Study abroad, stress, and hair cortisol: Highly individual variation

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Many language learners experience intense negative emotions during study abroad, resulting in challenges to their very identity (Pellegrino Aveni 2005). Recent research points to the need for interventions to assist students to better engage and thrive during their in-country experience (Trentman 2012; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige 2009). Project Perseverance is about empowering students to become highly effective self-regulating language learners. After three years of coaching and observing students studying Arabic intensively in Jordan, we found that the level of stress experienced by some students indicated that we should investigate the effectiveness of including biofeedback training. We will report on the experience of working with 46 American students who spent a semester of intensive Arabic study in Jordan in 2015. We will focus on oral proficiency gains; responses over time to the Foreign Language Enjoyment and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety survey employed by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), and hair cortisol from samples obtained at the beginning and end of the program, in addition to qualitative data from their learning journals, email correspondence and interviews. Results suggest the need to pay close attention to each individual’s story to better understand the highly variable progress they made in acquiring proficiency in speaking Arabic.


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