

Chapter 12

World Language Learning: The Impact of Study Abroad on Student Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Research on the impacts of study abroad participation on world language proficiency indicates positive and significant associations between sojourning abroad and students' self-reported language skills. In recent years, student engagement and 'deep-learning' have been found to exert powerful effects on student learning outcomes. However, the extent to which student engagement serves as a pathway to mediate and enhance the impact of study abroad on language learning has not been examined. This chapter uses pre- and post-test surveys and applies experiential learning theory (ELT) to model gains in language proficiency for students who studied world languages abroad versus on-campus. Results of mixed factorial ANOVA and regression path analysis indicate that students who studied world languages abroad experienced significantly greater gains in deep-learning and world language proficiency than students who studied world languages on-campus. This chapter is among the first to connect student deep-learning and engagement to world language learning.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of study abroad on college students' self-reported functionality in world languages. Further, it explores the role of student engagement in deep-learning practices (Kuh, 2008) as a mechanism that promotes language learning during education abroad.

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BACKGROUND

As promulgated by the 2005 *Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program*, an international and cosmopolitan citizenry capable of spreading democracy world-wide requires broad participation in study abroad programs (Lincoln Commission). Decades of research on participation in study abroad among college and university students support the assertion that immersion abroad is a personally and academically enriching experience capable of enhancing student academic attainment and promoting psychosocial development (Bishop, 2013). Studies confirm that study abroad participation can enhance students' intercultural awareness and global knowledge (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009), encourage cultural sensitivity and tolerance of social and economic differences (Ryan & Twibell, 2000), assist in L2 acquisition and linguistic proficiency gains (Hadis, 2005), and contribute to the development of student self-actualization and self-awareness (Carlson & Widaman, 1988). Education abroad is likewise generally associated with enhanced learning of world languages and improvement in self-reported linguistic proficiency skills (Freed, 1998).

The conceptual link between education abroad and enhanced language learning presumes that cultural immersion is the key factor. Therefore, longer-duration culturally immersive sojourns that span several months to a year remain the paradigm for fostering language learning (Institute of International Education, 2015b). To the contrary, approximately 80% of study abroad participation among US students is currently comprised of short-term programs of fewer than eight weeks, often led by home-campus faculty with limited global experience or third-party providers such as for-profit corporations or private foundations (Institute of International Education, 2015a). Cultural immersion is unlikely to manifest as a strong and influential component of student learning in such short-term, limited-immersion programs (Goldoni, 2013). Thus, comparatively little is known among researchers and practitioners with regards to what factors may enhance world language learning in the most common forms of education abroad (i.e., short-term).

One potential mechanism that has been linked to academic achievement accruing from education abroad (see Rubin, Sutton, O'Rear, Rhodes, & Raby, 2014) is the concept of student engagement in deep-learning activities. Student engagement has been linked to a wide array of positive learning outcomes in Higher Education (HE), including shorter time-to-degree, improved graduation rates, higher GPAs, and greater student satisfaction (Kuh, 2008). Many of these findings emerge from administration of the *National Survey of Student Engagement* (NSSE) at hundreds of postsecondary US HEIs.

In particular, 'deep-learning' experiences such as conversations with culturally diverse peers, out-of-class consultation with professors, or hands-on research and service-learning projects can result in significant positive impacts on student learning outcomes (Nelson Laird, Shoup, Kuh, & Schwarz, 2008). Limited evidence highlights study abroad experiences as one high-impact means of boosting student engagement (Gonyea, 2008). Despite the prevalence and growth of study abroad programs in US postsecondary institutions, however, the effect of student engagement in deep-learning practices on world language learning and gains in linguistic proficiency has been little explored.

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