

## **Impacts of Language Barriers on Students' Openness to Diversity Attitude**

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### **Abstract**

*Short study abroad programs can facilitate students' developing their intercultural sensitivity. The host country's language may, however, affect the extent of students' openness to diversity. This study empirically examines the impact of a host country's language on openness to diversity attitudes of students participating in short summer study abroad courses. More specifically, this study compares and contrasts the students' openness to diversity in non-English and English-speaking host countries both before and after the completion of such courses. The findings of this study suggest that students in an English-speaking host country are more open to diversity than those in a non-English-speaking host country.*

**Keywords:** diversity attitudes, summer study abroad program, business education, language barrier.

### **Background**

Study abroad programs are rapidly growing in popularity among colleges and universities. During the 2007-2008 academic year, about 262,000 U.S. students participated in such programs; an 8.5% increase from the previous year (Vistawide, 2010) and a growth rate of more than 100% over the past decade (Clarke et al., 2009; and Vistawide, 2010). Analogous to this trend, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) has been placing an emphasis on the importance of international focus in business curricula which encourages universities and colleges to provide their students with international curriculum and exposure to other cultures (Koernig, 2007). The increased popularity of these programs is also attributed to availability of shorter and less expensive abroad courses (Marklein, 1999 and Koernig, 2007). Pursuing the current trends, the International Business Programs at California State University, Fresno, is actively engaged in various international endeavors and strives to fulfill the University's international-related mission and goals. To that extent, in the summer of 2008, the International Business Programs offered five undergraduate and two graduate courses from the business curriculum in three different non-English-speaking locations: Hong Kong, Paris, and Dijon.

Two of the undergraduate courses (Production/Operations Management and Strategic Management) were offered in joint partnership with Hong Kong Baptist University, China. The remaining three undergraduate courses (Principles of Finance, Management Information Systems, and Marketing Concepts) were offered in joint partnership with Ecole Supérieure du Commerce Extérieur Paris, France. Lastly, the two graduate courses (International Strategic Human Resource Management and Global Marketing and Logistics) were a joint endeavor with Burgundy School of Business, Dijon, France. In the summer of 2009, the International Business Programs also offered two undergraduate and two graduate courses in two locations: London and Dijon. The two undergraduate courses (Production/Operations Management and Strategic Management) were offered in joint partnership with Regent's College, London, England (an English-speaking host country). And the two graduate courses (International Finance and International Strategic Human Resource Management) were a joint endeavor with Burgundy School of Business, Dijon, France (a non-English-speaking host country).

The purpose of this Summer Study Abroad Program is to provide students with an opportunity to complete a portion of their coursework over a two-week period at a foreign location, thus gaining valuable international experience. This program is designed to enhance the international and intercultural education of students. These courses included live presentations, a variety of web-based materials, seminars, and corporate and cultural visitations. Students are allowed to take a maximum of two courses.

### ***Literature Review***

Short study abroad is a type of experiential learning, a form of learning that takes place from or through experience (Hopkins, 1999 and Keily, 2004). In addition to the coverage of the required degree-related subject matters, the Summer Study Abroad Program also facilitates learning through experience; therefore, it is a form of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). Two streams of research, experiential learning theory (ELT) and developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS), provide the theoretical basis for this study. ELT defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984: 41). ELT posits that “learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world and results from synergistic transactions between the person and the environment” (Kolb and Kolb, 2005: 194). DMIS was developed to explain the observed and reported experiences of individuals in intercultural encounters (Bennett, 1993). Bennett argues that: (1) intercultural understanding is learned, (2) people and culture are highly differentiated, and (3) a person develops his/her intercultural mindset by moving from ethnocentric stages (Denial, Defense, and Minimization) where one’s own culture is experienced to ethnorelative stages (Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration) where different culture is experienced (1993).

ELT and DMIS studies have been very extensive and interdisciplinary, addressing learning, knowledge creation, and education in many fields (Kayes, 2002). The July 2005 update of ELT bibliography shows 1876 entries (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). Likewise, DMIS has served as the theoretical basis for many intercultural sensitivity studies including diversity research (Jackson, 2008). Several assessment approaches exist in the literature. Pascarella et al. (1994), for example, developed 8-item instrument to measure the changes in students’ openness to diversity. Since its development, the 8-item instrument has been used by several researchers to investigate the changes of students’ diversity attitude (Ismail, Morgan, and Hayes, 2006; Pascarella et al., 1996; and Wortman 2002). In the study conducted by Wortman (2002), Pascarella et al.’s 8-item instrument was used to measure the changes in openness to diversity that occurred as a result of semester-long study abroad programs. The sample consisted of 100 U.S. students visiting both native English-speaking and non-native English-speaking countries.

While this study shows the usefulness of semester-long study abroad programs on improving students’ openness to diversity, the impact of such programs on students’ openness to diversity is not conclusive. Using a similar approach, Ismail et al. (2006) investigated the changes of student openness to diversity of 23 Purdue University students participating in a three-week study tour in China. They did report significant changes in several openness diversity measures as a result of this tour. Moreover, their findings seem to imply that short study abroad may have similar effect as semester long programs in terms of the impact on students’ openness to diversity. This study differs from previous studies. As indicated above, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of language barriers in a short study abroad business program on students’ diversity attitude. Although there are many published articles using ELT, few papers linked ELT to short study abroad especially in business education. Apparently, most short study abroad articles are published in the education-related journals. Also, we could hardly find any papers in the field of management. For example, searching the archives of the Academy of Management, we were unable to find any results using the key words “short study abroad”.

### ***Research Hypothesis***

Short study abroad program is an effective vehicle by which students develop their intercultural sensitivity (DeLoach et al., 2003). For instance, U.S. business students traveling to abroad (e.g., England, Hong Kong, and France in our study) will deepen their understanding about the rationales behind globalizations. Students will better appreciate the significance and differences between global strategy and transnational strategy by visiting various establishments. By interacting with the local people, studying their way of lives, and acting as local students they will see the similarities and differences in terms of people and culture, thus, become more sensitive to those differences. Due to language barriers, however, the opportunity to interact with local cultures may be limited for those students who take part in such programs in non-English speaking countries (Mancini-Cross, 2009). Likewise, the extent of students’ experientially learning about diversity and their appreciation of intercultural sensitivity may be influenced by the language barriers.

Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

The language barriers in short study abroad programs have an impact on students' openness to diversity attitude.

### ***Methodology***

This study was based on two web-based research surveys. The first survey was conducted prior to the start of the summer abroad courses and the second survey was done at the conclusion of these courses. All students from the seven sections of the 2008 and the four sections of the 2009 summer abroad courses at California State University, Fresno (CSUF) participated in these surveys. Students were informed of the research survey during the summer abroad orientation day and via email. To maintain confidentiality, these surveys did not ask students to provide their names and assured them that their responses would not affect their grades. However, the two surveys were linked through the participants' ID numbers, without any reference to their names. The first web-based survey was composed of two groups of questions. The first group of questions classified students according to their demographic information, including major/option, grade average point, age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, work experience, and global exposure.

The second group of questions focused on the students' three personality traits: Risk-Taking Propensity, Goal Orientation, and Openness to Experience. Students' perception of the quality and effectiveness of various aspects of the summer abroad short courses was measured in the second survey. The second survey also included global exposure-related questions consisting of openness to diversity, intercultural sensitivity, and global mindedness.

To ensure the homogeneity of the sample and measure the impacts of the language barriers on the extent of student's openness to diversity, this study focused on the findings related to undergraduate students who completed the two surveys. A total of 166 undergraduate students (101 in non-English-speaking host countries and 67 in English-speaking host country) constituted the survey group. One hundred, thirty-four of these students (78 in non-English-speaking host countries and 56 in English-speaking host country) or 80.72% of them completed both of the surveys.

### ***Respondent Profile***

The first group of questions in the first survey was demographic in nature. This respondent profile is based on responses of 134 students who completed both surveys. The age of the respondent ranged from 20 to 53 years, with a mean age of 23.56 years (SD = 4.01 years). Students were close to equally divided between male (49.3%) and female (50.7%) genders. They were representatives of a cross-section of different business disciplines/options with an emphasis on fields of accounting and marketing. They were also representatives of a cross-section of different grade point averages with majority of between 2.5 to 3.5. Of those who indicated their marital and parenthood statuses, a great majority of them were single (97%) and had no children (96.9%). Of those who indicated their ethnicity (n = 130), the majority (44.6%) were White/Caucasian, with 26.9% Hispanic/Latino, 22.3% Asian American, and the remaining 6.2% a combination of African American/Black and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. About two-third of the respondents (65.7%) were employed, while 34.3% had no work obligations. A great majority of these students (89.6%) were of senior standing and expected to graduate in one year or less. Many of them (43.3%) had no travel experience outside of the U.S. and only 19.4% had traveled abroad for study. A majority of these students (67.9%), however, had already taken one or more courses that provided them with in-depth coverage of global issues.

### ***Openness to Diversity***

AS indicated earlier, in order to address the global attitudes, this study compared and contrasted students' openness to diversity in English and non-English-speaking host countries (England versus France and China/Hong Kong). The Pascarella, et al.'s (1996) eight-item scale was the basis for this study's findings. Using a seven-point ordinal scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree), eight of the first and second surveys' questions/statements measured students' openness to diversity. The eight diversity indicators were strongly correlated among each other. A great majority of these correlations for the first survey (before the start of the summer abroad courses) were at the two-tailed significance levels of 0.000. And all of the correlations for the second survey (after the completion of the summer abroad courses) were at the two-tailed significance levels of 0.000. The reliabilities (Cronbach's Alpha) for the eight diversity indicators were .842 for the first survey and 0.928 for the second survey which are very high. Given the high reliabilities of these indicators, the respondents' aggregate scores for each survey were used as the indicator of their overall openness to diversity. The correlations between the aggregate scores and each of the eight indicators were also highly significant (p = .000).

For this study students were divided into two groups: (1) the 78 students who completed their short abroad courses in the non-English-speaking host countries of France and China/Hong Kong and (2) the 56 students who completed their courses in the English-speaking host country of England. Table 1 presents the eight diversity indicators and their mean scores, standard deviation of scores, and standard error the means for the two groups of students before and after the completion of the short abroad courses. These findings indicate that the extent of students' openness to diversity ratings after the completion of the short courses were in aggregate higher than those of before taking these courses. The mean scores were, however, consistently higher for those students who were in the English-speaking host country than the non-English-speaking host countries. After completing the short courses, both groups of students assigned the highest ratings on the importance learning about people from different cultures as a part of their college education, followed by their enjoying courses that are intellectually challenging. The differences between the two groups of students' mean scores warranted further analyses.

Therefore, two sets of Paired Samples t-Test and two sets of Independent Sample t-Test were conducted to compare the two groups' openness to diversity ratings. The two sets Paired-Samples t-Test analyses were used to separately compare each group's openness to diversity attitude before the start of the short courses to that of after the completion the short courses. To confirm the findings of the Paired-Samples t-Test analyses, two sets Independent-Samples t-Test analyses were also used to directly compare the two group's openness to diversity attitudes both before and after the short courses. Table 2 presents the openness to diversity indicators and Paired Samples t-Test's t values and two-tailed significance levels for each of the two student groups. For the first group of students, this study found that only one of the eight diversity indicators was significantly affected by these short courses. Also, in an aggregate basis, there was no significant difference between the first group of students' openness to diversity attitudes before and after the short courses. That is these courses had little or no impact on the openness to diversity of those students' who studied in the non-English speaking host countries.

On the other hand, for the second group of students, the Paired Samples t-Test analyses found significant differences with respect to five of the eight diversity indicators. Such differences were far more pronounced with regard to the students' (1) enjoying courses that challenge their beliefs and values ( $t = -3.328$  and  $p = .002$ ) and (2) enjoying courses that are intellectually challenging ( $t = -2.813$  and  $p = .007$ ). The Paired Sample t-Test for the second group's aggregate scores was also highly significant ( $t = -3.209$  and  $p = .002$ ). That is, overall the language of English-speaking host country had a significant impact on the extent of these students' openness to diversity attitude. The outcomes of the Independent Sample t-Test analyses were more revealing than the Paired Sample t-Test analyses. Table 3 presents the openness to diversity indicators and the Independent Sample t-Test's t values and two-tailed level of significances before and after the short courses. These findings indicate almost no significant difference between the two groups prior to the short abroad courses.

On the other hand, we found significant differences among the two groups of students with respect to six of the eight diversity indicators after the short courses. Such differences were far more pronounced with regard to the students' (1) enjoying courses that challenge their beliefs and values ( $t = -3.151$  and  $p = .002$ ), (2) enjoying courses that make them think about things from a different perspective ( $t = -3.151$  and  $p = .002$ ), (3) believing that the real value of a college education lies in being introduced to different values ( $t = -3.099$  and  $p = .002$ ), and (4) enjoying to talk to people who have values different from theirs because it helps them to understand themselves and their values ( $t = -2.673$  and  $p = .009$ ). The Independent Sample t-Test for the aggregate openness to diversity scores also revealed significant difference ( $t = -2.987$  and  $p = .003$ ) among the two groups of students. In other words, after the completion of the short abroad courses, students in the English-speaking host country were more open to diversity than those in the non-English-speaking host countries. Both of the Paired-Samples t-Test and the Independent Sample t-Test analyses confirmed this study's hypothesis. That is, the language barrier in short study abroad program has an impact on student openness to diversity attitude. Apparently, students are more open to diversity when they are able to comprehend the language of the host country.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This study examined the impacts of a host country's language on openness to diversity attitudes of students who participated in short summer study abroad courses. The study compared and contrasted the students' openness to diversity before and after the completion of short abroad courses in non-English and English-speaking host countries. Five undergraduate courses hosted in two non-English-speaking countries (France and China/Hong Kong) and two undergraduate courses hosted in an English-speaking country (England) provided the frame for this survey.

The findings of this study indicate that overall the extent of students' openness to diversity after the completion of the short courses was relatively high for both groups. However, students in the English-speaking host country were significantly more open to diversity than those in non-English-speaking host countries. Furthermore, both groups of students assigned the highest ratings on the importance learning about people from different cultures as a part of their college education, followed by their enjoying courses that are intellectually challenging.

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**Table 1:** Openness to Diversity Indicators and Their Means, Standard Deviations, and Standard Errors in Non-English and English-Speaking Countries before and after the Abroad Courses

Items/Questions Used to Measure Diversity	Host Country's Language	Before the Short Abroad Courses			After the Short Abroad Courses		
		Mean	S.D.	Std. Error Mean	Mean	S.D.	Std. Error Mean
I enjoy having discussions with people whose ideas and values are different from my own.	Non-English	5.74	.859	.097	5.88	.939	.106
	English	5.70	1.235	.165	6.05	.980	.131
The real value of a college education lies in being introduced to different values.	Non-English	5.63	1.175	.133	5.81	.941	.106
	English	5.91	.920	.123	6.27	.774	.103
I enjoy talking to people who have values different from mine because it helps me understand myself and my values.	Non-English	5.83	.859	.097	5.87	.812	.092
	English	6.07	.871	.116	6.23	.738	.099
Learning about people from different cultures is a very important part of my college education.	Non-English	6.04	.932	.106	6.00	1.019	.115
	English	6.16	.826	.110	6.32	.811	.108
I enjoy taking courses that challenge my beliefs and values.	Non-English	5.23	1.248	.141	5.62	.943	.107
	English	5.62	1.001	.134	6.09	.793	.106
The courses I enjoyed the most are those that make think about things from a different perspective.	Non-English	5.82	.950	.108	5.73	.878	.099
	English	5.98	.963	.129	6.20	.818	.109
Contact with individuals whose background (for example, race, national origin, and sexual orientation) is different from my own is an essential part of my college education.	Non-English	5.67	1.136	.129	5.88	.967	.109
	English	5.77	1.128	.151	6.20	.883	.118
I enjoy courses that are intellectually challenging.	Non-English	5.81	.954	.108	5.94	.873	.099
	English	5.96	.852	.114	6.29	.706	.094
Aggregate openness to diversity scores.	Non-English	45.77	5.862	.664	46.73	5.975	.677
	English	47.18	5.056	.676	49.64	5.252	.702

**Table 2:** Paired Samples T-Test of Respondents’ Openness to Diversity before versus after the Short Courses in Non-English-Speaking Country and English-Speaking Countries

Items/Questions Used to Measure Diversity	Paired Differences			
	Non-English-Speaking Countries		English- Speaking Country	
	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
I enjoy having discussions with people whose ideas and values are different from my own.	-1.394	.167	-2.079*	.042
The real value of a college education lies in being introduced to different values.	-1.273	.207	-2.389*	.020
I enjoy talking to people who have values different from mine because it helps me understand myself and my values.	-.402	.689	-1.455	.151
Learning about people from different cultures is a very important part of my college education.	.344	.731	-1.267	.210
I enjoy taking courses that challenge my beliefs and values	-3.282	.002**	-3.328**	.002
The courses I enjoyed the most are those that make think about things from a different perspective.	.867	.389	-1.352	.182
Contact with individuals whose background (for example, race, national origin, and sexual orientation) is different from my own is an essential part of my college education.	-1.662	.101	-2.569*	.013
I enjoy courses that are intellectually challenging.	-1.368	.175	-2.813**	.007
Aggregate openness to diversity scores.	-1.580	.118	-3.209**	.002

\* Significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 3:** Independent Sample T-Tests of Respondents’ Openness to Diversity in Non-English-Speaking Countries versus in an English-Speaking Country before and after the Short Abroad Courses

Items/Questions Used to Measure Diversity	t-Test for Equality of Means			
	Before the Short Abroad Courses		After the Short Abroad Courses	
	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
I enjoy having discussions with people whose ideas and values are different from my own.	.264	.806	-1.001	.319
The real value of a college education lies in being introduced to different values.	-.1560	.121	-3.099**	.002
I enjoy talking to people who have values different from mine because it helps me understand myself and my values.	-1.570	.119	-2.673**	.009
Learning about people from different cultures is a very important part of my college education.	-.800	.425	-2.030*	.044
I enjoy taking courses that challenge my beliefs and values	-2.026*	.045	-3.151**	.002
The courses I enjoyed the most are those that make think about things from a different perspective.	-.964	.337	-3.151**	.002
Contact with individuals whose background (for example, race, national origin, and sexual orientation) is different from my own is an essential part of my college education.	-.511	.611	-1.938	.055
I enjoy courses that are intellectually challenging.	-.998	.320	-2.560*	.012
Aggregate openness to diversity scores.	-1.488	.139	-2.987**	.003

\* Significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).