

Research Question:

How do students taking intermediate Spanish abroad and on campus during January compare after one month with respect to . . .

- listening comprehension skills?
- listening comprehension strategies?
- attitude towards studying Spanish?
- motivations for studying Spanish?
- self-assessment of language skills?
- language use out of class?

Research Methodology

- multi-page self-designed paper instrument
- AP listening comprehension test (tape)
- pre- and post-tests administered abroad by program assistants, on campus by researchers (instructors not involved)
- administered to all students in intermediate Spanish (103 on campus, 49 abroad)
- voluntary participation
- IDs used for pre/post matching and tracking

Respondent Profile

Abroad - 48

- 65% female vs. 35% male
- 26% gpa ≥ 3.50
9% gpa = 2.0-2.50
- 48% freshmen
25% junior/senior
- 21% 1-2 yrs. school Span.
17% > 4 yrs.

On campus - 92

- 44% female vs. 57% male
- 11% gpa ≥ 3.5
22% gpa = 2.0-2.5
- 24% freshmen
53% junior/senior
- 28% 1-2 yrs. school Span.
10% > 4 yrs.

same amount of college and "life experience" Spanish



Listening Comprehension Skills

- both groups showed significant improvement ($p < .05$)
- no significant difference (generally) in degree of improvement between abroad and on-campus groups
- better students abroad (top 20% on listening comprehension) showed significantly more improvement than better students on campus

Listening Comprehension Strategies: Examples (Likert Scale)

When listening to Spanish, the things I do to listen effectively are . . .

- Bottom-up: I try to identify grammatical structures.
- Top-down: I look for topic/summary sentences.
- Meta-cognitive: I keep telling myself to stay focused and keep up.

When listening to Spanish, if I don't understand something . . .

- Affective: I tell myself to calm down.
- Social: I ask for help; I ask for confirmation.

Listening Comprehension Strategies: Results

Abroad

- Pre: dominance of meta-cognitive strategies; social and top-down strategies secondary; bottom-up strategies less important
- Post: social strategies dominant; meta-cognitive secondary

On campus

- Pre: obvious sense of frustration (affective); bottom-up strategies important; social unimportant
- Post: frustration decreased in importance; bottom-up strategies prevail

Attitude and Motivational Items:

Examples

(Likert Scale)

- Intrinsic motivation: L2 communication is fun. I intend to take more Spanish courses.
- Instrumental motivation: My primary reason for taking this course is to fulfill a requirement.
- Spanish interest (social): I would like to get to know more native speakers of Spanish.
- General foreign language interest: L2 fluency is a necessary part of being well-educated.

Attitude and Motivation Factors: Results

Abroad

- Pre: intrinsic and social motivations dominate; recognition of importance of L2
- Post: very little change, other than some intrinsic motivations supplant instrumental ones in importance

On campus

- Pre: intrinsic and instrumental motivations dominate
- Post: social motivations added to dominant factors; some recognition of importance of L2

For 11 of 17 items, abroad group scored higher pre and post.



Self-Assessment Items: Examples

(rating scale of 1-6 between extremes)

- Listening comprehension: When I hear Spanish spoken, I usually understand nothing/everything.
- Speaking skills: When I am speaking and don't know a word, I say it in English/try to describe it in Spanish.
- General confidence/effort: When I interact in Spanish I am usually nervous/confident. The thought of being in a Spanish-only environment fills me with excitement/dread.

Self-Assessment Items: Results

- Listening comprehension: Both groups rated their level of understanding similarly pre and post, but the abroad group considered their listening comprehension skills to be “stronger” pre and post.
- Speaking skills: By the end of the course the on-campus group was making more of an effort to sound like native speakers.
- General confidence/effort: The abroad group rated significantly higher pre and post on two of three items. By the end of the program the abroad group rated itself significantly more confident ($p < .10$).

Comparison of Out-of-Class Activities

For all items, a significant difference existed between groups regarding the self-reported frequency of selected activities during the month, such as:

- engaging in basic conversation with a Spanish-speaking person;
- engaging in meaningful conversation with a Spanish-speaking person;
- talking on the phone with a Spanish-speaking person;
- listening to Spanish music;
- watching a Spanish TV broadcast.

In addition . . .

- The groups rated their class environments and instructors similarly, so these factors did not impact the rest of the study. However, the abroad group rated the course as significantly more difficult. (These items appeared only on the post-test.)
- 31% of the abroad students have registered for at least one Spanish course for fall 2005; only 6% of on-campus students have. None were foreign language majors.

Qualitative Data: Short-Answer Responses

- abroad students more likely to respond to short-answer items (100% response rate vs. 67% on-campus); had more to say about their language learning experience
- abroad students more likely to report improvement in listening and speaking skills than on-campus students (greater perceived degree of improvement, not evidenced in actual measured improvement)
- 40-50% of abroad students referred to out-of-class factors as contributors to their language learning; homestay perceived as highly influential

Summary of Findings

- Better intermediate-level students appear to benefit more (linguistically) from short-term study abroad than from taking the same course on campus. This cannot be said of students generally.
- Abroad students perceive more improvement in listening comprehension than those on campus, although this is not reflected in performance.
- Abroad students tend to employ more effective listening strategies from the beginning, which are reinforced while abroad and augmented with a stronger social component.
- Abroad and on-campus students' attitudes and motivations about language learning differ even before study abroad, making post-program change difficult to assess.