Language acquisition inspired by cultural interaction: The impact of international service learning on cultural sensitivity and foreign language acquisition.

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There is an abundance of anecdotal accounts to support the claims that combining study abroad experiences with service-learning pedagogy has great transformative learning potential, but a lack of reliable evidence (Grusky, 2000). This talk presents the initial findings of the author’s doctoral research; a qualitative study exploring the link between cultural sensitivity and student investment in language acquisition by following Spanish language learners participating in a short term international service learning program in Holguín, Cuba. Studies in the field tend to focus on a student’s sense of social justice after partaking in service learning (Grim, 2011) and in international service learning programs (Green, 2014). This study focuses on the transformation (Kiely, 2002; 2005) in students’ cultural sensitivity due to the interactions with host communities during the “service” portion of the program and how this cultural awakening influences the students’ investment in acquiring the target language (Norton, 1995; 2000), and addresses such questions as: Do students experience an increase in cultural literacy as a result of their short term service experience abroad? Do they feel more invested in language learning after their sojourn than before? Do they feel the cultural interactions during the trip contributed to their investment? Professor, graduate student coordinator, language student, and host partner case studies informed by interviews, surveys, and researcher observation illustrate the perceptions of cultural interactions, expectations, investment in foreign language learning, and plans for future development from the various perspectives. A reflective portion of the talk will consider this specific program’s emphasis on cultural interaction and intercultural literacy with a view to future enhancements given the symbiosis with foreign language learning. Generalizations will be presented that can be applied to similar programs producing an optimal student/instructor/host partner experience.

References


