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**College Degree Program:** Dramaturgy, International Security Studies

**Study Abroad Program:** Italy



*On the top of the Altare della Patria*

“Scusi...posso avere un altro coke?”

I stammered out this phrase in ugly, broken Italian to the waitress at our table. This was the first night of a three-week study abroad trip through Italy. I studied Italian previously and even lived in the country for a year during high school, so I felt the pressure that night to impress my peers with my foreign language skills. It seemed that the waitress could detect my fear of speaking Italian as she continued staring at me with a blank face.

“Uh...un altro?” I said while pointing to the Coke bottle. She continued to stare, and I thought to myself, *what is her problem?!* People around me watched inquisitively, but she did not seem to understand what I was trying to say. A million thoughts raced through my head: *These are the correct words, right? I couldn't have forgotten that much in a few years! Has the language changed?* It felt like forever while I decided my next move. The waitress started slowly shaking her head. Did she not understand? My worst fear was coming true. I could not determine if my spoken Italian was simply incomprehensible or if she was playing a really well-timed joke on me.

“Va bene...okay, never mind,” I said in dismissal, trying to salvage some of my Italian-speaking pride. As she left I shrugged off this experience to my friends, laughing that maybe my accent was worse than I thought. Then it happened. Just as quickly as she left, she returned with a two-liter bottle of Coke, placing it in front of me. Just as mysteriously as she appeared, she left again.

I never thought that speaking foreign languages would be a talent of mine. It is not that I could not speak them, but that I refused to do so. Being a crippling perfectionist, I have struggled to use my words when traveling abroad. I have been fortunate to travel extensively in about 30 countries, and even live abroad multiple times before turning 18 years old. After all this experience, one might think I would be more comfortable out of my comfort zone, able to bravely attempt communicating in a different language. However, this is not the case. I have been afraid of using the wrong grammar or syntax, leaving the native speaker unable



to understand what I said, and worse, being perceived as a dumb American. Although I realize this concern is irrational, the fear nonetheless maintained a strong grip over my study abroad experiences.

I understand that the fear of messing up and looking dumb is anathema to study abroad. In fact, it is anathema to almost everything in life. In order to get the most out of your experience, you must be willing to try, fail and then try again. New foods, new ideas and new customs are all available through travel—and I was able to fearlessly try them all—so why was speaking a foreign language so hard for me? The answer is that it *was not* hard. During this study abroad trip I decided to speak more Italian while traveling throughout Italy. I decided that I could not be afraid—my peers could benefit from my knowledge and previous experience in the country, and I wanted to be there to help them have the best experience. Once that decision was steadfast in my mind, it truly was not hard to implement. Yes, I received that dreaded blank stare from time to time, and yes, I embarrassingly used incorrect grammar, but it was well worth it. If anything can be learned from this essay then let it be this: find a way to overcome your fears. Be patient with yourself because those with whom you interact will be patient with you as well.

Of course, miscommunications cannot be avoided when operating in a foreign culture. That is the beauty and difficulty of travel, and is one of the most important lessons you can learn before even leaving home. It is easy to appreciate cultural differences and language barriers when you are sitting comfortably in the United States surrounded by the familiarity of your lifestyle. It is much harder to do so when you are actually on the ground in a foreign country, but that is precisely when to appreciate cultural and linguistic differences the most. That experience may be a bit messy when speaking a language less than perfectly, but it also comes with the joy of understanding and empathizing with another community.

Being abroad is hard. I do not say that to scare anyone—in fact, I say it in the hope of inspiring



others. College is about overcoming hardships in order to grow as a young person. Life is about having the grit to do things that seem scary. Through study abroad and overcoming difficulties, skills are gained—tenacity, confidence, and of course, patience. You must have patience with others when you do not understand their actions, beliefs or customs.

You must also have patience with yourself when you make little mistakes—whether getting on the wrong train, using the wrong restroom or receiving blank stares as you try to use your knowledge of another language. Ultimately, one must have patience in order to learn and grow as a young adult, to develop into an educated person and to become a global citizen.



*Swimming in the ocean off of Capri*