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Study Points to Keys for Language Development in Study Abroad Programs

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - While the acquisition of language skills is a primary goal of most college study-abroad programs, a recent study by a Hispanic Studies professor at Illinois Wesleyan University suggests that specific kinds of interaction are critical to students' success in becoming proficient in a second language.

Christina Isabelli-García used a case-study approach to examine the different experiences of students who spent a semester abroad. She reports on her findings in her new book, *A Case Study of the Factors in the Development of Spanish Linguistic Accuracy and Oral Communication Skills: Motivation and Extended Interaction in the Study Abroad Context*, published by Edwin Mellen Press.

Isabelli-García followed five North American students throughout their study abroad experience, conducting bi-monthly interviews not only to evaluate any development in their language skills but also to get a sense of the activities in which they were engaged outside the classroom, with whom, and what language they spoke in those situations. This differs from traditional methods of judging language skill development abroad that compare oral proficiency examinations administered before and after the study abroad experience.

“From my own experience as a study abroad student, I had observed that those students who developed a close friendship with a non-English speaking person and who were included within that person's group of friends noticeably improved their oral language skills,” Isabelli-García said. “By conducting this case study, I hoped to test my hypotheses about what generated the differences between students' language development.”

Of those students she studied, the student whose language ability increased least had become disenchanted with the experience and, as a consequence, had few extracurricular interactions. “About half way through the program, this student began getting annoyed by the culture and her feelings were hurt by the people in the culture when she wasn't included in certain activities,” reports Isabelli-García. “She shut down, and her oral language ability did not improve.”

At the other end of the spectrum was a student who, in addition to the normal activities associated with the study-abroad program, became involved in an extracurricular activity that centered on a volunteering at a local church.

“This student worked in the church's soup kitchen once a week and interacted with the other volunteers and eventually became friends,” said Isabelli-García. “By breaking off from his own group of friends, especially English-speaking friends, and finding a new network, he was conversing at a very different level. For example, he had to state opinions and then defend them or tell stories that had a point to them - characteristics of any normal conversation and sometimes lacking when practicing a second language. Of the five students in my study he wound up making the most progress.”

The result, admits Isabelli-García, only makes common sense but does point to the need to build certain experiences into study-abroad programs to maximize language development. Immersion in the culture has always been deemed the best way to learn a language. Yet, the immersion of traditional study-abroad programs can often be superficial if students do not know how to take advantage of the learning environment they are in.

“Telling students that they need to engage the taxi driver or the book store owner in conversation in their language is good advice, of course,” she says. “But that is not the same as being a member of a social network in which you are a full partner. I believe that is what successful study abroad programs need to promote in some way. For instance, an internship or volunteer setting places the student in an environment with non-English speakers with similar interests. The ball is then in the student's court to initiate interactions. If this fails, the student has a semester to try and try again.”

To discuss Isabelli-García's study, contact either Ann Aubry or Jeff Hanna at (309) 556-3181.