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## Language Proficiency Benefits of an Arabic Language Immersion House

John Bailey

Western Kentucky University, john.bailey923@topper.wku.edu

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LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY BENEFITS OF AN ARABIC LANGUAGE  
IMMERSION HOUSE

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

John Bailey

\*\*\*\*\*

Western Kentucky University  
2016

CE/T Committee:

Dr. David Dimeo, Advisor

Ms. Jennifer Markin

Dr. Melinda Grimsley-Smith

Approved by

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Advisor

Department of Modern Languages

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the language proficiencies of 25 students using the ACTFL “Can-Do Statements” and Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPI), examined responses of 33 language students throughout the US from a questionnaire to find behaviors they use in their language studies, and also studied results from questionnaires directed to 6 WKU language faculty and a faculty member for Denison University. The goal of this analysis was to find links between those behaviors exhibited by the students and their level of language proficiency to uncover what methods are most conducive to increasing second language (L2) proficiency and to find L2 proficiency benefits for a Language Immersion House (LIH). Through this analysis, the research suggests that there are key elements to creating an effective immersion environment for LIHs: minimal contact with the first language, welcoming native speakers who serve as a language resource, and all participants having an intermediate-mid proficiency level before joining the immersion house. If these conditions are met, LIHs can serve as a domestic immersion environment to augment study abroad, and therefore serve as an aid to increase students’ language proficiencies.

Keywords: Language Proficiency, Language Immersion House, Benefits, Domestic Immersion Environment

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## VITA

December 24, 1992.....Born- Louisville, Kentucky  
2011.....Bullitt East High School, Mount  
Washington, Kentucky  
2014.....Study Abroad to Amman, Jordan

## FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Arabic and International Business

Minor Field: Military Science

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## **Introduction**

The intent of this project is to outline and reinforce the key benefits of providing students an Arabic-only speaking residence, better known as an Arabic Language Immersion House, in which to live in order to build their language skills as an alternative to studying abroad in the Middle East or North Africa or studying at a domestic immersion language school. Qualitatively, primary research was collected through the use of surveys and questionnaires with students who are working to increase their proficiency in an L2 who have studied abroad, in an immersion house, or in a domestic language program and also with faculty from Denison University and Western Kentucky University (both of which use a form of language house). Quantitatively, the study compared students' language proficiencies over time compared to in which type of environment they studied, immersion or not. All of the information gained through this research uncovered the key practices for successful immersion programs and an analysis was conducted to outline the key tenants for creating a successful immersion environment through the facilitation of a Language Immersion House (LIH). Furthermore, an analysis was conducted that will help universities and language institutions understand what practices and requirements most effectively help students increase their L2 proficiency and motivation for learning it.

## **Definitions**

### **Proficiency**

This study uses language proficiency as its gauge for measuring the effectiveness of L2 acquisition. Specifically, this study will use the “ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines” which are “a description of what individuals can do with language in terms of speaking, writing, listening, and reading in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context” (ACTFL, 2012). These descriptions are divided into Distinguished, Superior, Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice. This scale starts from Novice as the lowest and progresses upward to Distinguished. Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice are then further categorized into Low, Mid, and High. These levels “describe what an individual can and cannot do with language at each level, regardless of where, when, or how the language was acquired” (ACTFL, 2012). Here is some context to some differences between the levels: Distinguished level speakers are those who can skillfully make arguments using cultural and historical references (ACTFL, 2012). An Advanced-Mid level speaker can talk about topics such as work, home and leisure with ease and confidence using facts to support claims, normally in paragraphs (ACTFL, 2012). An Intermediate-Mid level speaker communicates in “straightforward social situations” and conversation is normally predictable but not memorized (ACTFL, 2012). A Novice-Mid level speaker uses a “number of isolated words and memorized phrases” and is normally limited to short (2-3 word) responses (ACTFL, 2012). These guidelines are widely

accepted by educators around the world but are not the only acceptable measure. For this discussion, language proficiency will be discussed in this manner.

### **Immersion and Immersion Houses**

In order to understand the topic which this study examines, it is best to define key words that will be used throughout this analysis. Initially, immersion must be understood and used in a similar sense throughout this entire discourse. Immersion environments must fundamentally work under this premise in order to be successful: “people learn a second (or third) language in the same way as they learn their first; that is, in contexts where they are exposed to it in its natural form and where they are socially motivated to communicate” (Lambert, et al., 1984). For these purposes, immersion is considered as an environment where the target language is by far the primary language spoken, classes are taught to coincide with the use of the language, and activities (such as movie nights, games, dinners, etc.) are offered to promote the use of the language. By providing students with this type of environment, L2 proficiency can be realized more effectively and quickly. This implies that all immersion education should develop their programs under the pretext of simulating the natural environment circumstances.

Secondly, it's important to know what a language immersion house is. There are many definitions and interpretations to how a language house is defined and even more differences when applied. Further along in this analysis Denison, Cornell and Western Kentucky universities' language houses are examined to reveal how they're being used at their universities. As a standard, an LIH strives to “provide a domestic immersion

experience for learners” (Martinsen, Baker, Bown, & Johnson, 2011) wherein “students typically live with other [non-native speaker] learners and one or more [native speakers] of the target language” (Martinsen, Baker, Bown, & Johnson, 2011). One of the goals of the immersion house is to speak the L2 while in the house. A preferred method to ensure maximum language use is to require students to undergo a language pledge that will render consequences if broken.

In reality, this practice of a language pledge can be difficult to enforce, but is not always the case. For example, enforcement of a language pledge is easy at the WKU Chinese Language Immersion House in relation to Denison University’s language house which utilizes “clusters”, a term used by one of the faculty at Denison University. The clusters concept is a strategy used at the Denison House which arranges students together based off the language they’re learning. The house is used as a place for these clusters of different languages to meet and share the language together (while speaking only in the L2) rather than a residence where only one language is spoken at all times as is the case with WKU’s Chinese Language Immersion House. This research will focus on the different strategies used by different universities to replicate immersion in a residential setting, but when the term Language Immersion House of LIH is used, it is assumed that the residence is a place where students live under the same roof and speak in only one target language, with some exceptions.

The houses examined in this document do what is possible to emulate Middlebury Language Schools (which will be looked at in further detail) and other summer domestic immersion programs in regards to the language pledge. However, since these houses are used on multidiscipline campuses nationwide and students have differing levels of

proficiency, speaking in the target language throughout the entire day is not feasible, especially if the house is used as a residence for students. This is evident in the WKU Chinese LIH that regularly frequents guests who are Chinese students with lower language proficiencies and who aren't studying Chinese language. Even though the students undergo a language pledge in the house, when these students or other guests come to the house, English is permitted (Wilson, 2015).

The overarching idea of the LIH is to replicate an immersion experience as studies abroad intend to provide. In some cases, if the goals and implementations of the LIH are aligned properly and with effective procedures in place, a domestic language course can provide more L2 use than a study abroad program increase language proficiency over a similar amount of time. In order to support that claim, it's important to understand how are study abroad courses are effective and ineffective for providing an immersion language learning.

## **Overview of Immersive Environments**

### **Strengths of Study Abroad**

Unlike language immersion houses, there has been a plethora of studies that analyze study abroad. Study abroad courses aim to put students into an environment where students will be forced to utilize the language. When there are language barriers and students have the tools to overcome them, the students begin to think in the L2 and respond accordingly in order to live out their daily lives in that new environment. This idea leads to the belief that “truly functional competency in a language requires spending

time living in the country where that language is spoken” (Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1993). The assumption is that there is no better place to study a foreign language rather than to immerse the student into that environment in which it is primarily spoken.

There is evidence that supports the effectiveness of study abroad in factors such as better fluidity within their speech (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004) and increased routine responses in the target language (Taguchi, 2013) as well as the observations that there are “students returning from abroad, who frequently demonstrate significantly improved language skills” (Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1993). 70% of those students from Brecht’s et al. (1993) research showed improved language skills according to OPI testing after study abroad. Furthermore, studying a language abroad provides every opportunity in daily life for students to utilize their L2. Students are submitted to new phrases to learn, different situations to piece together responses in the L2, and different utterances of words that students wouldn’t be subjected to regularly in a domestic environment where their first language is primarily spoken. Because of this immersion, students reach higher proficiencies, which will be demonstrated later in this study.

### **Weaknesses of Study Abroad**

Being in a study abroad environment provides more opportunity to speak each day, but there are several factors that could hinder language use. These factors include: anxiety, the pressure to use their first language to avoid the struggle of learning the L2, fear of making mistakes or failure (Martinsen, Baker, Bown, & Johnson, 2011), and the more recent observation that areas where many study abroad programs operate are

experiencing a growth in the use of English which exacerbates the pressure to use it rather than their L2 (Trentman, 2013). In addition to that, this study has shown that some language study abroad programs don't have benchmarks that would test that program's effectiveness. For example, one of the students interviewed in this study mentioned that they studied abroad to learn Arabic but had neither an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) to test their language proficiency or a language pledge. These components help to measure the effectiveness of a student's study habits and the pledge provides a standard to inhibit the use of the L2. This student stated that their program was "somewhat effective" at helping to increase their language proficiency. This is in contrast to 13 out of 17 other students who studied abroad who listed their programs as either "effective" or "very effective"; most of those programs had both an OPI and a language pledge.

Another study helped to show that contact with the L2 can be hindered when studying with a group of students that speak a common language. A 2007 study that analyzed 29 Japanese students learning English presented several barriers to L2 acquisition. These barriers are: willingness to communicate (WTC), the necessity of a certain proficiency level before studying abroad, and the presence of welcoming native speakers. Willingness to communicate describes students' motivation and attitudes when learning an L2. The study found that if students have lower WTC, they are less likely to benefit from study abroad. Proficiency level is directly linked to this barrier. If lower proficiency students (intermediate-low and below) have high WTC, they will still not be able to gain from study abroad as much as students who have at least intermediate-mid or higher proficiencies. This can also be seen as a game of cat and mouse in the sense that higher proficiency students have higher WTC because they are more confident in their

language abilities, are more able to have more complex conversations, and take more risk. This leads to the necessity of effective formal classrooms in at-home institutions before students take that leap abroad. The last idea is the need for a host or native speakers who “play the same role as language teachers in the classroom” (Tanaka, 2007). The effects of native speakers were positive for language learner when they took on this role and negative for the student abroad when they didn’t (Tanaka, 2007). This means that much of the success of a study abroad experience is dictated by the native speakers. .

### **Domestic Immersion Programs**

On the other side of the spectrum lie language domestic immersion programs. Domestic immersion programs are those programs that replicate immersion environments within that student’s home country. The key problems of study abroad are minimized when domestic immersion programs are in effect. “One advantage of domestic immersion over study abroad is that learners in immersion programs interact with speakers (both native and non-native) who are more sympathetic to their struggles as language learners” (Rifkin, 2005). In study abroad, shyer students find it more difficult to find a native speaker willing to communicate and practice the language whereas in immersion environments and language immersion houses, native speakers are required to interact with all of the students (Martinsen, Baker, Bown, & Johnson, 2011).

Within a domestic immersion program, it is preferred to have students who are grouped based on of proficiency; Middlebury Language Schools do this by offering varying difficulty language courses. In these contexts, students are able to talk amongst

each other and converse in the L2 which leads to higher proficiency gains (Martinsen, Baker, Bown, & Johnson, 2011). This supports the claim that this experience is more effective if similar level proficiency students study with one another so that a student is challenged by their peer rather than completely disadvantaged due to their lack of proficiency compared to other students or held back due to their higher proficiency compared to others; domestic immersion environments must ensure this happens. The caveat is that more opportunity is provided for all levels of speakers in study abroad contexts compared to domestic language immersion settings (Martinsen, Baker, Bown, & Johnson, 2011) because the opportunity to speak to more L2 native speakers is greater than in the confined boundaries of a domestic program.

Researchers Freed, Segalowitz and Dewey published a study in 2004 that compared domestic programs, such as language houses, against at-home classroom study and study abroad which opened the door for immersion program growth in all contexts. In their research, they tested 28 English-speaking students learning French for oral fluency and were based off of six measures: speech rate, hesitation-free speech runs, filler-free speech runs, fluent runs, repetition-free speech runs and grammatical-repair-free speech runs, all of which were measured in 2-minute speeches. The measures were then analyzed to measure total words, duration (amount of time speaking measured in seconds), and longest turn (length of longest stand a student makes within the 2-minute interview). These measures were tested between students enrolled in an intensive summer immersion program, formal language classrooms in an at-home institution, and in a study abroad setting.

While much of the results were context-based and were limited by a small sample size, a major conclusion can be drawn: due to higher contact with English in a study abroad setting and at home, the researchers found that domestic immersion students made higher gains in total words, longest turn, and in rate, essentially the ultimate measures of proficiency. Again, it is important to realize that this was one test with a small sample and that more evidence is required to come to accurate conclusions.

## **Domestic Immersion Environments in Practice**

### **Overview of Middlebury Language Schools**

One of the most renowned and successful immersion programs is located in Middlebury, Vermont and is known, collectively, as Middlebury Language Schools. This institution provides students with “dependable access to languages in an interactive, intensive-immersion environment” through the use of “innovative instruction in language with a curriculum that incorporates linguistics, literature, culture, and area studies, offering students opportunities to use the target language with native and near-native language professionals and with each other” (The Language Schools Mission Statement). The language school programs last on average of 7-8 weeks (8-weeks for Arabic) and are “generally equivalent to one year of rigorous undergraduate study” (Language Schools Learning Goals). The goals of these programs include substantial gain in language proficiency, the development of socio-cultural competence and to acquire a knowledge of various cultural aspects of their language (Language Schools Learning Goals).

Middlebury Language Schools are well-known among individuals, businesses and even government and multi-national agencies; students come from around the world and from many disciplines. Notable firms and agencies that Middlebury graduates work for using their language skills are the UN, the New Yorker, Associated Press and many others. Their approach is the standard for immersion programs and is successful due to several factors the institution commits itself to.

The language pledge is likely the primary element for language proficiency acquisition at the Middlebury Language schools. This is a promise between the student and the school that states that the student will speak, listen, read and write only in the target language for the duration of the program. The result of breaking that pledge could be expulsion with no credit or refund; the belief is that the language pledge “puts in motion” the language right away so that it is not forgotten (The Language Pledge). The language pledge “helps students focus their energies on the acquisition of language skills and to internalize the patterns of communication and cultural perspective associated with the target language”.

While the pledge is rigid when conversing with other students, watching television, reading the newspaper, and even the use of other languages other than the one the student studies, Middlebury allows leniency in cases of emergency, approved personal, off-campus trips, and talking with family members. The stipulation is that “sincere effort” of using the pledge is put into practice when attending any of the institutions programs so as to become as proficient as possible in the short time allotted (The Language Pledge).

Rigorous classroom study is also necessary for language proficiency according to Middlebury. For undergraduate students, most of the schools offer courses for elementary to advanced speakers. Within the Arabic Language School, no matter the level, students are required to abide by the full language pledge; this means that students who have no knowledge of the language are expected to utilize only Arabic. From the first day, all students are “exposed to authentic reading and listening materials” (Arabic School). The classes have functional activities with the use of small groups to help with their survival in the school setting and in an Arabic-speaking environment. Each day in all of the courses, students are expected to spend between 4 and 5 hours working on class materials outside of the classroom alone (this excludes attending additional activities outside of the classroom). Some of the key work within the classrooms are oral presentations, research papers, and reading novels, short stories and media (Arabic School).

The last element used at Middlebury are the “co-curricular activities” alongside the classroom. Language learning “reaches far beyond the classroom and extends into every aspect of daily life” (Arabic School). In order to support this belief, Middlebury has created a number of concurrent activities for each school. The activities that each language school has relates to that culture. For example, the Chinese Language School offers Kung-Fu classes, the Korean Language School offers “Noraebang” which is a karaoke contest and the Arabic Language School offers a Quran Club. These outside activities provide the students with opportunities to use their newly acquired language skills and build upon them in a realistic, real-life setting.

These three methods can be utilized by other institutions, albeit on a smaller scale, within language houses and remain effective. Denison, Cornell and Western Kentucky Universities have all replicated and modified these methods to reach their goals.

### **Overview of the Denison Language and Culture House and the Cornell Language House**

The Denison Language and Culture House stands outside the realm of immersion as discussed earlier, but can still provide a language experience that exhibits increased proficiency with its residents compared to a classroom setting. The Denison Language and Culture House works as follows: second, third and fourth-year language students who have reached intermediate-low proficiency can apply to reside in the house. Within the house, more than one language is spoken but students are organized into clusters where they are expected to converse only in their respective L2. These clusters work in accordance to the events and activities that the residents organize; when there isn't an event taking place, English is the primary language spoken between the different language students, which therefore hinders the growth of the L2. The activities that take place include: "visits by writers, scholars and artists, performances by dance and theater troupes, celebration of national holidays... and introductions to Arabic and Chinese calligraphy" (Language and Culture House: About). Along with living in the house, students are enrolled in a course that examines and discusses seven foreign-language films with English subtitles.

Within the Denison Language and Culture House the primary methods for language learning at Middlebury Language Schools are present (language pledge, classroom setting and concurrent activities) even if their applications are modified. A trend that will be seen in the subsequent houses as well as in the Denison house, that isn't used at Middlebury Language Schools, is the use of a native speaker in residence. As mentioned earlier, a native speaker in house is a key tool that increases the immersion experience (Martinsen, Baker, Bown, & Johnson, 2011) and, according to a Denison faculty member who offered insight into this study, serves to "offer many opportunities for students to practice their L2 in a low-stress environment". As this faculty member states, the primary function of this house is to provide students a venue to practice their L2 outside of the classroom and to learn more about cultures related to that language. Other elements to make the house successful are high student commitment or WTC, strong faculty involvement and a dedicated and creative resident assistant.

The Language House at Cornell works relatively similar to the Denison Language and Culture house. Within the house, speakers of several different languages are assigned to rooms with roommates who speak their similar language. The residents spend time cooking dinners, playing board games, reading the available literature and periodicals in the target language while planning events that reflect the culture of the languages that are spoken in the house which are Arabic, French, German, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese and Spanish. Similar to the Denison house and what will be seen in the WKU house is that native speakers, who are also students, live in the Cornell Language House to "serve as conversation partners and assist in organizing linguistic activities" (About Language House).

## **Overview of the WKU Chinese Language Immersion House**

A primary contrast between the WKU Chinese Language Immersion House and the Denison and Cornell houses is that only the one target language, and English one day per week, is used within the house. In the WKU Chinese Language Immersion House, 7 Chinese Language students and a native speaker live in an on-campus residence full-time and speak Chinese regularly. Cultural events are planned and reading material in the target language is provided. In order to live in the house, the students must fulfill the following criteria: achieve an intermediate-mid Language level as tested by the Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency test, STAMP for short, prior to moving into the house, uphold their language pledge within the House, attend functional area meetings as scheduled, complete 24 hours of WKU credit prior to move-in, attend and participate in the Chinese Cultural Ambassadors (CCA) training workshop in August, attend a house-wide, bi-weekly meeting and be present at the House and within the WKU Chinese speaking community (WKU, 2015). These rules are in place to maximize the amount of Chinese language that is used in the house and limit the use of English.

The key element, as addressed by two residents in the house, is that students that live in the house should have a high level of proficiency to live there. This helps to create conversation and limit the use of English in the house. This stipulation also helps to blend different ideas and learn different vocabulary. For example, most of the students learn new vocabulary simply because the students have different majors and are at a high enough proficiency level to trade ideas and have conversations that inhibit complexity in

their speech. Another element that the students agreed upon that was important within the house is the fact that the students in the house have a “willingness to communicate” (Tanaka, 2007) together, indicating that the house serves as a place where students are “socially motivated to communicate” (Lambert, et al., 1984). There is a language pledge that is used in the house but that it is not necessary to enforce because all of the students are there to learn the language and have dedicated themselves to using the language; so much so that on Sundays, the day they are allowed to use English, the students sometimes forget that they are allowed to use English. One of the students interviewed said that on occasion on Sundays, students will speak in Chinese until another student comes in and says “hello” in English, reminding the others that Sunday is their day off from Chinese.

Another resource the WKU Chinese LIH uses is a native speaker which, as noted above, is essential for effective international and domestic environments. Scholars claim that a good native speaker is one who serves as a “resource for language help” (Martinsen, Baker, Bown, & Johnson, 2011). Both of the residents interviewed believe that the in-house native speaker not only serves as this kind of resource, but has become a friend to the residents which, in turn, decreases many anxieties that language students have. One of the residents, a Modern Languages student, rather than a Chinese Flagship student like all of her housemates, stated that there is no apprehension when asking the native speaker a vocabulary, grammar or even cultural question relating to the Chinese Language.

The 2015-2016 academic year is the first year in which the language house has been used and many conclusions have yet to be drawn. Despite its youth, there are positive signs that show the house is beneficial to the residents. Though residents didn't

say that the house will ever take the place of a study abroad program, the house does replicate an immersion environment in a domestic setting at the university while it serves to preserve the proficiency that the students have attained abroad (all of the residents have studied the language in Chinese-speaking countries). While many language students will study abroad then stagnate once they return, the house serves as a safe place to practice the language with other motivated language learners. The Modern Languages student even believes that the house puts her at an advantage to her classmates by helping her to recall more easily what she learned when she studied in Beijing, China for a year.

The language house also accelerates the students' language proficiency by providing opportunities to use the language more often. Out of 28 students from across the US who were surveyed who don't live in a language house, 5 hours a week are spent on average either writing, reading, listening or speaking in their target languages. While times differ each week due to busy schedules and different course loads, it can be expected that students who live in the house use the Chinese language a minimum of 18 hours a week. This number is from the student who is not enrolled in the Chinese Flagship, therefore, she is not required to meet with a language tutor at least 3 more hours a week as is required for the other residents in the house. While numbers of hours is insufficient by itself due to the fact that much of that time could be spent using the language incorrectly in the house, the native speaker helps to minimize that potential problem.

## **Elements of Successful Language Immersion Houses**

While Western Kentucky University's Chinese Language Immersion House has been a success so far, there are other options for different language houses to aid in the language acquisition process for students. While differences remain, there are some qualities that are required to make a language house successful.

### **Intermediate Proficiency Level**

Proficiency level requirements for living in the language house are in place at Cornell and Denison as well as WKU. Students with a proficiency level of Intermediate-Mid are preferred at Denison but students who are tested at intermediate-low are accepted; at Cornell any intermediate-level speaker is allowed to apply. There is good reason to put such a rule in place. When asked if they teach in the target language throughout their class, a language professor at WKU replied that they do not require their students to speak in the target language because they cannot answer many questions in it. Another suggested "there are grammar questions at the 200-level [intermediate level] that require explanation in English". If professors at the intermediate level have difficulty teaching in only the target language, novice level students would not only likely use more English in the house but would take the opportunity away from a better prepared student to increase their proficiency if allowed to live in an LIH. By not permitting lower-

proficiency level speakers into the house, the first language used is minimized and L2 acquisition is more easily attained. Another language professor at WKU believes that “[setting] a threshold” as to who would be allowed to live in the house is a key concept to the successful use of a language immersion house. By using the Chinese Language House as a reference, even though Intermediate-mid-level speakers are accepted, all of the residents currently in the house are at least advanced. Neither of the students interviewed stated that there were an overwhelming number of language barriers between the students but sometimes used English for certain words if they couldn’t explain it in Chinese. This could show that maybe even intermediate-level students, who don’t speak entirely in the target language in their courses, would have difficulty and hamper the benefits the house would have for them. However, the goal within the house is for all students to reach at least advanced-level proficiency; this implies that while the house is now in the second semester of its use, some students must have been intermediate-level at first.

### **Native Speakers**

Native speakers are a common interest of both WKU and Denison language faculty, as well as among language students. 4 out of 6 educators who answered a question asking what they believe are the three most important elements to make an LIH successful mentioned that having a native speaker in the house is one of the key components while 91% of students who were asked a similar question would want to live in a house with a native speaker of the target language. When native speakers, who can be compared to homestay abroad hosts, are used effectively by taking on a teacher role,

“students [feel] more comfortable communicating...in the L2” (Tanaka, 2007) and “offer many opportunities for students to practice their L2 in a low stress environment” (Denison faculty). When students feel more comfortable, they communicate more which then paves the way for students to practice the language and potentially increase their proficiency.

### **Use of a Single Language**

Speaking the same language is another idea that is well supported by language learners and educators. Out of 23 students who answered the survey, all of them stated that they would want to live in an LIH that uses the same language rather than multiple languages. WKU has done well to ensure that this is the case. As seen earlier, Denison and Cornell Universities do not have this restriction; even though the faculty at Denison would like to see this change because “English is the prevalent language among students [in the Denison language house] when they are not in their language clusters”. When the first language is used primarily instead of the L2, there is little to no improvement in language proficiency as was seen in the Freed et al. study.

## **Evaluation of Questionnaires and ACTFL “Can-Do Statements”**

### **Results**

During this study, 25 Arabic students' language proficiencies were tested either using an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) by an American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) certified interviewer or by using ACTFL "Can-Do Statements". The OPI is conducted between a language student and the interviewer in the target language while being recorded. Afterward, the recording is compared to criteria outlined in the "ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines" or the Inter-Agency Language Roundtable Language Skill Level Descriptors (ACFTL). The "Can-Do Statements" are a series of questions divided by language categories: Interpersonal Communication, Presentational Speaking, Presentational Writing, Interpretive Listening and Interpretive Reading. These questions increase in difficulty and complexity and are subdivided into proficiency levels: Novice-Low, Middle and High, Intermediate-Low to High, Advanced-Low to High, Superior, and Distinguished. The language students then check boxes next to statements that they are able to do and finish checking boxes when they can no longer perform the language tasks prompted from the assessment. The OPI is the most reliable of these assessments but both are approved by ACTFL to accurately assess language proficiency.

33 language students then answered a series of questions that aimed to find out how many semesters they had studied their target language and what studying behaviors and experiences they have that influence their language proficiencies (8 students were added to the 25 original students due to the fact that they had never conducted an OPI or did not get evaluated by the Can-Do Statements). These behaviors are: meeting with a language partner, having participated in study abroad, and hours a week they spend

studying their target language. All of the data was collected and each proficiency groups' behaviors were analyzed to find trends.

Students who scored Novice-High or higher had studied their languages an average of 5.052 semesters, Novice-Mid and Low had studied for an average of 1 semester. All of those who had an Intermediate-Low proficiency and below had not studied abroad; 15 out of 19 (78.9%) students who were tested at Intermediate-Mid and above had studied abroad. Between students who scored Intermediate-High to Advanced-Mid, 5 out of 12 (41.7%) studied with language partners while those students who tested below Intermediate-High, 8 out of 13 (61.5%) had language partners. Lastly, all 3 students who tested at Advanced-Mid stated that they use the language 12 or more hours per week whereas all the other proficiency levels (excluding the native-low speaker who uses the language just as much as the Advanced-Mid speakers) use the language an average of 5.52 hours a week; there was one outlier in that data who was an Intermediate-Mid level speaker who uses the language 12 or more hours per week.

### **Analysis of Results**

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this information. Initially, semesters don't seem to have much effect on how well a student learns a language. There were only 3 students that tested below Novice-High and those students studied for only one semester, meaning that all of those remaining (22) averaged near 5 semesters. That covers 6 levels of proficiency who have studied near the same amount of time as one another.

Another conclusion that can be argued is that students who study abroad cross a threshold into higher proficiency when they return which enables them to build upon their language. In all but one proficiency level (Novice-Low), students start to use the language more per week while they begin to drop their language partners. This indicates that when proficiency level increases, students start to rely upon themselves more to increase their understanding of the language rather than a language partner. Lower-proficiency students tend to rely upon language partners for help, but students who return from study abroad gain skills and confidence that takes place of the necessity of language partners.

Finally, the behavior that sets students apart is the amount of the target language they use per week. All of the Advanced-Mid speakers use the language more than 12 hours. The other behaviors are necessary to get students to this point, but what seems to accelerate them above the others is their dedication to the language; one of the Advanced-Mid speakers stated that they use the language close to 18 hours per week. That is nearly a day of speaking in the target language and shows dedication in the face of attending school in an English-speaking university daily. This brings back the point of “willingness to communicate” (Tanaka, 2007) that with a higher WTC, students will increase their language-proficiency at a quicker rate and this is evident from this date.

None of these behaviors work alone, however. The Novice-Low student uses the language as often as the Advanced-Mid speakers, but there are steps that must be reached before advancing to the next levels. There needs to be a balance of using the language, studying abroad and communicating with a language partner. The Advanced-Mid

speakers wouldn't have gotten to where they are today without immersing themselves in the language and dedicating themselves to learning the language.

## **Further Considerations for Language Immersion Houses**

While this study focused primarily on finding the benefits of LIHS and the effective strategies to employ when using an LIH, there are still other considerations when deciding to use LIHs or not. These considerations include a cost-benefit analysis and the benefits of domestic immersion outside of language proficiency.

Initially, it can be seen that LIHs would benefit students financially, but would be more costly for universities and institutions. For WKU study abroad programs to Jordan, the average cost for study abroad for a semester is \$16,785 and a year is \$32,820 (AMIDEAST, CET, ISA, CIEE) while the cost to live in the Chinese Language Immersion House is the same as tuition, room, and board at WKU (WKU, Tuition and Fees Schedule) and would therefore not increase the costs for the students. Obviously the price for a student to pay for study abroad is much higher than to stay at school, so it would clearly be beneficial for a student to stay at school and study at the house if money played a large part in whether a student studies abroad or not. Similarly, there would be increased costs for the university; it now has to finance one more building which includes staffing, paying a mortgage, and other expenses. The balance of deciding to pay for it or not comes down to an LIH's benefits (which is seen above) and the decrease in costs in scholarships and grants for those students who decide to stay here rather than study abroad.

Secondly, a domestic immersion house would address concerns of parents and students about the safety of studying abroad. Many parents and students may worry that studying abroad to the Middle East and North Africa may pose a threat to their child's or their own well-being, in which case having an LIH would be necessary to provide an immersion experience for those individuals who hesitate to study to that region. Students have the option to stay at home and study their language without needing to increase their risk for injury or any other risk that students associate with studying to an unknown area when an LIH is available for their language. This would increase the comfort of staying at home to study. A university or institution could see the opportunity in the LIH in that it would decrease their risk, financial and political, by providing a safe area for students. A caveat is that some languages, especially Arabic, will be spoken in potentially dangerous areas and that there will always be risk involved when speaking to a different group of people inside and outside of institutional study. That being said, if students are serious about their language proficiency, they will have to take risks at some point.

## **Conclusion**

Noting the observations from this study, it is evident that in order for an LIH to be immersive and successful at increasing students' language proficiency, it must have certain criteria: students must be at level of proficiency to have engaging conversation with minimal disruptions from the first language (Intermediate-Mid is suggested), only one target language should be used in the house and a native speaker must be present to serve as a language resource.

In order for students to reach Intermediate-Mid proficiency, they would, in most cases, have to participate in an immersion program in a country that speaks the L2 primarily. It was seen that when students have this experience, they cross a threshold and begin to attain higher proficiency. When more than one language is used in a language house, it begins to lose its immersion qualities as the first language begins to be spoken more often than the L2, limiting L2 acquisition. Lastly, the native speaker who resides with the residents must be welcoming to the language learners to decrease anxieties with making mistakes and they must also take a role as a teacher would in correcting linguistic mistakes.

When all of these criteria are met, the LIH can serve as an immersion environment and give what language students need: practice using the language; this is the overarching element to the continuation of L2 acquisition. Students need a comfortable place to preserve and practice their L2 proficiency. With the use of an LIH, students have that environment that is unmatched at public and private universities where the focus is earning a degree in subjects outside of just language. L2 students will increase their proficiencies and what they gained abroad or throughout the course of their studies will not be lost.

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