

Study Abroad Programs

The importance of foreign language education is well understood in Europe. For example, in the Czech Republic, the Ministry of Education mandates that every school start teaching the first foreign language in 3rd grade three times a week, with the second foreign language starting in 7th grade. English is usually the first foreign language of choice; German, French and Spanish are popular choices for the second. However, if you believe that learning foreign language at school is not enough, you are right. With 20-30 other students in class for two hours a week, how can your child ever achieve fluency?

You can, like many other parents, send your children to private tutors. Holding a Master's degree in English Linguistics, my mother was one of those private tutors. When I was five, she assembled a group of my friends and started teaching us twice a week. Private tutors like my mother will be able to give the individualized attention and teach speaking and listening skills as well, as the groups are usually not larger than six students. However, even with private tutors, your child may never be able to fully grasp the language. So what can you do to help your child become fluent? Send them abroad.

First, let me explain what study abroad is. Study abroad programs are educational opportunities where a student travels to a foreign country for an extended period of time to learn a foreign language. They may range from four weeks to a full year. The primary purpose of study abroad is to be immersed in a culture that speaks the language, as learning happens most quickly under those circumstances. Study abroad programs are also great for making life-long friends around the world, expanding one's world-view, gaining independence and enhancing employment opportunities in the future.

Many Czech schools offer one-week trips to England during 7th or 8th grade, which they market as "study abroad." Students spend four to five hours of language classes in the morning and go on sightseeing trips in the afternoon. Parents, wanting to give their children as much foreign language exposure as they can, are often willing to pay close to \$1,000 for such a trip. Unfortunately, many concerned parents lack the expertise to know that these one-week trips are not study abroad.

Not my mother though. I did not get to go on my school's study abroad trip in 7th grade, because my mother was able to see all the shortcomings. I vaguely understood when my mother tried to explain that such a trip would be a waste of money. She promised I would definitely go some other time and for longer than a week. But that didn't matter to me. I was angry. I wanted to be on the nearly 20-hour bus ride, during which my friends and

I would tease the boys. I was looking forward to a week full of sleepovers with my best friend, talking late into the night, nobody telling us when to go to sleep. I wanted to experience all the adventures my friends and I would talk about for years, making us friends forever.

Obviously I was looking forward to the trip for all the wrong reasons. All of the exciting things I wanted to experience could easily happen during a summer camp right in the Czech Republic for less than a fifth of the cost. While it will surely be difficult to deny your child such a trip, they will thank you for it in the future if you save the \$1,000 and send them abroad alone and for longer than a week. Here is why.

First, these one-week trips are organized by schools. This means that your child is going to spend the week with 30 or more of her peers. This completely defeats the purpose of studying abroad, as your child will be immersed within the Czech-speaking group of her friends, not the foreign culture. Your child will not feel the need to communicate in the foreign language for everyday purposes, because the teachers will take care of everything. Furthermore, even though your child will most likely stay in the home of an English family, she will do so along with her best friend, because these trips place at least two students with one family. Therefore, there is no need for your child to get out of her comfort zone to make friends with the English children, missing out on one of the greatest opportunities of studying abroad.

Even if we ignore the fact that your child will spend the entire week with her Czech-speaking friends, one week is simply not enough time to become immersed in a foreign language. Not even if your child is alone in the foreign country. Actually, it's barely enough time to fully grasp 10 new vocabulary words. From my own experience, it takes between two to three weeks to even begin using the foreign language comfortably for everyday purposes.

Even though these one-week trips are incorrectly labeled as "study abroad," the intention of Czech schools is commendable. Taking away the stress off of parents' shoulders, they are a safe way to experience foreign travel for the first time. Furthermore, the trips are great for motivating your child for further travel. However, if your primary reason of sending your child on this one-week trip is foreign language and culture, you should reconsider. While she will experience foreign food, appearances and habits, foreign culture and language go deeper than that. Both encompass deep perceptions, beliefs and values, all of which cannot be understood within a week. Therefore, the final result of the school-offered "study abroad" is an overpriced sightseeing trip that brings minimal exposure to foreign culture and no permanent language improvement.

My mother didn't break her promise. I went to Bournemouth, England for four weeks in 8th grade. Not only was I the only one who spoke Czech on that trip, there was no one else to guide me through the experience, forcing me to use the language to communicate. Sure, there were times that I was uncomfortable. For example, when we got on the ferry to cross from Calais to Dover, everyone suddenly started leaving the bus. The driver finally came up to me, as I wasn't about to go anywhere, and told me I had to leave. I was confused and didn't know where to go. I was surrounded by a parking lot full of cars on a giant boat. I was forced to talk to him and found out I had to go to the upper decks. Situations like this, however, are the ones that force children to speak, employing language skills they thought they never had. This gives them confidence and teaches them independence, further empowering them as individuals.

While four-week study abroad programs are significantly more useful in helping your child acquire a foreign language, they are obviously more expensive and more difficult for you as a parent to let your 14-year-old venture out by herself. However scary it might be for you, your child will gain a much more meaningful experience and permanent language improvement than going on a week-long school trip. If you are afraid you can't plan such a trip by yourself, you don't have to worry. There are countless student agencies that organize these trips. They have experienced travel agents, carefully selected families for home stays and top notch learning centers with certified EFL teachers.

I am sure some you might now be wondering if four weeks is even long enough to get all of the advantages of study abroad. Of course, you are right. To give your child the best there is, I recommend waiting a few years for their freshman or sophomore year of high school, and send them abroad for a semester or a full year. By the time your child reaches high school, she will have a good language base from learning at school (and private tutors). This means she will be very likely to achieve fluency to the point where she will never forget the language. It will stay with her forever, even if she barely spoke it on a regular basis in the future.

Aside from becoming nearly bilingual and getting all the benefits of four-week study abroad, your child will be able to truly experience the foreign culture first hand. She will get to know the value system of the culture, gaining a truly expanded worldview and understanding for people of other cultures. Immersed in a different academic setting, since your child is placed within a local school, your child will discover new teaching methods, unfamiliar topics and unknown strengths and skills. Plus, she will surely make life-long friends.

I am sure some of you are now concerned that yearlong study programs are even more expensive than four-week programs. Surprisingly, the cost is not that different, given the significantly more valuable experience.

You are paying the same price for the flight and the paperwork as if your child was going for four weeks. Plus, usually your child is placed within a selected school, not into a specialized learning center, which means the cost for the entire year within a district school is very close to that of intensive four weeks in a specialized learning center. Furthermore, aside from regular agencies that organize study abroad, there are many nonprofits like sister-city organizations that do the same and offer scholarships. So a yearlong stay can turn out to be even cheaper than a four-week program. Obviously, yearlong programs, whether they be through a regular agency or a nonprofit, require more planning. Many of the nonprofits often require language tests and essays to qualify for the scholarship. However, if your child can spend a year abroad for a little more than the price of an airline ticket to the country, it sure is worth some 2,000 words for the essay and some planning ahead.

Yearlong study abroad programs are truly life-changing. I went during my sophomore year of high school. Being more comfortable in the American academic setting and making a life-long friend, I decided to explore the options of studying at an American college. I have now been in the U.S. for six years, studying journalism and design, which I first realized were my passions while studying abroad.

Give your child the best there is. Give them the opportunity to become fluent in a foreign language and discover who they are (and can be) by sending them abroad for more than four weeks. Let them become a global citizen.