

State University of New York at Geneseo

Language Barriers in International Academic Exchanges
Personal experiences of US students abroad

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Geneseo, New York
2019

Introduction

The impetus for this study stems directly from a trip taken by undergraduate students of several campuses of the State University of New York at the beginning of this year: 10 students of various backgrounds participated as part of an anthropological course titled 'Race, Racism, and the Black Experience in Cuba,' which in fact had a stop at the same Guardalavaca resort at which this study is being presented for the first time. The group was comprised mostly of monolingual English speakers, was guided by an English-speaking tour guide, and spent most of their time in Cuba with English-speaking students of the Universidad de Holguín. Despite the linguistic accommodations made for the group, the monolingual participants faced significant barriers in Cuba, and the students who could speak Spanish were heavily relied on as translators in public settings. Significant burnout was experienced by bilingual students, which in turn became a factor of stress within the entire group. These experiences fundamentally informed the interest of the students who carried out this study and formed the questions that the study seeks to address. How do language barriers affect the development of interpersonal relations between students studying abroad and with locals? What difficulties do language barriers engender in daily life? How does the stated purpose of a study abroad trip (an educational trip versus a trip with an NGO, for example) impact cultural literacy and the process of language-learning?

Methodology

State University of New York students who had participated in at least one study abroad trip, as well as one Cuban student from the Universidad de Holguin, consented to be interviewed according to an eighteen-question questionnaire which addressed the major themes of interest. Questions posed included not only inquiries into attitudes surrounding language and language barriers but cultural attitudes. We interviewed each participant remotely or in person, about their experiences abroad, and each interviewee had participated in at least one study abroad program. The programs in which each student participated varied in the degree to which language learning was part of the experience. The participants varied between Junior and Senior class in university and all of the countries to which students had traveled were not primarily Anglophone (although many participants found that English was also widely spoken.) The level of language proficiency students had in the primary language of the country in which they studied was also of interest to our research, and we have scaled each interviewee's proficiency from No Knowledge to Fluent. In highlighting language proficiency, we can better understand what language barriers were faced when making relationships.

The analytic work of the research focused on two groups of students: those (both American and Cuban) who had been participants in SUNY Geneseo's trip to Cuba in January 2019, and SUNY Geneseo students who had previously studied abroad. The questionnaire that was administered, posed questions stemming from four main topics of research: the purpose of the study abroad trip,

language barriers faced while abroad, cultural differences faced while abroad, and relationship building. The questionnaire consisted of eighteen questions, the first six concerning preliminary information on the participant and the following twelve touching on topics such as barriers faced abroad, expectations of people in the country, the importance of language, cultural difference, etc. [See figure 1.] More specifically, five out of eighteen questions pertained to the purpose of the participant's trip abroad. Seven questions related to language barriers faced, while eleven questions focused on relationship building during the participants' study abroad experience. Finally, six questions examined language-related difficulties experienced abroad. The Cuban student interviewed was asked a variant form of questions, adjusted to fit their experience as a local participant in a study abroad trip. For the analysis portion of the research, we decided to combine specific questions in order to better examine our four main topics of inquiry. In the case of the first topic, cultural differences, we combined questions #8 and #13 [See Figure 2] to allow focus on the cultural differences noticed by participants. The second topic, relationship building, connects questions #10 and #11 [see Figure 2], allowing data to be more efficiently compared and contrasted. The next topic of inquiry was language barriers and we joined questions #9 and #16 [see Figure 2] to understand how language played a role in creating relationships. Finally, we combined questions #14 and #15 [see Figure 2] to examine the purpose of each student's study abroad trip. Inquiry into each of these topics combines to contribute to a more precise examination of language and interpersonal relationships.

Purpose of Study Abroad Programs

In their interviews, students stated various reasons for enrolling in study abroad programs. For the purpose results analysis, participants were divided into groups based on the nature of their study abroad program. The two most common programs in which students enrolled were those centered on language learning and (multidisciplinary) research. We found out that overall, students searched for cultural experiences that would broaden their worldviews and bolster their academic ability. The experiences that non-language programs participants most frequently named as positive were smaller excursions within the larger trip, which they understood as spaces to reflect on the personal impact of their experiences. However, students who had participated in language-learning programs stated that the same excursions had been detrimental to their process of learning and practicing a second language. This was due to the fact that excursions created group settings where English was spoken almost exclusively. In contrast, students with limited language proficiency thought of excursions as opportunities to enjoy settings apart from academics, with no need to worry about the language barrier. Nevertheless, these students also felt that they needed to learn the local language, and many expressed regret that they had not known the language prior to their trip. Even with this difference, the most common reasons students gave for studying abroad was to gain a deep understanding of the culture they visited. For the students who were on language programs, the excursions were a major component of the process of understanding and appreciating the culture from a cultural relativist perspective. In contrast, the students on non-language focus programs explained that their lack of language proficiency stymied their purpose of deeply understanding the culture and the population of the country they studied in. Again, several of these students expressed that they wish they could speak the language before traveling abroad, especially because of the academic nature of their trip.

Language Barriers

We took a variety of factors into considerations in order to explore language barriers and their relation to relationship building. The majority of students came to the conclusion that it was much easier for them to create bonds and practice language through one-on-one or individual activities. The participants added that it was difficult to form relationships in a group setting because it was usually in these group settings that their native tongue was spoken. A sense of security was created in these groups which creates unbalanced forms of communications among the participants and the people they are interacting with. Settings that created an atmosphere of intimacy helped in creating these bonds between the participants and the people they came in contact with. How participants overcame language barriers played a large role in their experiences as well. A number of students within the pool spoke of their use of translators, such as Google Translate and actual translators, as having been very helpful in their conversations with people in their respective countries. Additionally,

they mentioned the use of gestures and facial expressions helped express ideas and or feelings. However, it should be mentioned that a majority of the participants concluded that being in group settings helped them in overcoming certain language barriers. In participants' responses, there was a clear distinction between what is preferred in creating relationships with people abroad and what actually helps in overcoming language barriers. A more intimate dialogue between the participant and person they are communicating with creates a closer bond and, to an extent, helps in language proficiency. In contrast, working in groups fostered a sense of security for the participants, who were not forced to speak a second language, but did not improve their language skills.

Relationship Building

Language barriers can be seen both as positive and detrimental to relationship building. A handful of students stated that a lack of proficiency in the native language of the country they were studying abroad in was a complete hindrance on their experience and how they built relations with others. A number of students also mentioned that the application of a second language in academic spaces was a stressful experience. Additionally, a number of participants within the pool mentioned that not knowing the local language had made interacting with locals demoralizing. More notably, a number of students answered that the purpose of their trip made it difficult to overcome the language barrier. However, there were instances where students had claimed that language barriers had some positive impacts: specifically, students who were already proficient in a local language found it validating to help others improve their language proficiency. A majority of responses to these questions split clearly into positive and negative aspects of language barriers and hindrances on relationship building.

Cultural Differences

Our findings showed that responses to questions on cultural differences faced abroad yielded a wide spread of answers focused mainly on cultural oppositions. There is no clear separation between remarks on cultural differences and remarks on people from the United States. Many answers overlapped on both topics, showing how students naturally would compare and contrast the culture they are most familiar with and the culture they experienced abroad. One frequent observation was that students perceived a stronger sense of national community abroad than exists in the U.S. Furthermore, most participants mentioned a noticeable difference in how native citizens of the countries they visited viewed their time and relationships. In illustrating this point, students gave examples of a calmer lifestyle, less stressful environment, and lack of privacy as compared to life in the U.S. Participants also interpreted communities abroad as focused more on the quality of relationships in their lives than the quantity of their wealth. Universally, participants remarked on interpersonal relationships. These observations were central takeaways from their study abroad experiences, and in the context of this study were evidence of the cultural exchanges present during their travels. This discovery points to the possibility that students are subconsciously focusing on relationships abroad even when language might be a barrier.

Discussion

We discovered that a number of the students who had participated in research programs were not as worried about language prior to their trips. During their experience, however, they had encountered obstacles which had prevented them from achieving their desired goals. Therefore, we believe that study abroad programs should address language whether or not the program is focused on learning a language. We also came to the conclusion that whether or not a student knows a language, the student will generally believe that speakers of the local language appreciate the student's attempts at communication. We suggest that in group settings, a mixture of cultural backgrounds and language proficiencies work to create a more productive environment for language learning than other settings do. Lastly, study abroad experiences had altered students' perception of how other communities view relationships between individuals, objects, wealth, and their community in contrast with American society. Based on their observations, we can infer that students' understanding of the cultures in which they found themselves was fundamentally predicated on their observations of interpersonal relationships more than it was on learning and reading about the said culture in a classroom setting.

Figure 1

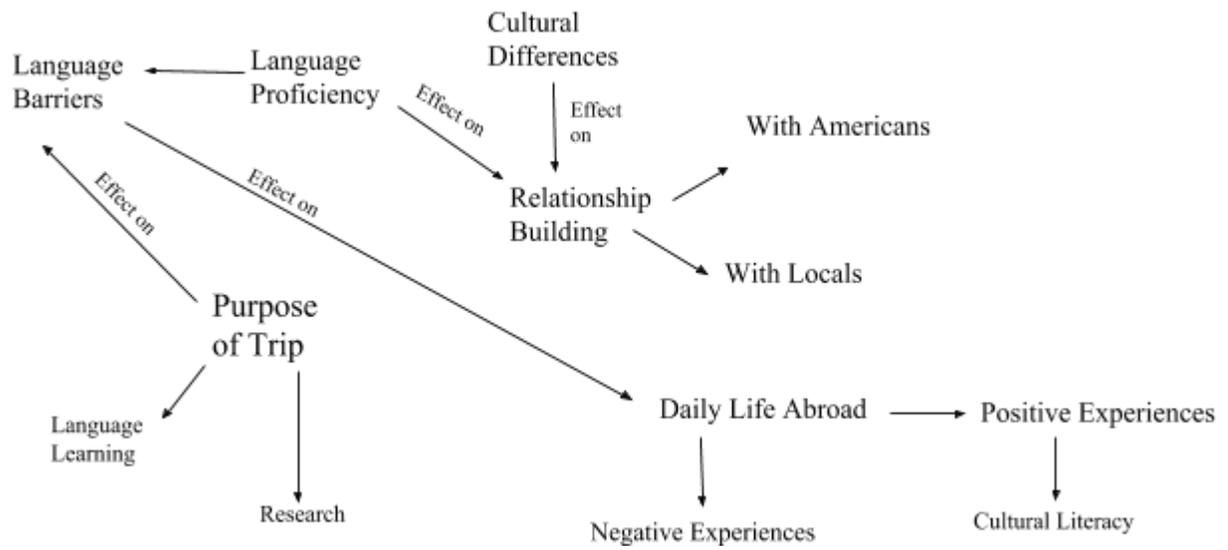


Figure 2
Language Barriers in International Academic Exchanges

Please answer these questions in relation to your own experiences

1. Please write your name or pseudonym.
2. How old are you?
3. What are you studying?
4. What year of college are you in?
5. What is your nationality? What languages do you know?
6. Where did you study Abroad? Which are the language/languages spoken in that country/countries?

Please answer the following questions for each of the countries that you studied abroad

7. How, in your opinion, does language affect relationship building?
8. How much of a cultural difference did you feel while abroad, with regards to people you encountered? Please explain.
9. Did you find it easier to build a relationship while in a group setting or in a one on one setting, keeping language in mind? Please explain your answer.
10. Can you think of a time where language was a hindrance on your relationship with folks you met? Please give a detailed example.
11. Can you think of a time where language had a positive impact on your relationship with folks you met? If so, explain.
12. What were your expectations of meeting people within the country? What conclusions did you come to after meeting them?
13. Did your trip change your perception of people from the United States? Explain.
14. Was the trip beneficial to your process of learning another language/languages? Explain.
15. Did you find the excursions that you went on to be meaningful to your perception of language and culture? Please explain.
16. What language barriers did you face and how did you overcome those challenges? Can you give an example?
17. What is the most important aspect of language to you and why?
Do you think learning languages is beneficial? Why or why not?