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SPANISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND CULTURAL ACCEPTANCE
BENEFITS OF STUDY ABROAD TRIPS FOR FIFTH GRADE STUDENTS

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EILEEN ROSE SCHAUMLEFFLE
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BY

Jody A. Worley, Ph.D., Chair

Brenda Lloyd-Jones, Ph. D.

Professor Rodger Randle, J.D.

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ABSTRACT

Spanish language acquisition and cultural acceptance benefits of study abroad trips for fifth grade students looked at the benefits of being bilingual, especially at an early age, and the benefits of study abroad programs. Bilingual education can have study abroad programs as a capstone to the classroom experience for the students. While research is inconclusive about the tangible benefits for teenagers and young adults who study abroad, the study of fifth grade students and their study abroad trips has not been previously measured. This mixed methods research found that the fifth grade students who studied abroad for four or eight weeks returned home with better grades, better second language acquisition, and increased independence in the classroom and at home in comparison to their peers who did not study abroad.

Key Terms

Bilingual - ability to speak two languages with the facility of a native speaker

Biliterate - ability to read and write in two languages

Cultural appreciation - respectful and courteous understanding of another culture

Global mindset - openness, awareness, and acceptance of a wide range of cultures

Globalization - the act of extending to other or all parts of the world

Language acquisition - when exposed to comprehensible input, language is learned through a subconscious process

One-way immersion - native English speakers learn the content in the target language

Two-way immersion - inclusion of native English speakers and speakers of the target language in the same educational program.

Chapter I

Introduction

Studying abroad can have unimaginable impacts on a person's life, ranging from cultural appreciation to future career opportunities. One of the main intentions of studying abroad in a country of a differing language is to return home a bilingual and biliterate citizen. The term bilingual refers to a person who is able to use two or more languages in their everyday life. With this classification, over half of the world's population is considered bilingual and this number is only going to increase with the continued globalization of the world (Ansaldo, Marcotte, Scherer, & Raboteau, 2008). At the end of the 20th century, globalization was changing the interactions among people of the world in a way that had never been seen before. The Internet and television have created instant connections between people worldwide that would have previously taken much longer. People were also becoming more introspective as they were able to think about their own identity and preferences, given the prevalence of so many other cultures readily available (Woods, 1998).

International Education

Internationally, bilingual education is thriving. Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France, Australia, Denmark, and Sweden are all a few European countries that offer programs to help children acquire a second, or sometimes third, language. Other countries within the European Union (EU) offer instruction in indigenous minority languages such as Catalan, Irish, and Frisian. These programs have successful results, mirroring similar programs in the United States. (Krashen,

1999). With documented research confirming that these programs are flourishing within Europe, the United States would do well to implement more of these programs and to further enhance the second language acquisition, including a study abroad program within each immersion program.

Types of Immersion Programs

Two-way immersion programs work with native and non-native English speakers with the target goal of developing fluency in both languages. The monolingual English-speaking students learn a target language, while their peers who are native speakers of the target language learn English. Typically, the native speakers of the target language have limited English ability and this ensures that they are in the classroom alongside their peers instead of in an English Language Learner classroom (Dual Language Education, 2014).

In one-way immersion programs, the target language is taught through the content and curriculum, not through typical foreign language programs such as those found in a high school classroom. They differ from two-way immersion programs in that most of the students are speakers of English, and they are learning a target language. Fortune and Tedick (2008) explain, “the end goals of an immersion education include academic achievements, bi- or multilingualism, literacy in at least two languages, and enhanced levels of intercultural sensitivity” (p. 10). To further assure that these goals are met, a study abroad program is the ideal capstone for students in an immersion program.

Benefits of Bilingualism

Outside of being able to communicate with a larger range of people, research by Crawford and Krashen (2007) has shown that fluent bilinguals perform higher in schools, and regularly outperform their monolingual peers. Bilinguals also tend to be better at executive control and have superior working memories, and these skills decline at a slower rate as bilinguals age. Bilinguals have an expansion of social and cultural horizons due to their ability to communicate in multiple languages, they have a competitive edge in business and jobs, and continued globalization is showing a need for bilingual proficiencies in business, diplomatic relations, and the military. Additional benefits for bilingual speakers include higher salaries later in life in a variety of fields. A 1999 study found in three major cities, bilingual Hispanics earned up to \$7,000 more than others who only spoke English (Fradd & Boswell, 1999).

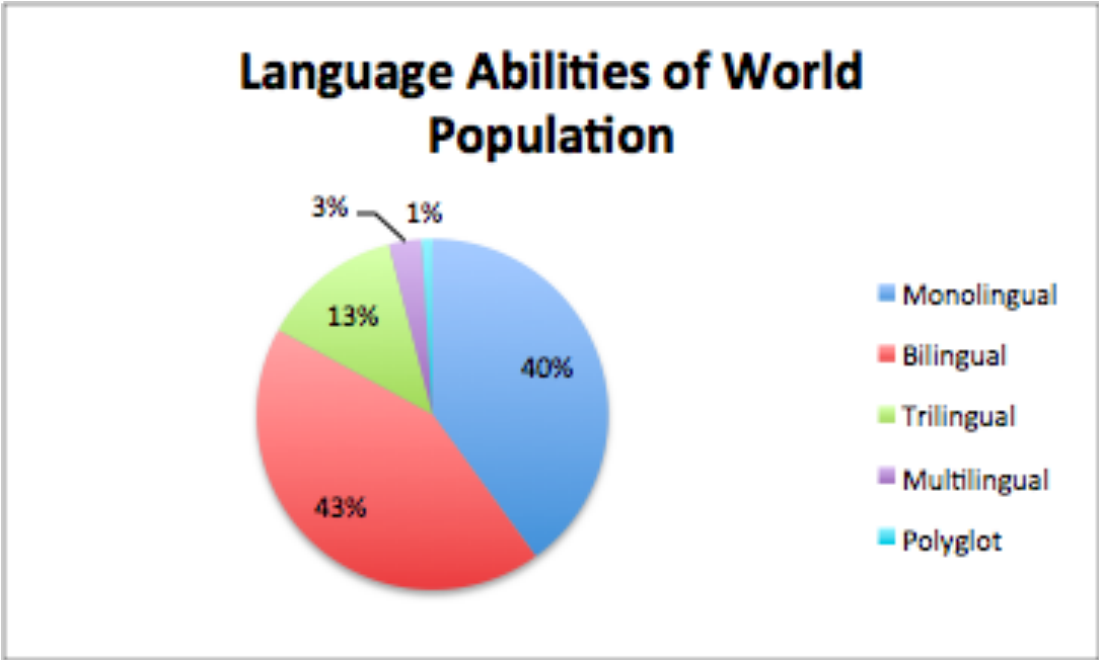


Figure 1. Language Abilities of World Population. This figure illustrates the percentage of people worldwide and their language abilities. Data retrieved from <http://ilanguages.org/bilingual.php>

Chapter II

Literature Review

While learning a second language can be beneficial at any age, research has shown that early language learners, especially before the age of 7, have benefits over those who learn later in life with the achievement of near native accents, higher cognitive development, and higher test scores (Mondloch, 2012). Children who are bilingual have a higher level of cultural awareness than their monolingual counterparts (Ray, 2009). It has also been shown that children exposed to Spanish language by native speakers have the second highest (behind native speakers) pronunciation rate in adulthood (Knightly, 2000). However, while the children may have the advantage to develop a near native accent, adults will learn the second language faster than children due to higher analytic abilities and more advanced grammar (Hu, 2016).

Development of Language

Pray and MacSwan's (2002) research has shown that it takes an average of 3.3 years for elementary age students to acquire a second language in conversational skills. With this information, language acquisition programs should start earlier than middle school and high school, like in most schools in the United States, in order to increase the number of bilingual children. Even more beneficial would be true second language immersion programs from an early age. This would help the young students have a positive attitude toward language learning, better memorization skills than adults, and the development of the second language accent (Hu, 2016).

Research done by developmental psychologists continues to support the evidence that bilingualism has positive effects on abilities related to academic success. Bialystok's (2001) research shows that bilingual children have more developed control processes than their monolingual peers. Bilinguals are regularly dealing with language control and are generally considered more proficient with task-switching abilities (Ansaldi, 2008).

Theories of Language Acquisition

Sociocultural theorist and psychologist Lev Vygotsky's research on language acquisition concluded that the primary way language develops is through social interaction in a supportive, interactive environment. With this combination of factors, children have the ability to advance to a higher level of language performance (Wertsch, 1985). This theory is in contrast to psychologist and epistemologist, Jean Piaget, who saw language as a system of symbols that could be used as an expression of knowledge through physical interaction with others and the world (Ginsburg & Opper, 1969). While this research study was done through the sociocultural lens, it is important to note as one of the major opposing theories to Vygotsky's view on language acquisition.

Current Research

A majority of the current research on study abroad focuses on the outcome of the experience, rather than on the experience itself (Wang, 2010). It is generally agreed among experts that when the right circumstances are in place, the study abroad can result in linguistic gains and that a study abroad should be considered an essential piece of second language acquisition in the cultural context (Kubler, 1997).

The right circumstances, which may be hard to obtain, include regular interactions with native speakers outside of the classroom. Ideally, these native speakers are proper writers and speakers of the language and also willing to help the study abroad student (Wang, 2010). Wilkinson (1998) reported that the major frustration of students participating in study abroad programs was their lack of interaction with native speakers outside of the classroom.

The duration of the study abroad and the success associated with second language acquisition have varying responses from researchers. While Brecht et al. (1995) found that although at least one semester was needed in order to benefit from a study abroad, it has also been shown that less than six weeks can make a positive difference in a student's language abilities (Allan, Dristas, & Mills, 2007).

However, the vast majority of research on study abroad is on older students and adults, due to the lack of availability of true study abroad programs for younger children. While there are cultural study programs available, full immersion in school and with a host family is very rare for elementary students. This makes it difficult to apply the data of study abroad programs to elementary programs.

Additional Considerations in Bilingual Research

While bilingualism is now generally considered to be an advantage in life, at one point in time it was seen as confusing to the brain and was not desirable. This was based on IQ tests administered by psychologists who failed to take into account the cultural, educational, and economic factors that influenced the test results (Crawford & Krashen, 2007). Not all questions are culturally relevant, and what someone from one country might take for common knowledge is not necessarily a

known fact in another, therefore negatively influencing the IQ tests and making study abroad gains hard to measure in an academic sense.

As recently as the late 1980s, there were still some who argued for English only education and English as an official language in the United States. However, a 1988 ballot calling for Arizona to be an English only state was deemed unconstitutional because it violated the First and Fourteenth Amendments. An English only law violates freedom of speech and equal protection of the laws for all Americans (Ruíz v. Hull, 1998). Promotion of English as the sole language of the United States does not unite speakers of English; it divides communities. One of the goals of the study abroad program in this study is to help unite the English and Spanish speaking communities. This is important to note because it shows the transition of thought in regards to bilingualism over the past few decades, and bilingual education still has a lot of room for improvement and research.

The sociocultural appropriateness of not just IQ tests, but of language assessments, must also be taken into consideration. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has listed guidelines to properly assess language proficiency in reading based on familiar and factual material. The familiar and factual material can be different in any given language, and particular background knowledge cannot be assumed (Child, 1988).

Chapter III

Methods

A one-way immersion school in the southwest offers an eight-week study abroad trip to Spain and a four-week study abroad trip to Costa Rica to increase the Spanish language abilities, cultural acceptance, and global mindset of its fifth grade students. A committee of teachers and staff within the school selects the students, who are approximately ten years old. As seen in the literature review, there has been extensive research over the benefits study abroad programs, but this data is not about elementary aged students. This particular program is a true exchange; the students from the schools in Spain and Costa Rica come to the school in the southwest.

Not all students who apply are selected to travel, although a majority of the applicants are accepted into the program. Students are selected based on a thirty two-point rubric. The committee of teachers and staff carefully selects the students, based on their preparedness to be away from their parents, native language, and surroundings for an extended period of time. Without the rubric, students would be chosen who are not yet ready to be immersed in the Spanish language and culture, would not acquire the language, will be in a high stress environment, and would not have a successful exchange overall (Crawford & Krashen, 2007). Anxiety and self-consciousness interfere with the ability to receive comprehensible input. In this case, the students would not be able to acquire the target language (Krashen, 1981). A teacher who was involved in the selection process said that when students have been sent in previous years when the rubric was not in place, they did not return

home with any benefits, struggled throughout the entire study abroad program and academically when they returned home. They had a negative view of the study abroad countries, the target language, and their experience as a whole.

Demographics of the School

The school in the study is a Title I school, with over 35% of the students receiving free or reduced lunches. A school can receive Title I government funding if the school has at least 35% poverty rate (Weinstein, Stiefel, Schwartz, & Chalico, 2009). Taking this into account, there are multiple scholarships available for students and these scholarships are awarded based on merit and financial need. Studying abroad can be a very costly experience, but the goal of the program is to be inclusive for all those who are qualified to travel, and for finances to not be a reason that a qualified student cannot participate. Every effort is made to ensure that all of the families know about the scholarship and fundraising opportunities. Since the four and eight week programs have been in existence, every family since 2014, who applied has received a scholarship ranging from \$250 to \$1,250 to help offset or cover the cost of the study abroad trip.

Participants

The control group consisted of students who did not travel abroad (40), but were in class daily with the exchange students from Spain and Costa Rica. The control group received minimal cultural training outside of the regular curriculum, but had exposure to the incoming exchange students for a span of twelve weeks throughout the fall semester. Students who did not travel but hosted incoming exchange students (9) were included in control group data set. They also received

some cultural and Spanish language information with their exchange siblings but did not receive the full benefits of studying abroad. The students who traveled received fifteen weeks of cultural training at school in the spring and fall semesters, and additional preparation from their families throughout the summer. All traveling students (27) received basic cultural training (forty-five minute sessions once per week).

Table 1 - <i>Students in fifth Grade Class</i>
Students selected to travel abroad (27)
Students not selected to travel and not hosting (31)
Host students (9)

Other possible exemptions were any students who use Spanish at home as a native language with their family. This was determined based on Home Language Survey results, required by the local public school. Of the control group, the English Language Development teacher is monitoring five students, although they are no longer considered English Language Learners. Therefore, these students were included in the data set.

Two students from a local two-way immersion program also participated in the study abroad with the one-way immersion program for the first time. However, since the model used at a two-way immersion program is different from at the one-way immersion, these students have been excluded from the data. Another student who participated in the four-week study abroad completed less than one week of the trip and voluntarily returned home early due to personal reasons. This student has also been excluded from the data.

Hypothesis

The primary benefits of this trip were hypothesized to be a higher level of Spanish language acquisition, improved classroom grades, and a higher level of cultural appreciation upon return. Observable side-benefits included increased independence, confidence, and participation in class. The control group only had basic interactions with the students from abroad, mostly in English, and therefore did not receive the full benefits of the study abroad program.

It is proposed that the elementary students who study abroad will have near native proficiency compared to the control group. While research has been done over immersion programs and study abroad programs, not enough research has been done with early childhood learners of second language (Meisel, 2009) and this is an area that needs to be expanded to truly understand the implications and benefits, especially in the study abroad context.

Chapter IV

Results

The independent t-test shows that there is statistical significance [$t_{65} = 2.09$, $p = .04$] between students who study abroad and those who do not study abroad in relation to their average fall semester grades. The students who participated in a study abroad trip have higher grades throughout the fall semester grades than their classmates who stayed in their home country. According to Levene's test, the equal variances assumption was violated; therefore, the equal variances not assumed version of the t-test was interpreted.

Further analysis showed that there is not any statistical significance between Lexile scores and study abroad participation; therefore, Lexile scores are not an accurate predictor of whether or not a student will study abroad. Although higher Lexile scores were not correlated with students' study abroad experience in this study, it is nearly impossible to succeed in a second language without proficiency in one's native language. Krashen's (2007) research has shown that improved classroom grades can be linked to second language abilities, and knowledge and literacy support second language development. Therefore, there is a likely correlation between bilingualism and literacy.

Qualitative Results

Based on conversations with teachers in the school who work closely with the students, they confirmed the quantitative results. The teachers who see the students on a regular basis said that the students did not have significantly differing language abilities before the study abroad program, but after all the students

returned home the differences were vast. They could also see a difference in the students who participated in the study abroad in Spain and those who participated in Costa Rica. They believe that the students who spent eight weeks in Spain had the highest language abilities, cultural awareness, and independence when compared to the rest of the students. While they could also see linguistic benefits in those who studied in Costa Rica, the main observable change was in their cultural awareness and confidence instead of major improvement of language abilities.

Potential Areas of Concern

Some potential areas of concern after the study abroad are the potential academic holes that need to be filled due to time away. The curriculum in Spain and Costa Rica, although similar to that in the USA, is not an exact match. The teachers report that the students return with some academic struggles, such as spelling and history, but have regularly overcome these disadvantages in a short amount of time. Furthermore, all the students who participated in the study abroad were accepted into their first choice middle school program.

<i>Table 2 - Group Statistics</i>					
	STUDY ABROAD	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Std. Error Mean
FALL AVERAGE GRADE	YES	27	3.68	.226	.043
	NO	40	3.46	.520	.082

Table 3 - <i>Independent Samples Test</i>										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Fall Average Grade	Equal variances assumed	12.61	.01	2.09	65	.04	.22	.11	.01	.43

Table 4 - <i>Level of Participation</i>					
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	SPAIN	19	28.4	28.4	28.4
	COSTA RICA	8	11.9	11.9	40.3
	HOST	9	13.4	13.4	53.7
	NONE	31	46.3	46.3	100.0
	Total	67	100.0	100.0	

Table 5 - Sex					
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	Male	30	44.8	44.8	44.8
	Female	37	55.2	55.2	100.0
	Total	67	100.0	100.0	

Chapter V

Discussion

As previously mentioned in the introduction, not all questions for exams are culturally relevant. The tests and homework that the students completed while abroad are potentially skewed toward the country in which the students were studying, further adding another layer of complexity to the grades they received. Although those students who participated in the study abroad program had higher grades in the fall semester, they were not all doing the same work. The chaperones who help monitor the students abroad agree that the work in Spain is more difficult, while the work in Costa Rica is on par, if not slightly easier, with the work in The United States.

Additional Benefits

To support the quantitative results, the qualitative aspect of study abroad research is very important for a variety of reasons. Language acquisition is complex and looks differently for every person. The self-identity and socialization processes that are formed in a study abroad program are dynamic and warrant a qualitative approach in order to look at every nuance of the data and subjects (Wang, 2010).

The school hosts eight separate kindergarten tours in the spring semester for families who are interested in applying for the upcoming school year. The initial part of the tour is done in Spanish and in English and is led by two fifth grade students, selected by their fifth grade teachers. The selection is based on the students' Spanish language abilities, confidence with speaking, and grades, as they miss class time to give the tour. Of the sixteen students who were chosen to

participate, nine studied abroad in Spain, four were host siblings, one studied abroad in Costa Rica, and only two did not participate in the study abroad outside of the classroom.

Unintentionally, ten of these sixteen students who were chosen by their teachers to represent the fifth grade class and the school in its entirety studied abroad. The students' abilities and confidence that were developed on their study abroad trips continue to have implications in their academic life more than three months after they returned home. Additionally, the four students who were host siblings to incoming exchange students seem to have received benefits over the students who did not host, although there was not a quantitative difference. This adds additional information to support the observable side-benefits of increased independence, confidence, and participation.

Potential Complications

However, it should be noted that the students who attend the program in Costa Rica potentially have lower Spanish abilities and that is the reason they choose the shorter program. They still receive four weeks of immersion with another family and culture, which is an additional benefit of the program. There were more male students who participated in the Costa Rica program and more females who participated in the Spain program. This could also be due to developmental reasons and the rate of maturity of males and females at this age. The selection committee should be extremely objective in their selection of the students so as not to add their own biases in the process. Coding the students and not having their names present at any time during the process could improve future selections.

Teachers and staff of the school agree that a major reason that this exchange is so successful is due to the preparation the students and families receive before the study abroad takes place. The culture of the school is also preparing the students for the study abroad in fifth grade. Fourth grade teachers see that the students who wish to apply for the program put more effort into their work, are more concerned with improving their Spanish, and are more responsible overall.

This model could potentially be duplicated at other schools and with other target languages, but the preparation and culture would be imperative for success. If the four or eight week model is not an option for another school, there are still social and cultural benefits to the students. This would not likely be an educational study abroad due to the time constraint, but would be an important shift in the students' view of the world and other cultures.

Chapter VI

Conclusion and Future Research

Perhaps one of the most beneficial areas of future research would be to look at the students' language abilities with a pre and post-test. Due to copyright technicalities, this data was not available at the time of this study. However, it would be worthwhile to see what the students' level of Spanish was before the trip, to ensure that they were not already outperforming their peers and that the study abroad did in fact, contribute significantly to their linguistic success. Since the acceptance rubric for the 2017 to 2018 school year included a language assessment by ACTFL, there is a possibility for this research to be done in the future. The use of a pre and post-test would also more accurately measure the specific second language acquisition levels that the students have before and after the study abroad.

There are age-related factors that contribute to second language acquisition, such as cognitive, psychological and social factors. These include individual ability, language aptitude, personality, and motivation, among other factors (Hu, 2016). This impacts pedagogy on second language teaching to students and how teachers should best implement strategies to effectively teach a second language to young learners. It must continue to be taken into consideration the cultural backgrounds of students and the target language for the students to be successful in not just the language acquisition, but also the cultural acquisition. When the teachers are thoroughly trained and equipped with the pedagogical methods to teach second language acquisition, the students will flourish.

If future research shows that there is no direct correlation between studying abroad and higher grades and advancement of second language skills, the cultural and personal relationships that were created with the study abroad have an impact on the students and their families. In the summer of 2017, at least ten families and/or students from the schools in The United States, Spain, and Costa Rica have gone to visit their former exchange students or host families. The impact of the study abroad program in elementary school has the potential to have a much deeper effect on those that participate, including the parents and siblings.

One of the main goals of this study abroad program has always been to increase children's global mindset and cultural appreciation. In a world that is becoming more interconnected, the inclusion of all family members, teachers, and community members in the exchange is a crucial part to the program's success and greater impact on society. The study abroad program has the potential to positively influence members of entire communities.

Future Opportunities for Bilingual Students

Second language acquisition has the possibility to open doors to social, economic, and personal opportunities (Lightbown & Spada, 2011). While some of these implications are yet to be seen for the group of students who participated in the study abroad in this survey, the analysis shows that their grades are higher than their classmates who did not participate. Moreover, these were not grades in their school in their home country with their native language, but in their exchange schools in Spanish. The participants of the study abroad program still outperformed their peers, even though they were in another country, with a different family, fully

immersed in their second language. The participants of the study abroad program are more prepared for their futures and are equipped with the tools to be independent and confident global citizens for the rest of their lives.

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APPENDIX A

Internal Review Board Letter of Approval



Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Human Research Determination Review Outcome

Date: February 16, 2017

Principal Investigator: Eileen R Schaumleffle

Study Title: Spanish Language Acquisition and Cultural Acceptance in Elementary Students Participating in a Study Abroad Program

Review Date: 02/16/2017

I have reviewed your submission of the Human Research Determination worksheet for the above-referenced study. I have determined this research does not meet the criteria for human subject's research. The proposed activity uses de-identified data that were collected previously for non-research purposes. Therefore, IRB approval is not necessary so you may proceed with your project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the HRPP office at (405) 325-8110 or irb@ou.edu. Thank you.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Lara Mayeux'.

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board