Chapter 1

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.

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INTRODUCTION

One’s destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things. —Henry Miller

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.

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
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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.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A number of theoretical lenses and models inform the hypotheses of this study, which seek to determine the extent to which participation in a study abroad experience enhances student engagement and increases gains in L2 proficiency when compared to students who do not study abroad. Given the emphasis on immersion in the foreign country, Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) is an important underlying facet of the association between a student’s experiences learning in a foreign setting and their subsequent gains in L2 proficiency. Kolb’s (1984) model consists of four elements: (1) concrete experiences; (2) observations and reflections; (3) formation of abstract concepts; and (4) testing of those concepts in new situations. These four facets comprise a circular experiential learning cycle, beginning with concrete experiences and transitioning through the remaining stages, a cycle that is reiterated many times over throughout a student’s educational career (Smith, 2010). The immersive experience of studying abroad represents the concrete experience phase, wherein students confront a new language and unfamiliar culture that require reflection, internal conceptualization, and testing in order to contribute to gains in language competency and fluency in sociocultural skills.
A second and related theoretical framework is Astin’s (1985) Development Theory of Student Involvement, which describes implications for desirable outcomes in student learning and achievement, including graduation and retention. The three core components of Astin’s theory include: (1) inputs (student demographics, background, and prior experience); (2) environment (educational atmosphere and experience); and (3) outcomes (student knowledge, attitudes, and values). Most crucial to the study abroad experience, however, are the five postulates pertaining to a student’s level of involvement: (a) investment of physical and psychosocial efforts; (b) continuity of effort; (c) qualitative and quantitative forms of involvement; (d) direct proportionality between gains and level of effort; and (e) correlation between academic performance and level of involvement (Astin, 1999).

As an immersive and integrative experience, studying abroad demands heightened levels of student involvement, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in order for the student to survive and prosper in the unfamiliar linguistic and cultural contexts. Accordingly, students who study abroad and who exert high levels of effort in order to maintain involvement in adapting to the target culture and language are likely to report higher levels of academic and personal engagement during their experience, which translates to greater gains in standard academic outcomes such as persistence and completion upon return to the home campus.

PRIOR RESEARCH AND LITERATURE

Study Abroad Learning Outcomes

Sutton, Miller, and Rubin (2007) present a matrix for classifying the variety of outcomes examined in research on study abroad. Significantly, they distinguish learning outcomes from other psychological outcomes, such as measures of student satisfaction or gains in student psychosocial development. In particular, assessing student learning outcomes has become the linchpin of rational curriculum planning and resource allocation in HE (Allan, 1996). While strong empirical evidence supports the notion that studying abroad boosts psychosocial traits such as self-actualization and self-efficacy (e.g., Milstein, 2005), evidence of the impact on learning and academic outcomes has remained relatively unexplored until recent developments.

Sutton and colleagues (2007) list three distinctive types of true learning outcomes that may be elucidated by research on education abroad: (1) knowledge and skills (e.g., language proficiency); (2) attitudes toward elements of global citizenship (see Tarrant, 2010); and (3) life choices (e.g., career paths). With respect to learning outcomes, a number of recent studies provide evidence that studying abroad is associated with traditional institutional indicators of learning and attainment such
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as student retention, time-to-degree, institutional GPA, and college completion rates (Hamir, 2011; Xu, de Silva, Neufeldt, & Dane, 2014). Such positive learning outcomes are especially pronounced among minority students and students with risk factors associated with poor academic performance, and these findings hold for both 4-year college and community college populations (Rubin et al., 2014). In general, high impact, engaging activities such as study abroad programs tend to exert especially potent effects on college completion for minority and at-risk students (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008).

Study Abroad and World Language Learning

Research that analyzes the similarities and differences in the outcomes of student world language learning in domestic classroom settings with those that incorporate some degree of immersion in the target culture context generally confirms that the study abroad experience enhances linguistic skills and competencies, particularly speaking and listening in the Target Language (TL) (Freed, 1998). This finding is predicated on the theories of integration and immersion, which postulate that students who are consistently surrounded by unfamiliar environments and must therefore function within the host culture and TL, are more able to adapt to the new environment and to acquire the linguistic and psychosocial skills necessary for social and cultural integration (Polanyi, 1995; Ryan & Lafford, 1992).

Early research pertaining to study abroad and language learning relied upon student test scores on standardized examinations and surveys designed to document the linguistic gains associated with study abroad (e.g., Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1995). Subsequent and follow-up studies have incorporated multi-dimensional, multi-institutional, and multi-year approaches to analyze the differences between domestic and abroad language learners; other projects focused on aspects of language acquisition among students in a specific language setting (e.g., Vande Berg et al., 2009).

A more recent line of research questions whether all study abroad experiences are equally immersive, and therefore, equally efficient in enhancing proficiency and the development of functional linguistic skills in the study of world languages (see Goldoni, 2013). A study by Dewey, Bown, and Eggett (2012) found that nearly half of the variance in self-reported gains in speaking proficiency among Japanese language learners was contingent upon a relatively small number of factors: pre-departure language proficiency, duration of the study abroad program, and frequency of interaction with host nationals and native language speakers.

A study from Dewey, Belnap, and Hillstrom (2013) on language acquisition among Arabic language learners similarly attributes proficiency gains to the time student-participants spent interacting with native speakers of the TL. While even
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immersion via homestay in a TL household does not guarantee superior language learning outcomes (Rivers, 1998), short-term ‘island’ or self-contained programs that offer few opportunities for unstructured socialization and interaction in the TL would not be expected to yield strong gains in proficiency. Importantly, both of these studies on world language acquisition utilized a self-reported measure of functionality in spoken language, which queries students about their ability to achieve specific communication objectives. We have modified and adopted that measure in the present study.

Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes

Even with relatively infrequent interaction with native speakers in the target culture—as is typical in the most common forms of short-duration faculty-led programs—it is possible that studying abroad offers an experience that is so thoroughly engaging to students that it nonetheless leads to strong gains in world language learning. The theoretic connection between engagement and learning outcomes associated with study abroad resides in constructs such as ELT (Kolb, 1984) and Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984), both of which posit that students acquire and consolidate new material when they are challenged to articulate knowledge, synthesize concepts and ideas, and solve open-ended practical problems. Study abroad is commonly cited as one high-impact activity that contributes to and can enhance student engagement and deep-learning (Kuh, 2008).

In one large research study, study abroad participants reported greater increases in integrative and reflective deep-learning relative to their on-campus peers (Gonyea, 2008), and these gains persisted across students’ college careers. One multi-institutional study showed statistically significant but mostly weak associations between/among several types of student engagement and self-rated growth in world language competency and intercultural knowledge (Stebleton, Soria, & Cherney, 2013). However, the self-reported measure of language proficiency in that study consisted of just a single measurement item, and the design was not structured as a true pre- and post-test comparison. The present study—deploying more robust measurement and a stronger design—thus postulates student engagement in deep-learning as the mechanism that may be responsible for enhanced world language learning in short-term study abroad experiences.

Self-Reports of Language Functionality

The use of self-reported measures of TL functionality, while suffering some obvious disadvantages, nonetheless offers an opportunity to measure both performance-related and development-related gains from the personal perspective of the student-
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participants. The measure of language functionality fits within the domain of language pragmatics learning, given that L2 students have the opportunity to engage in the pragmatic behavior of native speakers of a TL (Cohen & Shively, 2007). Pragmatic competence is thus conceived as the ability of L2 learners to communicate their own intentions and understand the intentions of others appropriately (Taguchi, 2008).

While some researchers have questioned the accuracy of self-assessments of proficiency in a specific skill set such as pronunciation or verb declension, self-reports enjoy several advantages, including the elimination of cheating and savings in time and cost (LeBlanc & Painchaud, 1985; Strong-Klause, 2000). Also, self-report of L2 functionality using ‘can-do’ statements has been found to be relatively accurate (Blanche & Merino, 1989). Furthermore, reports of success in concrete communication tasks ‘i.e., measures of language functionality’, may reflect at least students’ sense of efficacy in the TL (Dewey, Belnap, & Hillstrom, 2013). Certainly, researchers must remain vigilant of the possibility that student self-reports are merely whimsical. The use of a pre- and post-test design in the present study helps control against intentional bias by comparing self-reported outcomes with pre-test self-reports.

RESEARCH METHOD

Hypotheses

Three main hypotheses guide this study’s method and subsequent interpretations of results, and aim to capture the dynamic interaction among study abroad experiences, deep-learning, engagement, and student outcomes in language functionality:

1. Compared to students who study world languages on-campus for a similar duration, students studying world languages abroad will evince larger gains in self-reported language functionality.

2. Controlling for pre-study abroad self-reported engagement in deep-learning, studying world languages abroad exerts a greater impact on student engagement in deep-learning, compared to the impact of studying world languages for a similar duration on-campus.

3. Controlling for self-reported language functionality at pre-test, the impact of world language learning site location (abroad versus on-campus) on self-reported language functionality is moderated by student engagement in deep-learning practices. The world language learning site location also exerts a direct, but smaller impact on the language learning outcome.
Participants

Data for this analysis are a component of a larger project entitled ‘Student Learning Outcomes and Global Programs’ examining the association between student participation in study abroad and subsequent changes in linguistic and psychosocial capacities (see Tarrant, 2010; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014). The project was designed to measure the changes in students’ global perspectives, self-reported deep-learning, and environmental sustainability awareness as the result of participation in a short-term (four weeks or fewer) faculty-led study abroad program or enrollment in a short-term Summer course on-campus. The larger sample from which the present data were drawn was collected in the Summer of 2013, and included 21 study abroad programs and 12 on-campus classes at a comprehensive university in the Southeastern US. Among the total sample of 605 students, 76 (12.6%) studied a world language, 46 (60.5%) in a non-Anglophone country and 30 (39.5%) in a domestic classroom setting. Thirty-one of the students (40.8%) were male and 45 (59.2%) were female, three (3.9%) were 1st-Year students, 26 (34.2%) were 2nd-Year students, 28 (36.8%) were 3rd-Year students, 18 (23.7%) were 4th-Year students, and one (1.3%) was a graduate student. Table 1 reports frequencies of relevant student characteristics.

Procedures

Students completed the pre-test questionnaires on the first or second day of class, both in the on-campus classes and in the classes abroad. To maximize the response rate, the questionnaire was administered in-person and in hard copy form. All students attending class during questionnaire administration agreed to participate and complete the pre- and post-test questionnaires. Post-test questionnaires were similarly administered in hard copy and in-person during the last two or three days of class, both in the on-campus classes and in the classes abroad.

Measures

The primary dependent variable of interest in this study is a self-reported measure of functional spoken language proficiency. This measure focuses specifically on speaking proficiency in particular, given that oral communication in a world language is the goal of most study abroad programs and many international education policies are designed to develop an internationally-informed and democratic citizenry (Lincoln Commission, 2005). This measure is an adaptation of Dewey’s Then-Now Proficiency Scale, which asks students to self-assess language functionality prior
### Table 1. World language learner demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>World Language On-Campus</th>
<th>World Language Abroad</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>Architecture Major</td>
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to and following an experience in a study abroad program or an on-campus course (Dewey et al., 2012; Dewey et al., 2013).

For the purpose of the present study, we asked students to respond only in terms of their current language functionality, but we asked the questions at two points in time. Items for this instrument derive from an oft-used scale developed for the Educational Testing Service (Clark, 1981; see also Allen & Herron, 2003), and include additional items reflecting oral communication standards adopted by the American Council for Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The resulting 21-item scale reflects oral communication functions that students can accomplish in the TL e.g., ‘Describe college life to another person in detail’ or ‘Speak without producing errors that may disturb or distract a native listener’ or ‘State and support with examples opinions about controversial topics’. Survey takers rate their ability to accomplish specific functions on a five-step scale ranging from ‘not at all’ (1) to ‘quite easily’ (5). The internal consistence reliability (Cronbach’s α) of the language functionality scale in this study was 0.96 both at pre-test and at post-test, indicating an internally reliable assessment. The theoretical range for scores if students responded to all questions was between 21 and 105 points.

In the present study, the hypothesized pathway for the influence of study abroad on language learning is through student engagement in deep-learning activities. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh, 2008), has been adopted at more than 1,500 US institutions and yielded data from over 4.5 million college students (Kinzie, Cogswell, & Wheatle, 2015). At the core of the NSSE survey tool are 15-items that comprise the deep-learning scale (Nelson Laird, Shoup & Kuh, 2005; Nelson Laird et al., 2008). The items asked students to self-assess engagement in learning activities designed to promote reflective (e.g., ‘Learned something from discussing questions that have no clear answers’), higher-order (e.g., ‘Made judgments about the value of information arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions’), and integrative (e.g., ‘Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class’) learning. Survey takers rate each deep-learning activity on four-interval scales ranging from ‘never’/‘very little’ (1) to ‘very often’/‘very much’ (4). The internal consistence reliability (Cronbach’s α) of the deep-learning scale in the present study was 0.874 at pre-test and 0.919 at post-test. The theoretical range of scores for students completing all of the questions was between 15-60.

Analysis

To test Hypothesis 1 (RQ1), a 2 (pre-test versus post-test) x 2 (abroad versus on-campus) mixed factorial ANOVA was run for the dependent variable of functional
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language proficiency. Post hoc pair-wise comparisons using Bonferroni t-tests were run to assess non-orthogonal contrasts of interest in the interaction between time of testing and site of instruction (preserving a family-wise error rate <0.05). The same contrasts were run for the time of testing x learning site interaction involving the dependent measure of engagement in deep-learning to assess Hypothesis 2 (RQ2).

Hypothesis 3 was assessed by means of a path model. The model specified a direct and positive link from self-reported student engagement to self-reported world language functionality. Student engagement in deep-learning, in turn, was hypothesized to be positively affected by studying abroad (as opposed to the dichotomous alternative, studying on-campus). The model also anticipated the existence of a somewhat weaker, but still positive path directly from participation in study abroad to self-reported language functionality. This hypothesized direct link may be attributable to a small degree of cultural immersion accruing from the short-term programs conducted in non-Anglophone countries in which the sample students participated. Finally, the model included the exogenous effect of the student’s self-reported functionality in the target world language at the start of the term, prior to the study abroad experience (pre-test). The inclusion of the pre-test functionality score in the model enabled better isolation of the variance in scores attributable to study abroad and to engagement in deep-learning activities.

RESULTS

Table 2 reports the cell means and standard deviations for functional language proficiency and for engagement in deep-learning activities for both pre-test and post-test surveys and for both on-campus programs and programs abroad.

Mixed Factorial ANOVA

The ANOVA for functional language proficiency reveals significant main effects for the repeated measure time of testing ($F_{1,60} = 43.78; p<.001; M_{pre} = 66.00, M_{post} = 73.53; \text{ eta}^2 = .42$) and for site of instruction ($F_{1,60} = 15.86; p<.001; M_{campus} = 63.77, M_{abroad} = 75.71; \text{ eta}^2 = .21$). Time of testing included prior to and following the on-campus class or study abroad experience; site of instruction included on-campus and abroad. Not surprisingly, across learning sites post-test scores exceed pre-tests; and across time of testing, study abroad students surpass on-campus learners.

More illuminating, however, is the finding that the interaction between time of testing and site of instruction is also significant ($F_{1,60} = 10.43; p<.001; \text{ eta}^2 = .15$). Bonferroni t-tests indicated that the study abroad group exceeds the on-campus group at both pre-test and post-test on this outcome, measuring the self-reported language
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proficiency scores. The pre-test and post-test means for self-reported language proficiency for the on-campus students do not differ significantly. In contrast, the post-test mean for self-reported language proficiency significantly exceeds the pre-test mean for the students who studied abroad. This latter finding confirms Hypothesis 1.

The ANOVA for engagement in deep-learning scale scores reveals a significant main effect only for site of instruction ($F_{1,67} = 5.67; p<.05; M_{\text{campus}} = 36.91, M_{\text{abroad}} = 41.27; \eta^2 = .08$), with students abroad more engaged that on-campus learners. However, the interaction between time of testing and site of instruction does prove significant for this variable ($F_{1,67} = 15.91; p<.001; \eta^2 = .19$). Bonferoni t-tests indicate that the study abroad group exceeds the on-campus group in self-reported engagement in deep-learning at post-test, but the two groups are equivalent at pre-test on this outcome. The pre-test and post-test means for self-reported engagement in deep-learning for the on-campus students do not differ significantly. In contrast, the post-test mean for self-reported engagement in deep-learning exceeds the pre-test mean for the students who studied abroad. These results confirm Hypothesis 2.

Regression-Based Path Analysis

Regression-based path analysis was used to analyze the association between the independent variables of interest (study abroad participation, pre-test engagement in deep-learning activities, pre-test language functionality) and the outcome of post-test language functionality. Simultaneous regression equations determined the significance of the associations proposed in Hypothesis 3 (RQ3). Examination of the path coefficients reveal the relative importance of the exogenous and endogenous variables in the model and their influence on the dependent variable of post-test language functionality.
Study Abroad Participation: The first regression equation in the structural model evaluated the effects of pre-test language functionality, study abroad participation, and deep-learning on the dependent variable post-test language proficiency. The R² value for this model is 0.730. That is, nearly three quarters of the variance in post-tests can be predicted by the prior variables in this model. Pre-test language proficiency served as a control variable to account for the differences in incoming language abilities, and yielded a positive and significant association with post-test language proficiency (β = 0.608, p<0.0001). Further, all three of the paths display significant associations with the dependent measure of post-test language functionality. This finding supports the first claim in Hypothesis 3 (RQ3) that study abroad participation (β = 0.260, p<0.001) and engagement in deep-learning activities (β = 0.236, p<0.003) are positively associated with gains in post-test self-reported language proficiency.

Engagement in Deep-Learning: The second regression equation in the model assessed the effects of study abroad participation on engagement in deep-learning activities. The adjusted R² of the second equation was 0.196. The standardized coefficient for the equation reveals a positive and significant association between study abroad participation and engagement in deep-learning activities (β = 0.455, p<0.0001).
The results of this path analysis suggest that study abroad participation has a positive and significant impact on both post-test self-reported language functionality and self-reported engagement in deep-learning activities, while engagement also has a positive and significant impact on post-test language proficiency. Engagement in deep-learning thus mediates and enhances the association studying abroad during world language learning and the subsequent gains achieved in self-reported functionality in the TL. These results do not fully confirm Hypothesis 3 (RQ3), which postulated that gains in language proficiency would be attributable more to the moderating effects of engagement in deep-learning activities than to the direct effects of studying abroad. Rather, the results confirmed that these two predictors of language proficiency had roughly equivalent effects on language proficiency.

**DISCUSSION**

Results fully confirm the first two hypotheses (RQ1 and RQ2) and partially confirm the third (RQ3). Studying a world language abroad rather than on-campus resulted in greater gains in self-reported functional language proficiency (Hypothesis 1). Unsurprisingly, the study abroad world language programs draw more superior students, as the more proficient students self-select to study abroad rather than on-campus during their world language learning. Whereas the students who remain on-campus exhibit zero increase in self-reported world language proficiency over the term, the study abroad students show a significant positive increment.

These results are encouraging given the possibility for the opposite effect to occur during world language learning abroad. For instance, it is possible that the students’ self-assessments of language proficiency could deflate following immersion in a target language (TL) environment when they realize that they are not as competent as they previously believed. Such decremental findings for study abroad participation are reported elsewhere (see Vande Berg et al., 2009 findings for male study abroad intercultural scores; see Rexeisen, 2013).

Students who studied abroad report greater gains in self-reported deep-learning engagement scores than do on-campus students (Hypothesis 2). At pre-test, student world language learners were asked to rate their engagement in deep-learning activities for their courses throughout the entire preceding semester. Tellingly, study abroad students and on-campus students were equally engaged before their paths diverged. Engagement in deep-learning activities plateau for students who remained on-campus, whereas students who went abroad report higher levels of deep-learning engagement during their sojourns. Accordingly, world language learners who studied...
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abroad report that they discussed more frequently with peers and with faculty outside of class, conducted and wrote up more independent research, and engaged in more intellectual synthesis than they (or their peers) had previously done while enrolled in courses on-campus. This finding challenges the critiques that characterize short-term faculty-led study abroad programs as mere tourism masquerading as academic experiences, and confirms the potentially transformative and impactful effects of such programs.

Finally, the analysis tests the hypothesis that gains in language proficiency would be attributable more to the moderating effects of engagement in deep-learning activities than to the direct effects of the presumably low-immersion form of sojourning in which these learners engaged (Hypothesis 3). Results indicate, however, that the impact of these two predictors on language proficiency are roughly equivalent. Both paths are statistically significant, but relatively weak. We speculate that the direct effect of class site location—wherein study abroad directly affects language learning in a way that is unmoderated by engagement—may be an artifact of the characteristic emphasis on reading and writing in on-campus world language classes. Since the measurement instrument focuses on spoken language functionality, on-campus learners would naturally not find their oral competence improving. In contrast, world language classes abroad particularly excel in imparting the oral competency skills that were the target of this self-reported proficiency instrument (Brecht et al., 1995).

Limitations

This study is limited by the relatively small size of the sample available for students who enrolled in a world language course over a single 3-4 week Summer session. It invites replication with additional short-term as well as long-term classes. In addition, although the researchers attempt to account for the potential for systematic and substantial differences among students who study abroad and those who do not, it is likely that students who study abroad exhibit greater motivation, aptitude, and willingness to engage in deep-learning activities and immersive experiences than students who do not study abroad (Gonyea, 2008).

On the other hand, the repeated measure design of this study ensures that each student acts as his or her own control, accounting for the pre-test language functionality prior to the study abroad experience or the on-campus course. Including additional control variables such as SAT scores or course-taking history may further strengthen the warrant for our conclusions. Finally, this study relied on only a single self-report measure of functional competence in the TL. Although there was precedent for this measure (Dewey et al., 2012; Dewey et al., 2013), it would be interesting to augment self-reports with actual language performance tests.
Implications

This study provides support for the assertion that study abroad experiences have a positive and significant impact on student learning outcomes, increasing both students’ propensity towards engagement in deep-learning activities and their growth in world language competency. This study was the first to link student engagement with world language learning. We found that regardless of the site of learning, more engaged students made greater gains in functional language competency. Accordingly, we recommend that instructors make affirmative efforts to incorporate deep-learning activities such as out-of-class discussion with culturally different peers, office hour meetings, and extended individual projects. Students who studied world languages abroad—even for short durations—seemed to have superior access to these deep-learning activities.

Within the framework of ELT and involvement theory, results demonstrate that students who studied abroad engaged in an experiential learning cycle that required increased engagement and involvement in a foreign setting, which in turn resulted in greater gains in linguistic competencies and engagement in deep-learning activities than non-study abroad participants. The heartening findings of this study have several notable implications for tertiary administrators concerned with the cost-effectiveness and utility of short-term, faculty-led study abroad programs.

- Given the positive learning outcomes associated with student engagement (Kuh, 2008), administrators should continue to promote HE abroad for all students. Studying abroad appears to have a positive and significant impact on students’ self-reported engagement in deep-learning. Even minimally immersive experiences provide positive learning opportunities for students that far exceed the gains associated with enrolling in a Summer course on-campus.
- Faculty seeking to enhance the linguistic skills and cultural knowledge of their students should make every effort to encourage participation in a program abroad. Students who study abroad experience greater gains in language competency than do comparable peers who study at the home campus.
- Faculty and administrators should address the potential loss in engagement that occurs among language learners who enroll in Summer courses at the home campus. Students in this sample exhibited a plateau in their self-reported level of engagement from pre-test to post-test, indicating that their Summer language courses did not stimulate engagement in deep-learning.
CONCLUSION

Given that the results of this study supported the hypothesis that study abroad participation is positively and significantly associated with student engagement in deep earning activities, one possible mechanism to account for the growth in linguistic proficiency that accompanies participation in a study abroad program is through the integrative and engaging experience of immersion in the TL and culture. Although students who choose to study abroad may be predisposed to enjoying the benefits of immersion and engagement due to differences in motivation or aptitude, it is evident from this study that studying abroad does result in higher-levels of engagement in the post-test survey following the completion of the academic program. Students who remain on-campus for their language learning do not report increases in engagement, perhaps due to a lack of appealing course material or insufficient exposure to sociocultural concepts related to the TL.

REFERENCES


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**KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Deep-Learning:** Understanding and truly knowing a topic, whereby students develop a personal affection for a topic through cognitive active learning behaviors.

**Development Theory of Student Involvement:** This theory describes how student change and development are critical for achieving desirable academic outcomes. This theory emphasizes the need for students to be involved co-curricularly in order to persist and graduate.

**Experiential Learning Theory (ELT):** How one learns is a process that includes a variety of theoretical methods and individual learning styles. In 1984, David Kolb created ELT and it is still one of the most widely used learning models. ELT is based on the premise that a person learns from direct experience or “learns by doing.” Kolb views learning as a four-stage continuous process where the participant acquires knowledge from each new experience. His theory treats learning as a holistic process where one continuously creates and implements ideas for improvement. According to Kolb, effective learning can only take place when an individual completes a four-stage cycle: (1) concrete experience; (2) reflective observation; (3) abstract conceptualization; and (4) active experimentation.

**Foreign Language Learning:** Developing the ability to communicate proficiently in a language that is indigenous to another country or is not the student’s first language (L1).

**Immersion:** A method of learning a foreign language in which the language learner makes exclusive use of the target language (TL), often in a setting where that language is indigenous. Typically, immersion programs, in which students spend at least 50% of their time learning in a second language, work amazingly well in developing students’ fluency and skills.
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Mixed Factorial ANOVA: Involving two or more independent variables, one of which is a factor of within-subjects comparisons and another which is a factor of between-groups comparisons. The within-subjects comparisons are a form of repeated measures.

Proficiency: The ability to read, write, speak, and listen in a foreign language with fluency and ease.

Regression-Based Path Analysis: Extension of multiple regression that provides estimates of the magnitude and significance of hypothesized connections between sets of variables, which are thought to be causal relationships.

Student Engagement: Students are engaged when they are attracted to their work, persist in despite challenges and obstacles, and take visible delight in accomplishing their work. Thus, it refers to a student’s interest and integration into academic activities and motivation to continue pursuing educational opportunities.

Student Learning Outcomes: Measurements of student learning outcomes include self-reported proficiency in language skills across the four domains (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, and writing).

Study Abroad: Any of a number of arrangements in which college/university students complete a portion of their degree requirements and credits through educational activities outside of their “home country.” Study abroad programs can be short- or long-term and can include academic as well as co-curricular activities.

Values: The positive and negative judgments that people assign to ways of being in the world. Each individual has a core of underlying values that contribute to that individual’s system of beliefs, ideas, and/or opinions. A value system is in essence the ordering and prioritization of ideals that an individual or society recognizes as important.