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Students' Immersion Experiences in Study Abroad

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STUDENTS' IMMERSION EXPERIENCES IN STUDY ABROAD

Study abroad is considered one of the major vehicles for helping language learners to become translingually and transculturally competent, open-minded, and tolerant individuals (Modern Language Association, 2007). It is essential to a nation's security (Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, 2005), can play a critical role in developing students' language proficiency and cultural competence, and offers learning opportunities that are simply unavailable or unmatched at home (Gore, 2005). The number of students studying abroad is growing (Institute for International Education, 2012), and both large and small institutions of higher education across the United States are allocating increasing resources to promoting study abroad and international education.

In spite of the increasing interest in, and many benefits of, study abroad, the study abroad experience may not always be as immersive and intensive as many participants, faculty, program directors and administrators would wish, in part because students are most frequently sent abroad in groups, often to attractive, vacation locations. In addition, students' approaches to the study abroad experience, their level of engagement with members of the new culture, as well as their socio-cultural identity and cultural values have an impact on their preparation for the experience, the quality of the sojourn, their perceptions of the sojourn, and the way in which they are perceived in the host society.

Review of Literature

The latest statistics published by the Institute for International Education's *2012 Open Doors Report* indicate that in 2010-2011, 273,996 American students (64% women) received academic credit for study abroad experiences - a modest increase (1.3%) over the previous year but a significant one over the past 20 years (Institute for International Education, 2012).

However, data suggest that sojourns have become significantly shorter and developing linguistic proficiency and cultural competence may no longer be the main goals of an international experience (Ogden, 2007; Coleman, 1997). The Institute of International Education (2012) reported that short-term programs (4-8 weeks) serve the largest number of Americans studying abroad. Furthermore, Kinginger stated that American students' active involvement in local host societies during study abroad is at risk (2008a; 2009; 2010a), as is students' understanding of the importance of foreign language study. These changes may reflect what Gore called "dominant beliefs" (2005, p. 23) about study abroad held by the U.S. higher education community, including the concern that study abroad:

- is not viewed as a serious opportunity for committed academic learning because courses and programs offered abroad may be academically less rigorous than those offered at the home university;
- is viewed as a vacation in the "Grand Tour" tradition during which students spend extensive time traveling with compatriots with whom the dominant language spoken is English.

Research on study abroad has focused on its impact on students' oral proficiency (Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Freed, 1995; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Lafford, 1995), grammatical or pragmatic competence (Barron, 2006), intercultural competence (Harrison & Malone, 2004; Savicki, 2008; Shaheen, 2004) and regional competence (Watson et al., 2013). Researchers have also examined the qualities of the student experience, adopting an emic perspective, or have focused on language socialization (Cook, 2006; DuFon, 2006; Iino, 2006). Dufon and Churchill (2006), Jackson (2006), and Byram and Feng (2006) found that the results of a cultural and linguistic immersion experience abroad depended on individual students'

personality traits and attributes, motivation, willingness to invest in L2 speakers and the host community, and on students' language socialization process. Freed (1995) pointed out that students' experiences with, and exposure to, the target language and culture varied enormously, as did the intensity and frequency of their interaction with native speakers. Kinginger (2010b) indicated that students' opportunities for success while abroad could be enhanced when students were taught how to turn everyday experiences, events, and activities, including conflicts and obstacles, into opportunities for learning. All of these variables are known to have an impact on the quality of the immersion experience as well as the opportunity for significant gains in language proficiency and cultural awareness. In summary, although study abroad appears to be superior to domestic study in terms of language gain, it is argued that simply studying abroad does not consistently or inevitably lead to increases in language proficiency or cultural competence. Rather, what makes a difference is the combination of program features, student factors, including personality traits, attitudes, motivation, and the nature of students' investment in, and social interactions within, the host community.

The quality of a study abroad program, student engagement and activities, and the effectiveness of international experiences can be analyzed through a community of practice framework (Wenger, 1998), defining how a group of individuals break isolation, build new relationships, negotiate meanings, develop communities, and share activities. Wenger identifies three major components found in communities of practice: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. First, Wenger holds that *mutual engagement* focuses on the ways in which members of the community build relationships with, and support, one another while negotiating meaning in a new environment. Engagement in a community of practice does not necessarily have to be harmonious, as members can have different perspectives and different feelings.

Wenger describes the second component as *joint enterprise* and highlights the ways in which members of communities of practice share and negotiate knowledge. *Joint enterprise* also takes into account the extent to which members feel accountable to the rest of the members and how the overall community develops. Third, *shared repertoire* refers to building a set of communal resources through negotiated norms, including specific activities, symbols, artifacts, words, stories, and gestures that work to create and maintain relationships in the community. For example, food, music, dance, and sports can be strong cultural symbols that identify a group. These symbols can have an impact on how people feel about their identity. During study abroad, students may choose to develop relationships within the English-speaking community of practice – the study abroad cohort group -- or may seek to become part of a new community, comprised of speakers of the new language drawn both from within the learning environment and the host community.

The purpose of this study was to analyze how truly intensive the academic study abroad experience was for students, what strategies students used so as to become more fully integrated into the new culture, and what social or personal dynamics affected the degree to which students' efforts to engage with native speakers were successful.

Methods

Participants

160 undergraduate students from a large public university in the southeastern United States enrolled in study abroad programs in Spain during the 2007, 2008 and 2009 calendar years. Of this number, 44 students, aged 19 – 26, agreed to participate in this study. 17 of the students studied abroad in Cádiz during summers 2007-2008; 20 studied abroad in Valencia during fall 2007 and spring 2008; and seven participated in the summer program in Sevilla

during 2009. 98 additional people were also observed and/or interviewed, including the two program directors, the academic coordinator from the home-institution, two resident directors, two onsite graduate assistants, 20 additional study abroad coordinators, 13 university faculty members from both the host and home institutions, employees from the host residence hall (cleaning staff, security guards, secretaries, administrative and maintenance people, employees from the bar/cafeteria, kitchen, and dining hall), Spanish and international resident students, members of the 22 host families with whom students resided during all three years of data collection, and other community members.

Programs of Study

The fall and spring semester programs in Valencia lasted 13 weeks each (September – December 2007 or January – April 2008). Students lived in a “colegio,” a residence hall owned by the University of Valencia housing more than 200 local and international students. Intermediate- and advanced-level courses were taught at the University of Valencia by faculty members from both the home and host universities and study abroad students received university credits at their home university for their classes. The concurrent summer programs in Cádiz and Sevilla lasted seven weeks each (May-June 2007, 2008, and 2009). Students lived with local families selected by the host institution and courses were taught by university faculty from the host language institute. All programs were overseen by the two study abroad directors from the home university as well as by a resident director and two graduate assistants who accompanied the students in each program.

Data Collection

Like many previous studies of study abroad programs, this study utilized ethnographic and case study approaches (Brecht and Robinson, 1993; Burnett & Gardner, 2006; Churchill,

2006; Fitch & Hooper, 1983; Jackson, 2006; Kinginger, 2008b; Norton Peirce, 2000; Siegal, 1995; Wilkinson 1998a; 1998b; 20000). Data were collected between March 2007 and August 2009, both during and after the program, using interviews, observations, written documents and e-mails. The goal was to gather participants' stories and academic, cultural and linguistic immersion experiences, their practices and interactions, perceptions and thoughts, challenges and critical moments.

Interviews. 50 hours of semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual case study students, with two focus groups, and with program instructors, the resident coordinators, and the home institution program directors. All participants were interviewed in person, by telephone, or using Skype at least once, and up to three times, during and after the conclusion of the program. At each initial interview, participants were given as much latitude as possible to tell their stories and share feelings, critical incidents, and experiences. During the second and third interviews, participants were asked to elaborate on their previous accounts. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded.

Observations and Field Notes. 30 hours of classes were observed with all class sections observed once or twice each semester. Class dynamics and discussions, teacher/student and student/student interactions, students' participation and reactions, subject matter, course materials, and language use were the focus of all observations. Students' interactions, attitudes, and experiences during more than 300 hours of daily activities and ten weekend field trips outside of formal instructional hours were also observed. Copious notes were taken during, and expanded following, each observation.

Written Documents and E-mails. 280 additional entries from students' logs, journals, pictures posted to Facebook, e-mail exchanges, course and program evaluations, students'

compositions and projects, the magazine *VALE* written by the American study abroad students in Valencia, and study abroad daily journals were also used in this study. Students were prompted to reflect upon their language and culture immersion experiences and write about their challenges, cross-cultural obstacles, and accomplishments, personal and academic issues, physical and psychological health and well-being, as well as attitudes, behaviors, and interactions at school, during out-of-class activities, and with the host families. E-mail conversations also allowed the author to collect and explore participants' feelings, attitudes, and reflections during and after the conclusion of the program.

Data analysis

The data for this project were analyzed inductively and recursively following suggested ethnographic case study approaches (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Line-by-line coding was used to focus on the emergent themes and participants' perspectives, and the audio-recorded interviews and their transcriptions were reviewed and compared. Drawing on socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), the following categories were created: 1) cultural artifacts -- participants' ways of thinking, behaving, feeling, expressing themselves, and how such activities shaped their understanding; 2) social interactions -- with whom did participants interact and how such interactions shaped their learning process; 3) learning -- opportunities for individual and collective learning; and 4) resourcefulness -- how pro-active participants were in learning and using the target language and learning about the culture. Codes, categories, themes, and key quotes were contrasted for each participant.

Results

A number of "rich points" (Agar, 1994) emerged from the data, including reports of cross-cultural conflicts, miscommunication, or misunderstanding at the intersection of two

cultures as well as accounts of strategies students developed to expand their opportunities to use the new language and to more successfully become integrated into the culture.

Obstacles to successful integration

Three compelling stories of clashes in cultural expectations and value systems emerged: Albert's¹ story addresses racial bias; Theresa's story shows how study abroad can be affected by a consumerist view of education; and Rebecca's story focuses on issues of gender.

Race

Albert was an African American student from a Spanish-speaking background whose father was Dominican. At the start of the study abroad experience, Albert manifested a strong predisposition to embrace the target language, culture, and society and showed determination to learn. However, although he expected to simply be absorbed into the host community, he experienced isolated episodes of racial discrimination and prejudice from a small number of local residents who appeared to have preconceived ideas about people of his race and viewed him at times with curiosity, superiority, suspicion, fear, or rejection. In an interview, Albert reported that he was called a "run-away slave," was asked for his documents by the police and, while on a plane, was insulted for having touched a passenger's white coat. While not typical of the majority of Albert's experiences, these isolated experiences caused Albert to feel like an outsider, unwelcomed and uncomfortable in the host community. Albert's perceptions of being discriminated against for his race reduced his willingness to participate in both individual and collective interactions with native speakers and in L2-mediated activities and effected his level of investment and academic engagement in the overall study abroad experience. Albert's assumption -- that all members of the host culture would share values and worldviews

¹ Pseudonyms replace the real name of all student participants in this article.

concerning racial and cultural diversity and acceptance that were similar to those he had experienced at home -- did not match those he encountered during his study abroad experience.

Consumerist View of Education

Theresa approached her experience abroad largely as an opportunity for extensive travel and behaved more frequently as a moneyed consumer than as a learner, both within and beyond the classroom. From this perspective, the out-of-class study abroad experience was construed by Theresa and other members of her cohort group as a contemporary version of the traditional Grand Tour. As evidenced by their Facebook pictures, accounts, and personal diaries, study abroad was considered to be a global “info-tainment” experience in which participants engaged in extensive travel both within Spain and across Europe and took every available opportunity to “shop the global cultural supermarket.”

Theresa’s consumerist view of education was also apparent in her approach to the classroom component of her study abroad. Her consumerist views, like those of other members of her cohort group, affected the ways in which she negotiated the academic component of study abroad. These students were competitive in class, seeking to obtain an A in order to maintain the required GPA and scholarship, and felt that they deserved high grades for completing assignments no matter what their actual class performance and language abilities were. Because she was incorrectly placed in a class that was too advanced for her level of Spanish, Theresa experienced discouragement and was increasingly disaffected with one of her Spanish professors abroad, Dr. Álvarez, whose critical comments reflected a teaching style to which she was not accustomed. In an interview Theresa stated: “I’m not learning anything. I want my money back!” In contrast, Dr. Álvarez viewed Theresa as a disengaged, uncommitted, and occasionally disrespectful student who was focused only on earning the credits for which she had paid rather

than improving her Spanish. Another study abroad Spanish professor admitted, with some frustration when writing in *VALE*, that American students “están obsesionados con tener una A” (*they are obsessed with getting an A in the course*).

Throughout her study abroad experience, Theresa failed to see this challenging class experience as an opportunity to explore cross-cultural differences in value systems and to investigate if, and how, cultural expectations, the role and status of the teacher, institutional interactions, dynamics, and responsibility are interpreted differently across cultures. She did not attempt to understand Dr. Álvarez’s viewpoint, motives, or the origin of their differences and did not consider the possibility that she had encountered a “rich point,” i.e., a clash in cultural values between the Spanish and American academic world, a conflictive situation deserving of more dispassionate investigation in which, for example, Theresa might have questioned her own responsibility and role.

Gender

At the beginning of the study abroad experience, Rebecca embraced the target language and culture and was eager to speak Spanish, meet people, make friends, fit in, and integrate into the target society. However, she experienced some instances of hostility toward Americans, including antagonism, resentment, distance and indifference, as well as several disturbing episodes of catcalling, harassment, and machismo toward American females. In an interview, Rebecca reported that she was sunbathing at the beach when a pre-teen approached her making sexual movements while his friends laughed. On another occasion, two boys spit on her and on her computer in a public square when she refused to engage in conversation with them. Rebecca also witnessed episodes of harassment involving other female students from her group.

Because of these occasional but powerful experiences, Rebecca became increasingly angry and uncomfortable both in general and within the host community, resulting in her total disinvestment in the target culture and in L2-mediated activities with native speakers. As a result, her affinity for, and affiliation with, her American ex-patriot friends increased. For Rebecca, the host family remained her main source of authentic engagement with the Spanish language and culture -- Rebecca stated that she had established connections within the host community “really just [with] the second family that we lived with.” In an interview after the conclusion of the program, she stated: “Part of me would love to go back and enjoy the beautiful country and the rich culture, but another part of me is still disgusted with many things that I learned and experienced while I was there.” Like Rebecca, seven female students described some men that they encountered as being “creepy,” “bold,” and “aggressive” and categorized these behaviors as “sexual harassment.”² However, five participants in this study, including both Spanish students at the university and people from the local community, stated in interviews that some American female students unintentionally seem to invite attention because of the way they behaved and dressed in public.

Commonalities

The accounts of these three students were selected both because similar experiences were mentioned by 12 other members of the 44-member study abroad cohort group and because these experiences exemplified a significant set of qualities and characteristics. Although the three examples address different issues and demonstrate the way in which individual social variables

² An existing literature documents that American female undergraduates are targets of foreign men in Russia (Polanyi, 1995), Argentina (Isabelli-García, 2006), France (Kline, 1998), Spain (Talbert & Stewart, 1999), and Costa Rica (Twombly, 1995).

impacted learners' experiences, they are, in other ways, very similar to each other and to experiences reported by nearly all members of the study abroad group. Specifically, students...

- expected the host culture to be similar to the home culture;
- maintained an ethnocentric perspective (a position of national superiority) with respect to the host culture and interpreted events and situations from this perspective; and
- took refuge in their American cohort group.

As a result, these students did not truly engage with members of the host community, use L2 in sustained ways beyond the classroom, or become immersed in the culture. In sum, they did not become part of a Spanish-speaking community of practice (Wenger, 1998) or benefit from guided cultural exploration (Engle and Engle, 2004, 2003. 1999).

Stories of successful integration

In contrast, the data also showed that some students purposefully employed a variety of strategies through which they were able to successfully become integrated into the host culture during the study abroad experience, including: 1) developing friendships with native-speakers of Spanish; 2) pursuing leisure activities; 3) participating in volunteer work and service learning; and 4) making sustained connections with members of the host family.

Friendship Relationships

In the five cohort groups examined in this study, at least three male and thirteen females reported having developed strong friendships with members of the local community. These relationships took the form of Spanish-speaking boyfriends, girlfriends or close friends, and through them, students entered into a wide network of Spanish-speaking contacts. Students noted three distinct benefits from their efforts to develop and sustain significant relationships with friends.

Extended use of language in a comfortable setting. Friendship relationships allowed conversation partners opportunities for sustained contact, constant practice, and extensive exposure to multiple manifestations of the target language and culture, including various forms of oral/aural as well as visual/written expression in L2. Participants residing in Valencia, Spain often socialized, mostly in Spanish or *Spanglish*, with Spanish, Central American, and international students in the cafeteria during meals and at a local bar close to the residence hall where students and young people from the community would mingle.

Maggie, Nelly, and Becky described the impact of having a Spanish-speaking boyfriend. These strong friendships created a low-anxiety learning environment where both partners played the role of private instructors, as indicated by Maggie's words:

My life was very relaxed [...] it is just such a comfortable way to learn things. [...] that was how our relationship worked. It was based around him teaching me things about Spain [...] He also enjoyed that because he wanted to learn about American culture.

Maggie added: "You spend so much time with that person [...] So just by hearing him talk like so many little words like little grammar things that you should use on a regular basis." Nelly also commented on the benefits of having a close Spanish-speaking friend, saying "I think it just presented more opportunities because... we would like go on a trip together" and spoke Spanish all of the time. Similarly, Becky stated: "He does help me to learn some cultural things like... cultural differences and some of the colloquialisms [...], and of course, there is bad language [...] that they use all the time."

In addition to providing more frequent and meaningful opportunities to communicate in Spanish, Maggie also mentioned changes in her body language and gestures:

I found myself picking up on some body language because I would mimic people I talked to for a long period of time. For example, when I shook my head *No*, I started to make a ticking sound with my tongue and teeth because one of my good friends, who is Spanish, did that all the time.

Similarly, the desire to master the language and to learn about another culture through friends affected students' identity and positioning. Being with a local person helped students to reduce their hyper-visibility and feeling of otherness, to appear less conspicuous, to blend in, and to "pass" as a native (Piller, 2002). Maggie stated:

One of the main reasons I came to Spain was to try and fit in with the people and adapt my identity to its culture. Being with him helped me out with this because I learned more about how people interact together in friendships and other relationships. I noticed this one time when I went out with him to a pro tennis match. We met some people that were new to both him and me. I, of course, did not say very much, but the people we met did not treat me like I was a foreigner. In other situations in Spain where I met new people, my being American was always what they noticed first.

Access to a large network of Spanish speakers. Students' degree of cultural and linguistic immersion abroad depended on how resourceful and agentive they were in their pursuit of opportunities to learn from locals, in their active participation in L2-mediated activities, and in their disengagement from L1-mediated events. Scott was particularly successful at separating himself from the cohort group and surrounding himself by local friends:

It's not that I didn't care about the Americans, but I live with them. And you know, I already spend plenty of time with them except, for me, I value her relationship [[a Central American student living in the residence hall]] more than the others' for that time period because that, I mean, from a selfish stand point, I had more to gain from it. All the Americans provide me with is more of the same, but for her, I was getting an opportunity to, you know, branch in her network of friends, see that festival [[Fallas]]³ through their eyes and, you know, to me, I was excited about that opportunity.

Becky also pointed out that going out with a local man afforded her the opportunity to access a larger network of potential friends: "I was able to meet more people after meeting Paco because you meet him and you also meet his friends whenever you go out with him... and his family."

Similarly, through her boyfriend, Maggie was able to participate in L2-mediated activities in

³ *Fallas* is a festive street celebration taking place in Valencia during the second or third week of March, attracting people from all over Spain and Europe.

authentic situations and to satisfy the desire to become a legitimate member of the host community:

When we all met up as a group, I felt included in his social circle [...] So when I was with his friends and we were in a big group, we would maybe, like, go out to dinner and then go to the other side of town that everybody knew of [...] it was just easier to actually feel like you're friend of theirs.

Likewise, Allison, who made friends within and beyond the confines of the residence hall, explained:

I went to Bette's house, her family's house. I met her parents and her sister [...] it's just south of Valencia. Her sister would come up [[to Valencia]] on some weekends and go out with us so I got to know her. I learned through her and another one of her friends who would come on the weekends, so there were, three other girls I met them through Bette and... and we all would just go out together.

Insider's opportunity to belong to and look at the culture. Thanks to having a close and special friend, Maggie was able to participate in all of the normal activities of daily living using the new language. She lived and experienced the "real" Spanish culture and people first hand. Instead of being a spectator, Maggie's role was one of spect-actor, particularly since, at times, she did not have to say or do much but could simply listen:

You are not forced; you don't have to do anything; you're having a good time naturally with a person that you really get along with. [...] We spent a lot of time doing normal things people do in life like watching TV, reading, going out to restaurants that are not touristy, going to the movies, going to bars in neighborhoods outside of downtown Valencia [...]. With him I was able to get a glimpse at the life he leads, which is that of a normal Spanish person.

In addition, Maggie noted that she had acquired an insider's look into everyday routines and was able to see how a native speaker lived, what he thought, and what he liked:

I was able to get an insider's view on the culture. There are still things I don't understand and maybe never will. But I see it as more real than I saw it before. Before, the culture was just an idea that I read about, watched movies about, and talked about. But now, I actually feel like it is tangible. That may sound naïve, but being as involved as I was with him made the culture and society really come to life.

Like Maggie, Nelly travelled within Spain with her Spanish boyfriend and had the privilege of visiting places that are not frequently visited by tourists, as well as experiencing cultural practices, attractions, and activities that were different from typical vacation or tourism experiences:

That's where we stayed and it was gorgeous; it was beautiful, but it was very, secluded and so it's not something that I would have just found if I would have been with my girlfriends, I mean, we found this place because he knew the area and he had connections and so ..., and that was really great because we saw the other side of the city [...]. You are seeing different parts of a country but you are seeing it from, like ..., a local's point of view.

In sum, the data reported above show that significant connections to the Spanish culture, language, and people were made through a variety of casual as well as deeper and/or more romantic friendships, although the depth of exposure to the local culture appeared to be less intense in simple friendship relationships compared to boy/girlfriend relationships, as noted by Miriam: "Even though I was friends with them, it doesn't mean that I spent all my time with them. I was still with my American friends."

Hobbies and Personal Interests

Among the 44 students from the five groups represented in this study, one male and four females stood out for actively pursuing their passions, interests, and pastimes in a new and exciting way with members of the local community. Through these activities, students established strong ties with Spanish-speaking friends, which generated a significant level of satisfaction and accomplishment and benefited students both personally and academically.

Soccer was the ultimate bridge to cultural and linguistic immersion for Lilly, who joined the female soccer team of the university dorm where she was living in Valencia and participated in league games. In a blog, she explained how her passion for soccer and her strong abilities and

performance allowed her to access a deep and extended network of local friends and to be very well accepted and admired among them:

Yes, I play with the team of girls here... After games, we go hang out at a bar together, and the whole time we are together, I speak Spanish, so it is fun to be just with Spanish girls. I have become good friends with a couple of them and might even go to one of the girls' home towns for her birthday. It is easily the best part of trip, immersion wise. I love that sports are such an international language; it is an easy ice breaker. To be honest, I think because I am a better player, it is easier for us to interact because they wanted me to play before they got to know me, and then it just got better when we enjoyed each other's personalities. It's fun to just talk about basic life things and compare family life and school life. I am really thankful to be able to play on this team with these cool girls.

Being respected and sought after as an athlete had a very powerful impact of this student's ability to integrate into the local culture and community.

Similarly, dance played a critical role in Selena's integration in Valencia, where she took a flamenco dance class and became very popular among a group of Central American students staying in the same residence hall who would regularly go salsa dancing. Selena wrote:

I did meet many people through my salsa friends. Therefore, every time I went dancing, I saw someone I knew and could speak to them. It was good to practice my Spanish, not just in the classroom, but also while being out on my free time.

I did not have a relationship abroad, but I did have a male friend that I spent time with and went salsa dancing with. Spending time with him helped me learn more because he did not speak English; therefore, we only spoke in Spanish. Not only him, but others I met while going salsa dancing, also helped me with my communication skills in Spanish. It was a good way to observe the different minority groups (Latinos) in Spain. They keep their traditions, listen to their own music and dance their traditional dances.

Scott, together with Leslie and Emma, participated in various activities and excursions and met people of all ages and backgrounds through a religious organization that was affiliated with Leslie's church in the United States and with which she had established contact before departure. Scott, Leslie, and Emma joined this community in Valencia for Bible study in Spanish once a week, as Leslie explained:

I have Bible studies on Thursday and nobody in my group speaks English. No one. No one in the group speaks English. So, if I don't understand, I ask them what it is; they explain it in Spanish and so I kinda get, like a double episode, because, if somebody knows English, they will explain it to you, you know, [the] first thing that comes out of their mouth is English. But for me, it is better if they explain it in Spanish and so they will explain words to me in Spanish or give me a synonym in Spanish.

In summary, the students described above showed a high degree of agency and initiative in creating opportunities to become immersed into the social fabric of life in Spain, both by making connections prior to departure and by reaching out to groups with similar interests during the time abroad. While abroad, they were also able to define their identities and positions as athlete, dancer, and religious/spiritual community members in new and unexpected ways.

Volunteer and Service-Learning Experiences

Volunteer and service-learning experiences also offered significant and sustained opportunities for students to develop language proficiency and deeper cultural knowledge during study abroad. Thanks to his friendship with Eva, a Central American friend from the residence hall, Albert participated in volunteer work at a non-profit organization in Valencia where ESL, computer, dance, pilates, and yoga classes, guitar lessons, basketball and other activities were offered to members of the local community and volunteers were available to help supervise and teach. In an interview, Albert noted:

She [[Eva]] teaches to older people and immigrants and they do have somebody teaching English and the lady... who directs everything, she asked me if I wouldn't want to teach English. But I definitely want to go and just converse with the people.

Similarly, Sofia had the opportunity to teach Spanish, which she described as the best way to learn the language herself while abroad:

Iris presentó una oportunidad de voluntarios y yo quiero hacer eso porque uhm necesito hablar español... y apren- enseñar español... uhm si una persona puede enseñar una un idioma uhm es la manera más fácil para aprender el idioma.

Iris, [[the study abroad coordinator]] presented the opportunity of doing volunteer work and I want to do it because uhm I need to speak Spanish... and to teach Spanish... uhm if you can teach a language uhm it is the easiest way to learn that language.⁴

Sofia and Albert sensed that, while serving others, their work for the local community also provided an effective way of enhancing their study abroad experience and supporting their academic and personal success using Spanish for real purposes.

Connections to the Host Family

Students shared memorable experiences with their host families who, in many cases, provided the most consistent embodiment of the culture and who were an inexhaustible source of language practice, pertinent information and support. Nine students reported having established durable contacts with their host families. Nuria, a woman from Cádiz who hosted female students from this study abroad program, stated that she treated the students as her own children and shared meals and extended discussions with them, a finding that was further documented when the family of one of her American students (Isabel) offered to purchase Nuria's plane ticket to the United States so as to personally return Nuria's hospitality, empathy, and generosity to their daughter during her sojourn in Cádiz. Patricia, another host mother from Cádiz, shared pictures that she had received from American students who had previously stayed with her and described the birthday party that she hosted for one of her American students and his close friends from the study abroad cohort group. Similarly, Mary-Jane described how close she became with her host family in Sevilla:

I enjoyed my family a lot; they are really young; they are really funny. And kind of sweet talking... and the mom's always making jokes and the dad's he was the most talkative guy I've ever talked to. And uh, he is cool; the kids are like really cute. I like Vivian [[the Spanish daughter]]. We are really close.

⁴ The English translation is the author's.

Adam also reported feeling very connected with his Spanish family in Sevilla and frequently reported engaging in genuine dialogue with them, as described below:

I was eating with the family... and talk[ing] with her [[host mother]]. She is extremely congenial. She feeds us and she hangs and talks to us, like “What about your day? What do you want to do?” You know... “What you think about this [...]?” [She was] just a very incredibly, incredibly sweet lady... always above and beyond. The food was amazing [...]. She always made it a point to kind of connect with me and talk to me [...] so I plan on keeping up with her the best I can [...].

Additionally, a former study abroad student, Kelly, was invited to the pre-departure orientation meeting for future study abroad students and their families in order to discuss the ways in which she kept in touch with her host family in Cádiz by sharing pictures, sending e-mail, and via social media.

As shown in these examples, many Spanish host families were very generous in spending quality time with their guest students; they went out of their way to ensure that the students staying with them felt comfortable and had a rich and memorable experience. In this way, the Spanish host families played a critical role in enriching students’ cultural and linguistic immersion and assuring their comfort, physical safety and emotional happiness.

Commonalities

The data reported above illustrate the extent to which the study abroad experience can be immersive, intensive, and engaging, particularly when students are agentive in creating points of connection with other speakers of the language beyond the confines of the traditional classroom. By developing friendship relationships, participating in activities of personal interest, giving back to the local community through volunteer work and service learning, and making the most of the safe and supportive environment offered by their host families, these study abroad students created extended opportunities to practice the language, experience the culture, and enjoy global citizenship.

Discussion

The Vygotskian perspective (1978) explains that learning is a social process, that interaction with others is a critical element that impacts individual learning, and that interaction with a more knowledgeable guide supports learners' progress toward deeper and more sophisticated levels of knowledge and skill. Who we choose to interact with will determine what, and how, we learn. From this perspective, it is clear that some students were able to create learning opportunities within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) with native speakers of Spanish, and thus had more sustained, effective, and memorable opportunities to learn about and experience Spanish languaculture (Agar, 1994). This finding further substantiates the important role of interaction and language socialization during study abroad (Dufon and Churchill, 2006; Jackson, 2006; and Byram and Feng, 2006).

Students' differing degrees of "language desire" (Piller & Takahashi, 2006) may explain the mixed feelings and experiences reported in this study (see also Hoffman, 1989; Kaplan, 1993; Piller, 2008). In addition to longing for another personal or cultural identity abroad and seeking to master another language, participants in study abroad programs bring different levels of desire for integration into the new culture, as demonstrated by their willingness to engage in the culture, seek access to interactional partners in the target language, seek to become accepted as legitimate members within the host community, and participate in authentic L2-mediated activities. As explained by Wenger (1998), building relationships with locals, establishing friendships, and participating in service or leisure activities within a local community of practice remain the most direct and successful strategies for creating a rich, authentic, meaningful, and effective cultural and linguistic experiences.

Other dynamics of language desire that are pertinent to the students in this study are discussed by Lukes (1974), who introduced the notion that individuals' desires may work against them: individuals' "wants may themselves be a product of a system which works against their interests" (p. 34). Piller and Takahashi (2006) also explored how learners may struggle to fulfill their dreams, develop resentment or depression, give up on their intents and efforts to learn the new language, and take refuge in their native culture's values. This may have been true for Albert and Rebecca, who experienced unexpected and dramatic changes in their desire to learn the language and become integrated into the culture while abroad. Their initial enthusiasm, anticipation, and joyful apprehension evolved into gradual disappointment, anger, and frustration due to occasional and short-lived but very powerful negative experiences with a small subset of the native speakers whom they encountered. Rebecca and Albert struggled to turn such challenging experiences into opportunities for learning (Kinging, 2010b), and these difficulties severely limited their willingness to access social networks and reduced their contacts with native speakers to short conversations and routine interactions.

Also relevant to understanding students' study abroad experiences are Bourdieu's notions of cultural capital (1977) (knowledge, abilities, education, and advantages which we receive while growing up and which give us a certain status in society) and social capital (actual or potential resources deriving from group membership, relationships, networks of influence and support). By cultivating relationships with Spanish-speaking friends, pursuing activities of personal interest, and making deep connections through service learning or with a host family, some students were able to transform their cultural capital into instrumental relations, or social capital. Interestingly, the socialization experiences of four students (Leslie, Scott, Albert, and Selena) into the small sub-group of Central American friends in Valencia suggests that local

community members may not have recognized the cultural and social capital available through study abroad students and thus did not seek out international students to befriend, particularly when international students participate in programs of study that last as few as seven weeks or a single semester. In this way, the study abroad student's experience is somewhat comparable to the experience of ethnographers in a new cultural setting who may initially be befriended by those who are culturally marginalized within their own society.

In addition, it is important to recognize that all study abroad students may not have the motivation or the fundamental background experiences or personal and interpersonal skills to be agentive (Vygotsky, 1978) and invested (Norton Peirce, 2000; 1995) in their learning while abroad; that is, they may lack the knowledge, skills, and strategies that are needed to create learning opportunities, make friends, and establish durable contacts with locals. Even within the walls of the residence hall, Albert, for example, found it intimidating at times to immerse himself in the crowd in the cafeteria at lunch and sit at a busy table with other local students:

At lunch, eating at lunch, is probably the best example [[of cultural immersion]] 'cause you feel like ... you are in elementary school looking for somebody to sit with and sometimes you are nervous and it is scary, even though others might be experiencing the same thing. But you go and you get to talk to people with different beliefs, different languages.

Implications

Because study abroad offers important learning opportunities that remain unmatched and unavailable in students' home countries, the challenges that students face abroad must be better understood and a comprehensive picture of how full immersion and student learning can be maximized must be developed. Particularly prior to departure, engaging and involving students so as to create in participants a strong and genuine commitment to serious, profound, and durable

investment in the target language, people and culture is essential. Several aspects of students' pre-departure preparation might be considered.

Personal preparation

Steps could be taken to better understand students' personality traits, proficiency levels, expectations, and future plans and, using this knowledge, to help students to better understand their experiences abroad. Also of importance are the cultural resources and artifacts (Vygotsky, 1978) that students inherit and use to make sense of their experiences as well as the ways in which race, ethnicity, gender, age, and socio-economic factors may affect the nature of students' experiences, perceptions and perspectives. In this way, program coordinators can help students to identify their personal values and histories and to reconcile them with the values and experiences that they will encounter in another cultural context. Thus, students will be better prepared to analyze the critical incidents experienced abroad within the context and from the perspectives of the target society instead of taking by default their home culture as the parameter of comparison (Savicki, 2008).

Linguistic preparation

Prior to departure, it is critical that students be prepared to carry out common tasks by role-playing a variety of daily-life situations, including possibly difficult situations like losing one's phone or luggage or dealing with a sudden illness, communicating with host families regarding dietary needs, schedules, or responsibilities, and interacting with members of the local community. It would also be appropriate to provide instruction on regionally-specific vocabulary and expressions, common phrases, and general expressions of courtesy and politeness.

Cultural preparation

Participation in discussion groups and courses in cross-cultural awareness and intercultural communication could be required in order to provide scaffolding for the experience. Such scaffolding should teach students to understand and access two critical dimensions of culture that Moran (2001) calls “Communities” and “Persons,” so that students can establish durable and meaningful contacts with the host culture and community and develop an appreciation for diversity through language (Kinging, 2008a), empathetic knowledge, global civic engagement and global citizenship. Similarly, through intensive and extensive reading of relevant literature on intercultural competence, students can be prepared to link direct experience with abstract understanding and thus “enrich and extend authentic cultural experience through reflection, personal articulation, and practical advice” (Engle & Engle 1999, p. 46). The use of ethnographic projects using host country newspapers, radio and television broadcasts, films, and other appropriate websites and resources, cross-cultural readings, reflection exercises on current events, and discussion activities designed to help students learn and apply a cultural framework that focuses on the practices, products, and perspectives of culture may help to prepare students for their sojourn abroad and to maximize their learning process and chances of success (Kinging, 2010b; Paige et al., 2002a; 2002b). An extended discussion of the differences between ‘high culture’ and ‘popular culture’ could help students to further understand the situations they will encounter. As shown in this study, both the sustained, as well as the isolated and short-lived but very powerful, experience of the invisible culture provided the most formative positive and challenging experiences for the students in the cohort groups under consideration.

Preparation for engagement

Dominant discourses circulating among American college students that study abroad offers weak academic programming or is a vacation experience (Gore, 2005) in which students take the role of transient observers cannot be allowed to prevail. Instead, students could be encouraged -- or even required-- to establish contacts within the local community through service learning or sustained opportunities to pursue a hobby or area of personal interest, thus ensuring that they become involved in L2-mediated activities with target language speakers. Requiring more structured durable contacts also provides the framework through which students could be held accountable their level of engagement with the members of the host culture and could be assessed on their developing language proficiency. Initiating correspondence prior to departure with members of the host culture, including the host family or members of a local club, service organization or interest group, and thus setting the stage for cultivating friendships while abroad, may offer essential, pre-planned and required points of contact through which students can more easily and comfortably become engaged in the local community.

Conclusion

Study abroad allows students to explore new spaces, challenge themselves and their preconceived ideas, observe other people's practices with curiosity, and suspend judgment for the sake of learning without being afraid to encounter differences in traditions and unfamiliar values and customs. As argued by Kinginger (2008a, 2010a), study abroad students are at risk of failing to engage with the host nation as well as failing to realize how ignorant they are of its culture. In response to this situation, Kinginger proposed an activist approach to study abroad and language learning: "As educators, we need to upgrade our ability to argue in favor of meaningful study abroad experiences explicitly, including an emphasis on language learning as

negotiation of difference” (p. 2008a), in other words, the ability to understand, appreciate, and value the practices and perspectives of others through language learning.

This article presented accounts of students’ successful immersion experiences within the host community as well as significant episodes of cultural clash and misunderstanding experienced at the intersection of two cultures. Both types of experiences affected the degree and nature of participants’ cultural and linguistic immersion. Based on these findings, it is argued that study abroad programs like the ones examined here cannot claim full cultural or linguistic immersion as a realistic goal for all participants. As illustrated above, for some students, participation in these programs served primarily in an introductory capacity that facilitated a first encounter with the host community, allowed for guided exploration of the foreign culture and society, and offered an academic component as well as opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. In contrast, for other students, sustained interactions with members of the host community were frequent and provided important linguistic experiences, allowed for sustained intercultural participation and dialogue, and helped students to develop and refine their understanding of cultural practices, products, and perspectives. In preparing students for what can, and should, be powerful, transformative experiences, study abroad program directors, course coordinators, and instructors could take the roles of facilitators, guides, and coaches who assist students before, during and after the study abroad experience in developing increased levels of language proficiency and in acquiring knowledge and awareness of, as well as sensitivity and empathy toward, both the home and host cultures.

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