Conceptualizing language contact and culture: L2 learners’ expectations and outcomes of a study abroad experience.

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How second language learners define and conceptualize the complex construct of culture during their study abroad experience is an important area of inquiry. This study discusses a short-term study abroad experience among a group of English-speaking Canadian students learning Spanish. The students participated in a faculty-led, five-week study abroad experience in Spain. Prior to and at the conclusion of the study abroad experience, the participants completed a language history questionnaire which elicited self-ratings of language abilities. At the conclusion of the experience, the learners also responded to a Language Contact Profile (Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, & Halter, 2004) and participated in an open-ended interview. Using a content approach to analyze the data (Schwieter, 2011), it was apparent that learners identified several variables during their meta-reflection of the study abroad experience. Our discussion of these results examines these issues in terms of language contact and socialization, representations of culture, and learner expectations and outcomes. We also explore how these issues work together to socially construct a unique learning community that functions interdependently (i.e., a relationship in which participants may be emotionally, educationally, culturally, and/or linguistically reliant on and responsible to each other) and impacts not only linguistic development but also personal and cultural development. In all, the present study demonstrates that a study abroad experience, even the shortest of programs, is an exceptional and powerful learning experience that allows participants to formulate their own view and expectation of the complex notion of culture during their road to second language acquisition.

References