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Peer reviewed

Study Abroad and Second Language Use: Constructing the Self
by Valerie Pellegrino Aveni. Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 2005, xii+188 pp.

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For many foreign language learners, the experience of studying abroad is generally regarded as extremely precious and appealing. Many believe that their foreign language proficiency will dramatically improve after such experiences. However, Valerie Pellegrino Aveni describes in her and her peers' overseas experiences what she has observed in her students: "an excitement and drive to mix with native speakers that vacillated regularly with a complete avoidance of speaking, at times for no apparent reason" (p. 1). In fact, such an experience is not unfamiliar to many overseas language learners. Aveni's book, targeted at this very learner group, analyzes extensive journal entry data and provides an elaborate account of barriers L2 learners encounter and strategies they employ in Russia. The book presents an empirical study of students' L2 use in a one-year study abroad program in Russia. Seventy-six students participated in the program, of which seventeen students' data were analyzed. The aim of the book is twofold. First, it attempts to record all the variables that affect learners' L2 use in a foreign environment. Second, it aims to analyze the role of self-presentation and self-preservation from a functional perspective in Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

Chapter 1 introduces the relationship between "self" (self-construction) and language use. In this chapter, Aveni sets the background of her work. Second language is perceived as a means to realize learners' desire to present themselves in the target language environment. This is a quite broad and uncommon perspective in SLA studies, for it seems that most of the research in SLA investigates curriculum or pedagogy's effect on language proficiency rather than the connection between learner's language use and self-construction. Under such a perspective, participants' communication with native speakers is discussed in relation to social, cultural, psychological and cognitive factors. The conflict between learners' desire to use L2 and barriers they encountered is presented.

The following two chapters provide an extensive and in-depth analysis of all the possible factors that might play a role in the conflict introduced in the previous chapter. Chapter 2 addresses social factors affecting L2 use from the learners' perspective. Aveni argues that learners need to feel secure, respected, and comfortable before being willing to participate in an L2 interaction. Chapter 3 offers a more elaborate and in-depth account for the factors in L2 use from two angles: social-environmental and learner-internal. With regard to the social-environmental

perspective, some rarely studied factors are carefully explored, such as caretakers' various responses, others' behavior, attitude, age, gender, and physical appearance. Excessive attention that is well meant by the giver may be perceived as humiliating by the receiver. When necessary, Aveni conducted a subscale quantitative study on individual variables, such as gender. For example, 79% of Americans are reported to show no gender preference in speaking Russian with another American, whereas 86.5% Americans claim they prefer speaking Russian with a Russian woman than a Russian man (p. 79). In terms of learner-internal variables, Aveni argues for the importance of learners' self-perception in L2 use. She believes that what really matters in a learners' willingness to engage in L2 use is learners' subjective perception of their L2 proficiency and potential outcome of L2 use, rather than the actual condition of these elements.

Chapter 4 discusses the convergence between the real self and the ideal self in L2 use. Aveni draws a balance matrix between social-environmental stimuli and learner-internal stimuli (Figure 4.2, p. 120). She points out that only when learners do not feel threatened in their social environment and self-assured within their minds are they in their best condition for L2 use. Different combinations of factors in these two lines of stimuli may result in different L2 use. As learners become more familiar with their L2 environment, social-environmental factors' role in L2 use decreases and learner-internal factors increases. This trend suggests learners are moving up the path described in the matrix, approaching the optimal condition for L2 use. As their experience accumulates, learners tend to take active strategies to reach a balance between their real self and ideal self. They may withdraw ("flight") themselves from L2 use to protect their ideal self if they feel they have little or no control to a communication; they may participate ("fight") in an L2 communication if they feel themselves in control of the interaction outcome. Different learning situations and learner strategies are discussed at length in this chapter.

The conclusion chapter summarizes and reiterates the importance of self-construction studies in SLA. Aveni argues that adequate understanding in this construction process has important theoretical and pedagogical values. She also discusses the strengths of qualitative methodology in SLA research. The appendices of this book are highly informative. A comprehensive illustration of the methodology and original data is provided. With such information, readers can better evaluate Aveni's data and researchers can easily replicate her study.

The book focuses on the construction of "self" in an overseas context. It analyzes many cognitive and psychological factors that might affect this construction process; however, it does not pay sufficient attention to two other equally important variables in such processes: individual differences and culture. With the exception of some simple introductory information about these two variables in the participants, Aveni does not provide much in-depth account of their role in learners' self-construction process.

Overall, Aveni's book has made significant contributions to SLA research: First, it offers a systematic internal account of a unique and rarely studied learner

group. There are quite a few L2 learners' studies in study abroad contexts, but most of them address the efficiency of certain curricula and instructional methods. Research accounts focused on L2 use from the self-construction perspective is rather rare. Second, Aveni's triangulation research design is especially successful: interviews, observation, and journal entries all serve their own purpose and validate one another well. It is quite remarkable to explore the immense one-year long observation data in such a systematic and scientific manner. Third, a large amount of literature from anthropology, sociology, inter-cultural communication, and psychology make this book in SLA particularly extensive and insightful. Lastly, Aveni's writing style is very succinct. In addition to researchers or graduate students who are interested in study abroad programs, general readers or language learners would find this book accessible and useful as well. They can learn from the extensive journal entries and interviews of the participants about the obstacles learners might encounter and how to handle them in their own language learning.