

“My job is to open the door and guide them through it”: Collaborating to Achieve Success in Study Abroad

Ann Kathryn Waschko, MA Cross-Cultural Communication

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How can students get the most out of study abroad?

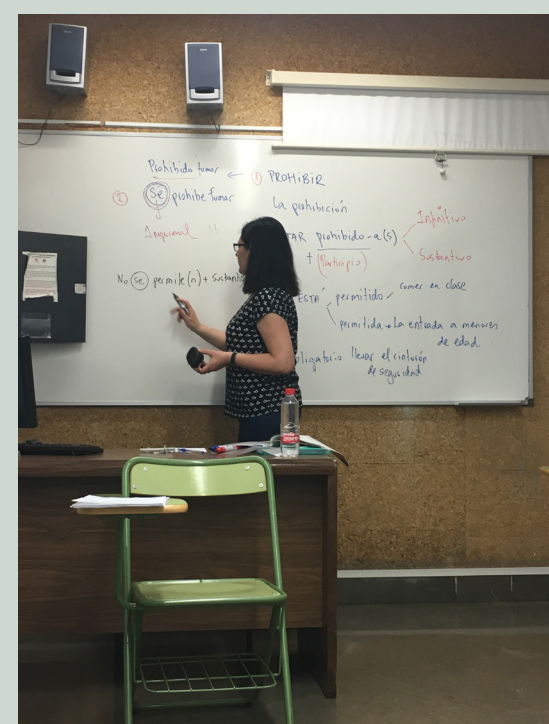
Study abroad is a field that continues to grow every year, as more and more students worldwide choose to include an international experience of some kind in their education. The most popular option for American students is short-term programs (i.e. less than eight weeks), but many researchers question if they lead to meaningful outcomes considering their length. The purpose of this study was to see how program participants work together to make the most out of their limited time, specifically by investigating whether or not the goals set for and by students were achieved in the end.

Why is this research different?

This study sought to address two gaps in this research field. First, instead of focusing solely on the students, it also incorporated the perspectives of all stakeholders in the program, such as the program director, language teachers, and homestay families. Second, ‘success’ was defined by the goals that participants set on their own rather than any external measurement. All of the participants engaged in “small culture formation on the go”¹ as they used what they knew about themselves and about the world at large to navigate new situations and collaborate effectively.

How was the data collected and analyzed?

This ethnographic study followed eight American university students on a five week study abroad program at the Centro de Lenguas Modernas in Granada, Spain. The data in this study comes from spending time with the students in class, on trips, and throughout day-to-day life on the program. Participants were also interviewed semi-formally at the beginning and end of the month. Additional data sources included students’ application essays, social media activity, text and email correspondences, and reflective blog posts. Because ethnography requires the researcher to be consistently present, it is important for them to think ‘reflexively’, or to work continuously to acknowledge their role throughout the data collection and analysis. In many ways, the ethnographic researcher is the key research instrument when gathering data.



Students spent three hours each day in Spanish-only classroom instruction.

**Ethnography:
A people-focused
research method
that involves
observation by
immersion**

What were the biggest insights?

Ethnographic study allows researchers to see what participants themselves find the most important or relevant as they navigate their daily lives. In this study, the key themes in student behavior that rose to the surface included the following:

- › Students generally preferred exploring Granada in their free time and on their own terms rather than attending mandatory guided tours and excursions.
- › Students were more eager to practice Spanish outside the classroom than within it, although they did not usually use the more difficult grammar points they had been taught.



Many students cited the hike through the base of the Sierra Nevada mountains as a highlight of their time in Spain.

These findings correspond with students’ initial comments that they were excited and curious about engaging with a new culture. The findings also echo an important statement made by the program director: “Outside the classroom is where the value lies.”

What is culture?

When asked what they knew about Spanish culture before arriving in Spain, students listed stereotypical aspects and markers such as bullfighting, flamenco, siestas, tapas, wine, and football. Most students also cited a more “relaxed” lifestyle compared to the United States and that Spanish culture appeared more “real”. Short-term programs are typically too brief for students to engage with deeper social and political contexts, but as in similar studies, the “simple act of going abroad and living in another culture” was treated by the students as “meaningful”². All students cited cultural immersion as an aspiration for the trip, with some even prioritizing it over language immersion. It must be noted that none of the students set out to gain intimate knowledge of Spain’s politics or achieve Spanish fluency, nor were such things expected; in other words, the goals set out by both the students and the program’s organizers were largely realistic considering the constraints of the program. Furthermore, despite anticipated language difficulties and the fact that some students were looking forward to being “done with Spanish” after the trip, all of the students earned at least a B+, with five of the eight receiving perfect marks.

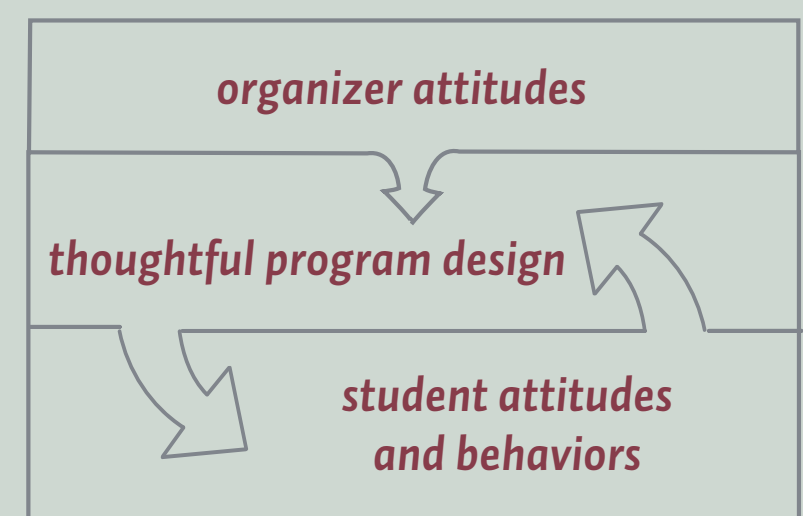
**“I feel like
America doesn’t
really have a culture
so I’m excited to be
somewhere that
does.”**

How did students spend their time?

Students sometimes became disengaged during the Spanish-only tours due to the disparity between their comprehension skills and the information being delivered, but they were often keen to practice the language with their host families or on the street. The program director gave the group a “Top 10” list with activities to do on their own around the city, which they completed and added to eagerly. They also shared their appreciation that Granada was a more “compact” and “walkable” city, unlike much of the United States which often requires owning a car. Together with the perception of Spanish life as slower and more easygoing, this likely informed students’ preferences to explore Granada on foot in the afternoons and evenings.

Why was this program a success?

The positive outcomes on this program were due largely to two factors: students’ willing and eager attitudes, and careful program design on the part of the director. The director created meaningful opportunities for students to engage with their surroundings (e.g. the Top 10 list) and then later consider their impacts (e.g. the reflective blog posts). The language instructors also often worked to draw from students’ experiences in Granada



during classroom activities. Even though not all of the students explicitly set personal growth as a goal, the director outlined that this would be a transformative experience for each of them, and by the end, every student noted that they had grown in some way, becoming more “confident,” “adventurous,” “open-minded”, and “responsible”, among many others.

What can we take away?

Although short-term programs cannot provide the depth that a semester or year spent abroad might, they are nonetheless a significant experience for students. Program directors should include meaningful opportunities for exploration and growth to maximize the study abroad program’s positive effects.

References

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2. Kortegast, C.A., and Boisfontaine, M.T. (2015). ‘Beyond “It Was Good”: Students’ Post-Study Abroad Practices for Negotiating Meaning’, *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(8), pp. 812-828.