Introduction

Many study abroad programs require proficiency, emphasize learning the language in which the course is taught and in which the students conduct all academic work. The purpose of the study is to provide an opportunity for students to immerse themselves in a foreign language and culture, to learn about the language and culture in a more natural setting, and to develop skills in the language that are transferable to other aspects of life. This is achieved through the development of language skills for their students. A general assumption underlying this attention to foreign language and culture is that exposure to the language and culture of the host country is increased as students are able to converse with host nationals using their language (Hendrickson, 2015; Morehead & Millenson, 1992). Yet there is some debate about the centrality of language learning in the process of developing intercultural competence. Barnett (2008) for example, says that a fluent foreign language speaker without intercultural competence may be a “fluorid fool” who knows how to insult host nationals using their own language rather than fitting into that culture (p. 17).

The current study examines the relationship of language fluency to a variety of outcomes of study abroad. The general question posed is “Does the requirement for foreign language fluency lead to better study abroad outcomes? The outcomes examined roughly follow Ward’s (1993) model of acculturation (Ward, 2001; Ward, Becher, & Fairbank, 2000). This model suggests that outcomes for study abroad fall into three categories: affective, behavior, and cognitive.”

Hypothesis

1) Study abroad students with a requirement for fluency in the host culture language will have greater contact with people in the host culture than study abroad students without a requirement for language fluency.

2) Study abroad students with a requirement for fluency in the host culture language will have better outcomes in terms of psychological adjustment, affect, social identification, and acculturational adaptation at the end of their stay than study abroad students without a requirement for language fluency.

3) Study abroad students with a requirement for fluency in the host culture language will adapt to the host culture with less difficulty throughout their stay and have better contact after study abroad students without a requirement for language fluency.

Methods

Participants and procedures:

Twenty students from U.S. universities in the Pacific Northwest and Midwest (N = 38) were enrolled in two different programs (Sievers, Jones, 2013; Oviedo, Spain = 20; Oviedo, Spain = 18). The average age was 20.61, 68% were female; closing standing distribution was 45% Senior, 50% Junior, and 5% Sophomore.

Language fluency and cultural contact

Hypothesis 1 posits that the requirement for fluency in the language of the study abroad culture will be stronger for higher percentages of student contact with members of the host culture. The two groups were not different in percent of reported general contact with host culture nationals, but as expected, the higher fluency group reported significantly more time spent in contact with American study abroad peers, or in contact with people from cultures beyond the host culture; thus hypothesis 1 is expected.

Table 1 Means and SDs for Affective and Cognitive Outcomes by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Fluency Required</th>
<th>Fluency Optional</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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Results and Discussion

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Conclusions

Language fluency may influence the experience of inter-group anxiety (Steele & Aronson, 1995) inasmuch as language fluency is more strongly associated with cultural assumptions of the groups. The role of anxiety in the study abroad experience may be further considered. Specifically, research on the inter-group contact hypothesis (Sternberg, Hinkley, & Guglielmo, 1998) has been applied to the study abroad context. These findings suggest an inter-group contact hypothesis as a possible explanation for the results. The conclusions are based on the assumption that the contact between host and home culture is necessary for the development of intercultural competence. However, the contexts between home and host culture are inevitable, indeed, they are factors for the development of intercultural competence. Yet, these contexts facilitate the sensitivity of the students’ selves. A common student reaction to studying a foreign language is a study abroad setting is “Being of absorbing by the culture of the language they are studying” (Paige, et al., 2000). Clearly, we are worldliness, the learning bedrock assumptionATSEANDdneiity, is actually only one of many ways to view the world. These challenges to one’s identity are what make the study abroad experience fulfilling and exciting, and, at the same time, sometimes frightening. The challenge for both students and intercultural educators is to simultaneously hold up for examination both host and home culture premises, while providing safety and support for continued examination.