International Service Learning:
Catalyst for Transformation in Language Learner Identity?

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Abstract

International service learning (ISL) is a course based service activity that meets an identified community need in a foreign country and incorporates reflection encouraging a deeper understanding of course content, personal ethics, and civic responsibility. An increasing number of North American universities offer ISL programs to meet the interests of students hoping to gain international experience and develop cross-cultural awareness through service learning abroad. While there is an abundance of anecdotal accounts to support the claims that combining study abroad experiences with service-learning pedagogy has transformative learning potential, there is a lack of reliable evidence to substantiate such claims (Grusky, 2000). This paper presents the theoretical framework of a qualitative case study exploring the link between cross-cultural sensitivity and student investment in foreign language acquisition. My framework brings together two theories from distinct fields of investigation focusing on the transformation (Kiely, 2002; 2005) in students' cross-cultural sensitivity during the *service* portion of the ISL component, and how this *cultural awakening*, in turn, potentially transforms the students' social identities and their investment in acquiring the target language (Norton, 1995; 2000). The blending of these two theories provides a novel theoretical framework for carrying out research into the efficacy of short term ISL as a tool for foreign language learning *and* cultural sensitivity.

Introduction

This paper introduces the theoretical framework used to guide my examination of international service learning (ISL) in a language acquisition context. As a novel approach to this case study research (Yin, 2014; Stake, 2006), my framework combines elements from Bonnie Norton's (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Williams & Norton, 2012) work on *social identity* and *investment*, with Richard Kiely's (2002, 2004, 2005a, 2005b) *transformative learning model.* This theoretical framework offers a unique perspective with which to research language learning in the ISL context due to the fact that Norton's work is used in the examination of foreign language learning, while Kiely's work was designed to examine ISL from a social justice/global citizenship perspective. When used separately, each theory provides insights into their respective fields; bringing the two together provides a novel framework with which to examine ISL when used as a tool to foster language learning. The focus in this study is on the transformation (Kiely, 2002; 2005) in students' cross-cultural sensitivity due to their interactions with the host communities during the *service* portion of the ISL component, and how this cultural awakening, in turn, transforms the students' social identities and their investment in acquiring the target language (Norton, 1995; 2000). For the purposes of this paper, cross-cultural sensitivity can be understood as attempting to put aside one's own cultural perspective to become aware of, understand, and accept another's culture.

International experiences are important to students, and the value of international service learning programs is becoming more widely recognized. International service learning takes place abroad in community, industry, and/or field environments where students have opportunities to apply classroom learning in real-world contexts. It is an approach to teaching and learning that helps students to link theoretical, abstract knowledge with practical, concrete experiences. As such, both educators and institutions of higher education are increasingly incorporating ISL

opportunities into their curriculum. But does participation in a short-term international service learning experience cause an adjustment to one's cross-cultural sensitivity? Does increased interest in a society's culture increase a language student's investment in language acquisition? While there is an abundance of anecdotal accounts to support the claims that combining service-learning pedagogy with study abroad has great transformative learning potential, researchers feel that more research, particularly longitudinal research, is needed (Crabtree, 1998, 2008; Grusky, 2000; Kiely, 2004; Longo & Saltmarsh, 2011). This study is designed to contribute to meeting that need. It is my observation that, while well intentioned, program designers who are experts in their field of study, but not in ISL may often, and inadvertently, create programs that are not as effective as they could be in terms of producing optimal student experiences. Working towards a PhD in Hispanic Studies, and having facilitated several years of study abroad for language learning, I discovered local service learning and decided to create an international version without realizing that a body of research existed on the subject. As such, my personal experiences have led me to focus my research on studying the experiences of students participating in the international service learning component of a Spanish language program at a university in Ontario (all names are pseudonyms). Study design and data analysis was guided by the following research questions: 1) How do university students understand the relationship between cross-cultural sensitivity and investment in language learning in an international service learning context? 2) If university students feel that they are more invested in language learning after their sojourn than before, why do they believe that is, or is not, the case? 3) Is this transformation maintained over time? 4) How did the cross-cultural interactions during the trip, or other aspects of their experience, contribute (or not) to student investment and to the construction of their identities as language learners?

Program description

Taking into consideration that "participation in a traditional immersion program could be too expensive and time-consuming for some students in professional programs" (Cordero & Rodriguez, 2009, p. 138), the week-long *Alternative Spring Break* style ISL component is designed to offer students a practical, affordable opportunity to experience cross-cultural immersion by combining traditional language classroom and international service learning pedagogies, utilizing a short term sojourn. All intermediate and advanced level Spanish language learners at the University are given the option of traditional classroom instruction only or classroom instruction combined with a local or ISL component. Both the local and international components are comprised of approximately 25 hours of service to the community; however, the local service learning component consists of an hour or two once a week throughout the school year, while the ISL component consists of seven days of immersion in the host community, 5-hour volunteer days, and cultural excursions, etc. It is this last option which is the focus of this study.

Though the ISL component of the language program is still relatively new and changes slightly from year to year—4 cohorts to date—for the most part the structure of the program is consistently maintained. Students who choose to participate in this option give reasons why they wish to participate in the ISL component, describe what they feel they have to offer, and explain why they should be chosen. This exercise encourages the students to begin thinking about some of the larger issues involved in volunteering abroad, such as their personal motivations for participation, ramifications of gift giving, the help imperative vs. voluntourism, and inequalities of power in post-colonial relationships, among others. Students then participate in pre-departure meetings, which are meant to educate them about the community they will be entering, prepare the students for the cultural, socioeconomic, and political differences they will encounter, and address the more administrative aspects of travel.

The week spent abroad takes place during the spring break. During this time the students stay with host families, and during their time abroad visit a retirement home, a school for students with visual disabilities, the local university, and a small community farm. They also learn about the country through visits to historically, politically, and culturally relevant sites. Students complete a reflection before the trip and after the trip, keep a daily work journal while abroad, and give a presentation about their experiences at the end of the 8-month Spanish class.

Description of Study

This qualitative case study examines the experiences of eight students participating in intermediate and advanced level Spanish language classes who have chosen to partake in the service learning component of the course; it is not

a program evaluation outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the ISL program. Using an interpretivist approach to my research design enables me to "rely on the self-reported accounts of lay actors [the participants] as they engage in the various meaning-making activities that constitute their lives" (Scott & Morrison, 2006, p.132), or for the purposes of this study their experiences during the international service learning program. This approach meshes well with my theoretical framework given that transformation, investment, and social identity are all self-perceived. It also meshes well with the tools I have chosen to gather data given that interviews, questionnaires, and personal reflections are all self-reported personal perceptions.

For triangulation of data multiple sources were used. The students participated in pre- and post-trip surveys, pre- and post-trip semi-structured interviews, and submitted documents for analysis. Ten students from previous cohorts were also interviewed adding a longitudinal dimension to the study, as well as giving insights into any factors influencing student outcomes, which may change from year to year. A teaching assistant who facilitated the program, as well as host families and program facilitators from the host community, were also interviewed in order to obtain various perspectives on the students' experiences, and adding more context to the case study. Data analysis began with the creation of a case profile for each study participant based on the above-mentioned surveys and interviews, as well as pre- and post- trip reflective blogs, and on-site daily work logs.

Based on my own personal experience as the designer and facilitator of this program in its first year, I anticipated this study would show that a short term ISL experience can provoke a transformation in social identity, which could in turn lead to an increased investment in language learning. As such, this study explores the potential impact of adjusted cross-cultural sensitivity on investment in language learning. This study also attempts to ascertain if students believe that adjustment in cross-cultural sensitivity takes place due to the interactions with host communities during the service portion of the ISL experience.

Theoretical framework

In creating the framework for this study, I distill elements from Bonnie Norton's (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011) work on *investment* and from Richard Kiely's (2004, 2005a, 2005b) *transformative learning theory*. Norton (Norton Peirce, 1995) states that learners invest in a language, expecting to profit from their efforts by transforming their social identity and thus gain access to a wider range of material and symbolic resources. To incorporate these ideas into the ISL context I blended them with work by Kiely who utilizes Mezirow's (1991; 2000) *Transformative Learning Model* to "provide service-learning educators with a conceptual framework for understanding and fostering transformational learning in international service learning" (Kiely, 2005b, p. 276). Both Norton's concepts of investment and identity and Kiely's model of transformative learning are in agreement with my own research schema in that they focus on how social reality, as well as language learners' understandings of their social reality, are fluid and changing. These theories serve as a guide to understanding the connections between cross-cultural sensitivity, investment in language learning, and the influence that ISL can exert on them.

Investment and Social Identity

For the purposes of this study, the definitions of investment and social identity will follow that of Norton (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Toohey & Norton, 2010), both of which were observed in a culturally interactive ISL language learning context. Norton suggests her concept of investment is "best understood with reference to the economic metaphors that Bourdieu (1977) uses in his work—in particular the notion of *cultural capital*" (Norton Peirce, 1995, p.17). Bourdieu's (1977; 1991) concepts regarding cultural capital, language, and symbolic power are particularly interesting in the context of this study given that he viewed cultural capital as the possession of non-financial assets, such as an intimate knowledge of the intricacies and inner workings of the dominant culture. This study follows majority language speakers of English in their quest to acquire a non-dominant language and knowledge of a non-dominant culture in order to expand their cultural capital.

The concept of investment attempts to capture "the complex relationship between power, identity and language learning" (Norton, 2000, p.10). Norton states that while language learners may be highly motivated to use the

language they are learning, sometimes the relations of power between speakers in certain social situations encourage their silence. Though the language learners in this study are fluent majority language (English) speakers and presumably are accustomed to occupying positions of power during unequal linguistic interactions in their global North home environment, whether consciously or unconsciously, the sojourn abroad converts them into vulnerable novice language learners in their new global South environment. According to Norton and Toohey (2011), investment in learning a language is closely linked with investment in learners' social/cultural identities, both of which transform over time and space. In this specific case, the students' identities are expected to transform as a result of the cultural and linguistic interactions within this inverse power dynamic, which can be interpreted as their *disorienting dilemma* leading to some or all of Kiely's elements of transformational learning (described in the section Transformative Learning Model for Service Learning). Norton feels that the traditional *artificial distinctions* between the language learner and the contexts in which they learn are problematic (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 10, 12). Norton believes that confusion arises due to dichotomous distinctions drawn between the language learner and the social world, which lead to unidimensionally assigning fixed attributes to the individual or the social context (Norton Peirce, 1995, p.11). Leaving the artificial distinctions behind, one must consider the language learner and the language learning context as "changing over time and space, and possibly coexisting in contradictory ways in a single individual" (p. 12). Referencing Weedon's (1987) conception of subjectivity, Norton offers three characteristics of the subject that will guide this research: First, individuals are "diverse, contradictory, and dynamic; multiple rather than unitary, decentered rather than centered" (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 15). Second, the concept that "social identity [is] a site of struggle" (p.15), and third, the recognition of an individual's social identity as fluid and changing over time (p. 16). I postulate that the *disorienting dilemma* described by Kiely and Mezirow (below) may act as a catalyst triggering a transformation in a student's social identity and investment in language learning within the ISL context. For example, one student from a previous cohort had been very discouraged, considered herself incapable of learning languages, and had decided the intermediate Spanish class would be her last. After participating in the short term ISL component of the class, she experienced a marked transformation—she became very enthusiastic about language learning, took part in two study abroad programs, and graduated with Spanish as half of her double major. While this is not likely a representative case, it would seem that the short term ISL program was the catalyst triggering a transformation in how this student viewed her language learner identity.

Transformative Learning Model for Service Learning

This study can be considered an answer to Felten and Clayton's (2011) call for a "gathering [of] evidence based on service-learning's transformative potential" (p.82). I position the previous perspective within the international service learning context through the incorporation of the transformative learning model outlined by Kiely (2002, 2004, 2005a, 2005b). Based on the participants' perceptions, their identities as language learners are understood as multiple, complex, and dynamic and will be examined by the researcher, and to some extent by the participants themselves, for evidence of transformation as a result of the ISL experience. Kiely (2005a) states that service learning provides unique transformative potential due to the powerful connections and significant social relationships that participants develop during their experience, which meshes well with Norton's concepts as outlined above.

Transformative learning theory focuses on how individuals make meaning of their experiences. It also focuses on how significant learning and behavioural changes often result from the way people make sense of problems, critical incidents, and/or ambiguous events. This theoretical framework has explanatory value unique to ISL contexts (Larsen & Gough, 2013). Kiely's work to create a conceptual framework for understanding and fostering profound change in international service learning participants builds on the transformational learning model created by Mezirow (1991, 2000). Mezirow's model includes ten learning processes: 1) a disorienting dilemma, 2) self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame, 3) a critical assessment of assumptions, 4) recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared, 5) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions, 6) planning a course of action, 7) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans, 8) provisionally trying new roles 9) building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships 10) a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 22). Kiely feels that this model is particularly suitable to service learning contexts as it "focuses on how people make meaning of their experiences and, in particular, how significant learning and behavioral change often result from the way people make sense of [problems]" (2005a, p. 6). Mezirow's model is modified by Kiely who

observed five elements of transformative learning: "contextual border crossing, dissonance, personalization, processing and connecting, and emerging global consciousness" (2005b, p. 279).

Transformative learning theory states that perspective transformation is made up of three dimensions: psychological changes in the understanding of one's self, convictional revisions of belief systems, and behavioral changes in lifestyle (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). A key aspect of transformative learning is a shift in frames of reference due to critically reflecting on assumptions and beliefs then consciously making and implementing plans that bring about new ways of defining one's world. Though Mezirow (1991) asserts that the process is fundamentally rational and analytical, I believe this study may show that emotional reactions to a disorienting dilemma are also an integral part of the process. Both Kiely and Mezirow, as outlined above, focus on the processes through which the participants reflect upon and make sense of their experiences.

Initial Findings and Final Thoughts

Producing university graduates who have the ability to competently interact in a global context is increasingly important to universities in a world that is internationally connected. Some academics even feel that it is the duty of the democratic university to produce active and morally responsible citizens (Carney, 2004). As such, students have come to expect that they will develop linguistic flexibility, international experience, and intercultural competence during their university careers. Institutions of higher education are increasingly being challenged to meet these demands and enhance the quality of learning for prospective students (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Research illustrating the strengths and weaknesses of internationalization programs such as ISL is thus becoming increasingly important. Given that international service learning is being touted as a tool to produce a variety outcomes in a variety of settings, it follows that researchers would benefit from utilizing theoretical frameworks tailored to examining those various outcomes. Utilizing a framework that combines language investment with ISL transformation – such as I have done – potentially draws attention to the language learning aspect of transformation in this context which could otherwise be overlooked.

It was expected that this study would demonstrate a positive correlation between cross-cultural sensitivity and language investment in an international service setting as well as provide insights into why this correlation might occur; however, a preliminary analysis of the data reveals that this may not be the case with the cohort that participated in this study. This cohort appears to have experienced very little transformation as a result of their experience. This is noteworthy considering the literature in the field suggests that most participants experience some form of transformation as a result of their involvement in ISL programming. These preliminary findings warrant further examination and justify an expansion of the study to include previous cohorts in order to determine if this cohort is an exception or an accurate representation of this specific program. Findings suggest it would be ill-advised to assume that all ISL programs produce transformation for all students, especially in diverse learning contexts. Utilizing a multi-layered theoretical framework – such as the one I have employed – may better provide researchers, program designers, and facilitators valuable insights into the key factors necessary to produce meaningful transformation when utilizing ISL as a tool for language learning. Ultimately, the goal of such research should be to develop a robust body of empirical work into all aspects of international service learning in order to discover its advantages and limitations, thereby facilitating the design of ISL programs which lead to increased language learning and equity for all participants and communities involved in such projects.

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