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Spanish Language Development and Perceptions of Undergraduate Students During Short-Term Study Abroad

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Spanish language development and perceptions of undergraduate students during short-term study abroad

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Purpose

- This study seeks to determine how SUNY Cortland students who participated in a short-term study abroad program in Cuernavaca, Mexico perceive their experience as worthwhile in their education.

Central Argument: Study abroad programs are beneficial for students with respect to their language development and beyond (e.g., networking opportunities, cultural appreciation, etc.)

The Spanish Language Institute

- In Cuernavaca, Mexico
- Offered for 25 years
- 3-week program
- Accommodates all levels of Spanish ability
- Small instructional groups (2 to 4 people)
- All students live with a host family



Image from Google Earth

Theoretical Framework

- Vygotsky's Social Constructivism theory (Kozulin, et al., 2013; Tracey & Morrow, 2017).
 - Constructing knowledge through interactions with others
 - Constructing knowledge from culture

Literature Review

Similar research about short-term study abroad programs	Students' engagement in the program	Gains in language acquisition
<p>Research about study abroad has been done in order to identify the benefits of foreign language learning because the student is immersed in the foreign language.</p>	<p>Some students were hesitant to speak the foreign language with native speakers or in class due to a lack of confidence. However, this varied student to student.</p>	<p>Specifically, in short-term study abroad programs, 15 weeks or less, it has been proven that there are significant gains in language acquisition.</p>
<p>Allen (2010); Baró & Serrano (2011); Castañeda & Zirger (2011); Duperron (2006); Dwyer (2004); Gaugler & Matheus (2019); Jackson (2011); Kehl & Morris (2007); Reynolds-Case (2013); Savage & Hughes (2014)</p>	<p>Allen (2010); Cadd (2012); Castañeda & Zirger (2011); Cubillos (2019); Jackson (2011); Klapper & Rees (2012); Savage & Hughes (2014)</p>	<p>Allen (2010); Duperron (2006); Dwyer (2004); Gaugler & Matheus (2019); Reynolds-Case (2013); Savage & Hughes (2014)</p>

Literature Review Cont.

Confidence, anxiety and Motivation after study abroad	Interactions with native speakers	Cultural appreciation and open-mindedness after study abroad
Research has shown that after study abroad students felt an increase in motivation and confidence. Also, they felt a decrease in anxiety.	As a result of networking with native speakers, students showed an increase in their speaking language proficiency.	After the study abroad, students felt that they were more openminded to the host culture. Also, they started to question their own culture and beliefs.
Allen (2010); Barró & Serrano (2011); Cadd (2012); Castañeda & Zirger (2011); Klapper & Rees (2012); Savage & Hughes (2014)	Allen (2010); Cadd (2012); Castañeda & Zirger (2011); Gaugler & Matheus (2019); Klapper & Rees (2012); Llanes et al. (2012); Savage & Hughes (2014)	Allen (2010); Cadd (2012); Castañeda & Zirger (2011); Dwyer (2004); Kehl & Morris (2007); Klapper & Rees (2012)

Research Design

- This is an evaluative case study (Merriam, 2001).
- Participant Criteria:
 - Must have participated in the short-term study abroad program to Cuernavaca, Mexico
 - Is or was a Cortland student
 - Spanish language learners

Data Sources and Analysis

Sources:

- One demographic survey
- One semi-structured interview

Analysis:

- Transcriptions (Seidman, 2013, pp. 119-121)
- Student/Alumni Profiles including member checking (Glesne, 2011)
- Descriptive Coding (Glesne, 2011; Saldaña, 2011)
- Thematic analysis (Glesne, 2011)

Participant Profiles

Riley:

- Studying Spanish since the 6th grade
- Family speaks Spanish
- The Spanish Language Institute
- Went while she was getting her Bachelor's degree
- Also, studied abroad in San Juan, Puerto Rico

Quinn:

- Studying Spanish since 7th grade
- Healthcare in Mexico at the Spanish Language Institute
- Worked in the International Programs Office
- Went when she was getting her Master's degree
- Also, studied abroad in Salamanca, Spain

Example of Thematic Analysis (Glesne, 2011)

- *Table 2. Theme: Support from Teachers or Peers with Descriptive Codes and Frequency Counts*

Support from teachers or peers	Frequency
Community	9
Host family	5
Networking	4
Teacher support	3
Native speakers	2
Excursions	2
Communication	1

Findings (Motivation)

- **Why Participants Went:**
 - Learn more about Mexican culture and the Spanish language
 - Prior exposure to international students
- **Perceived Benefits of the Cuernavaca, Mexico Program:**
 - Length of the trip
 - Cost
 - Location of the program

Findings (Motivation) Cont.

- **Benefits that Participants Receive from Participating in this program:**
 - Challenged themselves
 - Improve their Spanish language acquisition
 - Learning in general

Quinn stated, “I felt more confident in my Spanish language abilities because I spent the whole day speaking in Spanish.”

Findings (Support)

- **Structure of the Cuernavaca, Mexico program:**
 - There was a set schedule from the SUNY Cortland and Cuernavaca, Mexico personnel.
 - Students were grouped into small groups based on proficiency exams
 - Excursion opportunities

Riley stated, “I like being around other students who are at the same proficiency level because I don’t feel embarrassed in front of my peers.”

Findings (Support) Cont.

- **Support from teachers or Peers:**
 - Students felt that they were able to build a community with other students as well as faculty.
 - Lived with a host family that connected them to the community

Findings (Critiques)

- Participants wished that the program was 1 week longer.
- One participant didn't enjoy how intense the program was.
 - Too much homework
 - Too much time in classes

Limitations

- Due to COVID-19, I couldn't go to Cuernavaca, Mexico as planned to take field notes.
- I wasn't able to interview participants before and after because they were alumni.

Implications and Future Research

Implications:

- Information given to the Cuernavaca, Mexico study abroad program
- Fills in a gap of research for study abroad programs that are shorter than 6 weeks.

Future Research:

- More new research about study abroad programs that are less than 6 weeks.
- Include professors to better triangulate the data.
- Conduct an ethnographic study

Conclusion

In short-term study abroad programs that are less than six weeks...

01

Students need to be in a supportive environment

02

Learning must be differentiated

03

Students' confidence and motivation increased

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Thank You!

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