebury? (2)

The Middlebury Language Schools provide students with a blend of pedagogy typical in American colleges and universities and pedagogy you'd expect in the culture of the language you're studying. This is a useful bridge to study in that culture, where there is not likely to be a blend.

Why Better Gain at Middlebury? (3)

Middlebury Language School teachers provide students with explicit instruction in language learning strategies and help students monitor their language learning and language learning progress.

Why Better Gain at Middlebury? (4)

The most important “secret ingredient” of Middlebury’s success is the Middlebury Language Pledge: the promise all language school students make to use only the language they came to Middlebury to study. All the students are committed to the language pledge, so all the students help one another keep the pledge. There is no retreating to English: we all work together to stay in language.

Why Better Gain at Middlebury? (5)

Middlebury Language Schools hire diverse teachers representing a broad range of dialects from the culture you're studying, whether it's Arabic (teachers from Jordan, Syria, Morocco) or Spanish (teachers from Spain, Venezuela, Chile, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and California). Some teachers come with their families, so students get practice speaking with children and grandparents, too.

Why Better Gain at Middlebury? (6)

Middlebury Language Schools put at your disposal not only terrific teachers offering exciting classes, but also a world-famous co-curricular program. Students in each of the 9 language schools at Middlebury are encouraged to participate in activities offered by their language school, such as theater, choir, volleyball, soccer, radio station, newspaper, poetry club, calligraphy club, and more. These activities are, of course, all conducted in language and help students gain even more language than they would just in the classroom.

Why Better Gain at Middlebury? (7)

Of course students at Middlebury use their language not only in the classroom and in their clubs or on their teams. They also use their language in the dining hall or just hanging out in a lounge in the dormitory, the Grille (a campus café), nearby restaurants, and even on hikes through the mountains near the Middlebury campus to such sites as Texas Falls.

Challenges on Study Abroad

Students without very strong language skills who go on study abroad sometimes find themselves challenged by the social and cultural patterns of the country in which they're studying. They may want or need to talk about these challenges with other Americans in English. Every conversation in English is a step away from meeting your language goals.

Middlebury Summer *before* Study Abroad

Students who go to Middlebury for a summer before going on study abroad find that they develop strong language skills that help them avoid the pitfalls experienced by weaker students in the study abroad contexts.

Middlebury summer alumni are able to draw enhanced benefits from study abroad because they can ask good questions (why? how?) to enable them to engage in serious intercultural analysis.

The Ideal Learning Sequence

There is no ideal learning sequence that is a perfect fit for everyone, but many students find it easiest to start language study in a traditional high school or college classroom (non-immersion), continue at Middlebury in an intensive immersion environment, and then go directly to study abroad. This may not be the best choice for everyone.

Special Considerations

Some students need the special push of immersion or study abroad to get excited about language study. They may need or want an early experience in Middlebury's immersion or on study abroad. Other students may find that the intensive pace of Middlebury classes is too much to handle. But many students find that the Middlebury immersion is just what they need to take their language learning to the next level: over 1000 students come to Vermont for Middlebury immersion every summer.

Answering Your Questions

After having read through this slide show, you may have some questions about your own circumstances and how a Middlebury language school program might fit your needs. Language School staff for each language are able to answer your questions. You can start by writing an e-mail to the Language Schools at

languages@middlebury.edu

Whatever You Decide ...

Whatever you decide for your language learning plan, foreign language professionals at the Middlebury Language Schools and at colleges and universities all over the world wish you success. Studying a foreign language is an exciting way to open doors to opportunities and experiences that will change the way you see yourself, your own native culture, and the world. For more information about foreign language learning, see www.actfl.org.

References

- Brecht, R., Davidson, D., and Ginsberg, R. (1993). *Predictors of Language Gain in Study Abroad*. Washington, DC: National Foreign Language Center.
- Rifkin, B. “A Ceiling Effect...” *Modern Language Journal* 89.1 (2005): 3-18.