Creating a study abroad culture of engagement

Kirk Belnap, Jennifer Bown, Thomas Bown
Brigham Young University, USA

Culture shock and unrealistic expectations about language learning frequently result in students losing sight of the vision that once motivated them to study abroad. Because interpersonal communication is inextricably linked with one’s sense of identity and well-being (Norton 2000), language learning, especially in intensive study abroad contexts, can be particularly bruising to one’s sense of self-worth (Pellegrino Aveni 2005). As a result, many fail to fully embrace their learning opportunities and retreat into “home cultural islands” (Wilkinson 1998). Recent research points to the need for interventions to help students make more of their study abroad experiences (Trentman 2012).

In 2010, Project Perseverance was launched to help learners maximize their experience, but some key interventions, such as journaling, were not welcomed. Each new cohort of students, however, has learned from case studies of previous years, leading more and more students to embrace these interventions. In 2015, the 46 students of Arabic studying in Amman, Jordan realized the largest oral proficiency gains to date; they also wrote significantly more in their learning journals than previous students. We will report on qualitative analysis of journal entries, emphasizing individual and contextual themes that explain the students’ success. Furthermore, the expressive content of the entries will be quantitatively assessed to show how the entries may have facilitated student self-regulation. In short, we will report on a new culture of Arabic study abroad that appears to be emerging.


Keywords: journaling, study abroad.