The Effects of Short-Term Study-Abroad Programs in the Development of Willingness to Communicate in Spanish amongst High School Students Sojourning in Spain for Two Weeks

Evelyn Salazar
Mentor: Dr. Francisco Salgado-Robles
Department of World Languages and Literatures

Introduction

Despite the high volume of students in Spanish courses and the great number of those who participate in oversea programs, little research has dealt with the linguistic gains of students as a result of the short-term study-abroad experience. Additionally, while there are many variables and factors that contribute to a student’s willingness to communicate, few studies have been conducted regarding the willingness of high school students to communicate in Spanish.

Objective

The purpose is to gain the knowledge of how classroom-learning in conjunction with a short-term study-abroad program affects the second language high students’ willingness to communicate in Spanish, measured through four different skill sets: speaking, reading, writing, and comprehension skills.

Participants

The participants of this study are 20 L1 English high school students participating in a two-week study-abroad program in Spain. All of the students have a low elementary Spanish language proficiency, and have no previous foreign experience. Students are enrolled in and attend a level 2 Spanish class while they are abroad.

Methods

We evaluated each participant’s initial and final improvements as well as their willingness to communicate through surveys given prior to their departure as well as at the end of the term.

The survey contains 34 questions aimed to measure the participants’ willingness to communicate in speaking, reading, writing, and comprehension situations, requiring each participant to rate their willingness on a scale of 1-5 per situation.

From the survey, the results were calculated and put into percentage form. Each individual’s results were calculated and as well as an overall class average.

Results

From our data collection, we have found that there is no statistical significance in the results of the survey between the two data sets. However, major differences can be seen that the students feel more confident with their reading skills at the beginning while their overall comprehension in Spanish improved significantly by the end. The overall average of the four language skill sets indicate that the students’ willingness to communicate in Spanish started at 71% and ended at 73%.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Directions

From these results, we can conclude that the foreign experience gained by these students did have –albeit slight- a difference longitudinally on their overall willingness to communicate in Spanish. One of the major limitations was the lack of a mid-test, which might have shed some light. Besides, students’ interests represent a quite varied profile (a few of them are considering being Spanish majors in college), which might have its effect in the overall results. Moreover, the lack of a control group (without the study-abroad component) is likewise observed. Based on these irremediable constraints, we strongly suggest that future examinations should consider a more consistent group profile, with a larger number of participants, and a control group.