# Spanish L2 Students' Perceptions of Service-Learning:
# A Case Study from Ecuador

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This article examines students' perceptions of the relationship between the service-learning component of a four-week study-abroad program in Ecuador and the development of their linguistic and cultural competency. The data come from two sources: (1) students' responses to a survey composed of Likert-scale and rank-order items and (2) student journals written for an introductory translation course after the completion of several service projects relative to dental care and hygiene. The quantitative survey solicited students´ perceptions of the effectiveness of the service-learning component and other characteristics typical of study-abroad programs. In general, students perceived a positive relationship between their participation in service-learning projects while abroad in Ecuador and the development of their linguistic and cultural proficiency. Analysis of students' reflective journals concerning the service-learning experience resulted in the identification of several themes within the areas of language-related and culture-related learning, contributing to the discussion around the complexities of acquiring linguistic and cultural knowledge through International Service-Learning (ISL).

*Keywords:* international service-learning; linguistic competence; cultural competence; Ecuador

Service-learning projects focused on cultural and linguistic experiences are appearing more frequently in courses of all disciplines and levels but particularly in second- and foreign- (L2)[1] language syllabi (Beebe & De Costa, 1993; Bloom 2008; Long, 2003). The benefits of service-learning for language students are quite intuitive given its experiential, goal-oriented, communicative, and interpersonal nature. The body of research on service-learning in language development has grown exponentially in the last decade (Clark, 2000; Grabois, 2007; Smith & Moreno-Lopez, 2012; Strother & Díaz-Greenberg, 2007), with numerous studies and books focusing on second-language students' perceptions of service-learning and its effect on their cultural and linguistic knowledge development (Bloom, 2008; Carney, 2004; Nero, 2009; Wurr & Hellebrandt, 2007). Service-learning opportunities abroad allow language students to reflect on how they perceive other cultures, how they view their own linguistic development, and how they develop successful communication skills with monolinguals of the target language by accomplishing concrete and necessary tasks. Through intense experience and reflection, L2 students who participate in international service-learning (ISL) opportunities can develop into more culturally and linguistically adept students.

This research represents an exploratory and descriptive study aimed at examining Spanish L2 students' perspectives on the relationship between the service-learning component of a four-week study-abroad program in Ecuador and their language and culture learning. The focus of this research was not to objectively quantify students' gains in linguistic learning or increases in cultural competency but rather to highlight students' subjective perceptions of ISL and its relationship to their linguistic, cultural, and interpersonal learning. This approach is in keeping with Schulz's (1996)

claim that "while opinions alone do not necessarily reflect the actual cognitive processes that go on in language acquisition, perceptions do influence reality. Indeed, some would argue that perception *is* reality for the individual learner" (p. 349). Hence, as more L2 study-abroad programs offer a service-learning component, it is critical to explore students' perspectives on the intersection between service-learning and language and cultural development. From the students' perspective, the ISL experience stands in contrast to second-language acquisition during International Study Abroad projects, many of which focus on classroom language experience in an immersive environment; in contrast, the educational foundation of international service-learning in L2 centers on students developing their second-language and cultural understanding entirely through immersion in community-based projects. This study will focus on how students in the ISL environment perceive and articulate their own L2 acquisition and cultural self-development through journal reflection.

After reviewing literature relative to international service-learning, we present the particulars of this group and their experience. Both a quantitative analysis of their responses to a language survey questionnaire (see Appendix A) as well as a qualitative analysis of students' service-learning journals (see Appendix B for assignment description) are included in the discussion section. We sought to shed light on this particular group´s experiences by addressing the following questions:

1. How did students characterize the relationship between their service-learning experience and their individual language learning while studying abroad in Ecuador?
2. What attitudes and reactions – linguistic and cultural – surfaced from students' journals relative to their overall experience while completing the service-learning projects?


# Review of the Literature

## International Service-Learning

Service-learning is a curricular component of a course which provides an opportunity for students to develop knowledge and skills in content through service to the community. The community can be defined in many different ways, but the service component of the course should focus on an identified need in the community, foster a sense of civic duty on the part of the student, and include critical reflection on learning (Arenas, Bosworth, & Kwandayi, 2006). The recognition of service-learning as an important pedagogical tool in academic learning is based on its merit in bringing the subject alive in a way that cannot happen in a classroom setting (Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009). For language courses in particular, community-based projects enhance the curriculum because they provide opportunities for students to communicate in the target language in an authentic setting with native speakers. These service-learning courses may include projects focused on a need in the local community (Bloom, 2008; Heuser, 1999) or based in an international community (Morris, 2001; Smith & Moreno-Lopez, 2012).

In the international setting, courses with a service-learning core have been growing for a number of years. International projects arise from all academic disciplines, including education (Lowe, Dozier, Hunt-Hurst & Smith, 2008; Nero, 2009), nursing (Amerson, 2010), engineering (Borg & Zitomer, 2008), history (Greenberg, 2008), and the social sciences (Wessel, 2007). While subject matter objectives have always been interwoven into the goals of these ISL courses, an increasing number of programs focus on the linguistic and communicative competencies that students can develop through ISL (Nero, 2009; Shively, 2010) and the cultural transformation of students who experience service abroad (Amerson, 2010; Wilson, 2011).

## Linguistic Competence in the ISL Setting

In discussing linguistic competence, Collentine and Freed (2004) note the importance of studying second-language acquisition (SLA) in various contexts: "The study of SLA within and across various contexts of learning forces a broadening of our perspective of the most important variables that affect and impede acquisition in general" (p. 158). Given the unique and intensive nature of ISL, the linguistic variables that can affect a language learner's competency through this experience are important to examine. Morris (2001) and Long (2003), for example, both reported that language students who completed international service-learning projects experienced a marked increase in their motivation to learn the target language (i.e., Spanish) and also an increased desire for more contact with the Spanish-language community.

Another variable which impacts language use and acquisition is the development of self-confidence in communicating in the target language (Hummel, 2013). ISL specifically provides opportunities for L2 students to develop confidence in the target language through conversation and interaction with local, native speakers of the target language. During their service-project experiences, language students must negotiate meaning with native interlocutors using local dialects and in unfamiliar yet authentic language settings. This is where international service-learning can differ significantly with other study-abroad courses focused on language development. While students in the language classroom abroad may work with a local, native language teacher, the classroom setting may be quite familiar. Students will use textbooks, complete activities, and interact with other students who are also learning the language (Serrano, Llanes, & Tragant, 2011). In an ISL language course, the language objectives may be the same but the focus is on authentic interaction with native speakers in order to accomplish specific community-based tasks. In this unfamiliar setting, language students are forced to use the language on a daily basis, utilizing all of their language skills in order to communicate functionally in the target language.

## Cultural Competence in the ISL Setting

In fact, it is the unfamiliarity with the context and the speakers that actually fosters the greatest capacity for learning language and developing cultural competence. While some educational methods may strive for comfort and predetermined objectives in the classroom setting, service-learning advocates tension as a learning opportunity. When students are forced to confront new situations or situations for which they have preconceived ideas, they cannot help but acquire new ways of looking at the world (Johns & Tompson, 2010; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010; Urraca, Ledoux, & Harris, 2009). Amerson (2010) argues that service-learning introduces "students to cultural values and beliefs relevant to their targeted population" (p. 21). Through ISL, when second-language students interact with others who may differ linguistically and culturally, they are forced to create mechanisms in order to function and thrive in an unfamiliar environment. This is particularly true of L2 students who represent the linguistic and cultural minority.

Locklin (2010) refers to the critical importance of this dissonance—of placing students in uncomfortable and challenging situations that provoke students to question preconceived ideas about others and develop their own cultural understandings. ISL can contribute significantly to the appreciation of diversity for students who engage in meaningful projects (Levesque-Bristol, Knapp, & Fisher, 2010). Fuller (2007) tells us that "the work of helping students understand cultural difference is vital to the general education of university students" (p. 321). This concept of developing values and diversity appreciation through ISL can intertwine with developing language skills within those same projects. ISL experiences outside of students' own language and culture are rich with opportunities for developing life-changing experiences and fostering understanding of language and cultures (Fain, Rossatto, & Slater 2002; Gilin & Young, 2009; Wurr & Hellebrandt, 2007). Theorist Richard Kiely (2005a, 2005b) has written extensively about the concept of "high intensity dissonance" as a key component of successful international service-learning projects

(2005b, pp. 10–12). High intensity dissonance refers to situations in which students are placed in circumstances of vulnerability and weakness, giving them the opportunity to challenge their personal assumptions about the differences of oppressed people and to develop an authentic sense of belonging with people of different backgrounds, including language and culture. For example, Kiely noted that his students' intense emotional experience with the peoples of the Nicaraguan community provoked strong changes in their worldview, particularly with regard to social issues.

## Measuring Self-Perception of Competencies in the ISL Setting

In order to examine students' cultural and linguistic understanding and development through international service-learning courses, this study utilized student self-reflection as one important tool to measure the level of awareness and development. It is a critical aspect of any service-learning course for students to reflect on how they perceive the service-learning project and its impact on their overall experience and learning. As reported by Wilson (2011), service-learning goes beyond traditional methodologies in the college classroom: "[A] college's purpose is not to transfer knowledge but to create … experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge… to make students members of communities of learners that make discoveries and solve problems" (p. 208). In particular, Wilson found that students who completed a service-learning project in a local social-services agency and reflected on their learning developed more understanding and empathy for the population with which they worked than those who did not work in a community setting.

The framework for the service-learning reflections in our study stemmed from the work by Gray, Murdock, and Stebbins (2002), who specifically assessed the effect of their study-abroad program, which included five learning objectives: (1) understand how cultures and societies are formed, sustained, and evolve; (2) have empathy for values and perspectives of cultures other than students' own; (3) identify and discuss international issues and other cultures; (4) have communicative competence in a second or third language; and (5) experience or have a desire to experience a culture other than students' own. The results for the current study illustrate students' perceptions of how the international service-learning project contributed to their linguistic and cultural development through personal reflection. It is clear the ISL project served as the catalyst for the university students to explore their own linguistic and cultural competency through community-based experiences.

# Method

## Background

During the summer of 2010, a group of 26 university students and three professors (two Spanish professors and one sociology professor), mostly from institutions in the Southeast, traveled to Ecuador for a four-week study-abroad program with an explicit ISL focus. All students and professors came from schools that are members of an educational consortium (i.e., the Kentucky Institute of International Studies), whose goal is to promote international education programs for its students, including study-abroad programs. Students could enroll in one of three courses in accordance with their own perceived needs and desires, and each was taught by a distinct faculty member. The courses included: an introductory Spanish-English translation course, a sociology course targeting modern social problems in Ecuador, and a course centered on ISL. Although most of the 26 students had some Spanish proficiency, several students in the program had no functional proficiency in Spanish and could be considered monolingual English speakers. However, all of the 18 students enrolled in the Spanish translation course and whose journals and survey responses make up the current data had some level of proficiency in Spanish.

## Service-Learning Component

As the study-abroad program to Ecuador began to take shape nearly a year before departure, the faculty decided that the program would include a significant service-learning component, which would serve as a unifying framework for all courses offered and for the selection of target destinations. An American dentist was recruited to accompany the group and agreed to lead the dental "brigades," or clinics, in spite of his lack of Spanish proficiency. The original plan was to engage students in several day-long dental brigades to serve underprivileged communities in a suburb of Quito and in remote Afro-Ecuadorian communities in northern Ecuador near the border with Colombia. Following these dental brigades, arrangements had been made for the American study-abroad students to travel to a boarding school located along the banks of a tributary to the Amazon River so they could work alongside high school students focused on agricultural sustainability. Each of the professors included in their course syllabus tasks related to students' participation in the service-learning projects.

In spite of months of pre-departure planning and constant communication with contacts at each site, several unexpected and last-minute alterations had to be made to the service projects described above. Fortunately, the changes to the first, two-day dental brigade in Quito were extremely positive as arrangements were made with a humanitarian organization in Ecuador to provide additional local dentists as well as portable equipment for a nominal fee. At this site, all 26 students in the program—half on the first day and half on the second day, regardless of the classes they were enrolled in—participated in a variety of activities depending on their Spanish proficiency. Those with Spanish proficiency were asked to complete several different tasks and rotated periodically between tasks, which included: (1) organizing the assignment of turns to patients and calling out numbers when a dentist was available; (2) conducting basic intake interviews, asking patients why they wanted to see the dentist, and explaining the limitations of the dental care available; (3) serving as assistants to the Spanish-speaking dentists; (4) serving as interpreters to the American dentist and his wife working as an assistant; (5) providing dental hygiene and dietetics lessons to small groups of patients waiting to see a dentist; and (6) engaging children in creative games to pass the time and conversing with adult patients waiting to be seen. On both days the brigades began at approximately 9:00 a.m. and went until 6:00 p.m.

A similar scenario had been planned for the underprivileged Afro-Ecuadorean communities north of Quito in the Province of Ibarra, near the Colombian border. However, after arriving in Ecuador and just days before the group was to travel to these remote areas, we received word from the host dentist who was to work with our dentist and with whom we made all the necessary arrangements that the province's newly appointed Minister of Health was opposed to the idea. We immediately altered our plan, and although we still visited the communities, we decided instead to have the study-abroad students organize games with local students, teach dental hygiene at each school, and distribute free toothbrushes and toothpaste we had brought from the United States.

The final service project that had to be altered was the extended visit to the lodge in the Amazon jungle and the adjoining boarding school focused on sustainability. Evidently, there had been a misunderstanding as to when classes would be in session and when the local students would be available to work alongside our students. Nonetheless, we were able to adjust our plans and engage the study-abroad students in several small-scale projects with local students who had not left for the break, such as harvesting rice and other crops grown in the fields owned by the school. One group of students provided the same dental hygiene lessons to a nearby elementary school and passed out free toothbrushes and toothpaste. Two of the study-abroad students preparing for medical school were allowed to spend time in the local health clinic shadowing the health care providers. Serendipitously, these logistical difficulties in arranging service-learning encounters abroad caused many students to reflect on the connection between culture and logistics, especially in the case of the cancelled dental care brigades among the remote Afro-Ecuadorean villages.

## Course Description

Although each of the three courses from the program included projects and assignments directly related to the international service-learning experiences, the data for this particular study came from the 18 students enrolled in the introductory Spanish-translation course entitled *Advanced Spanish through Translation.* Since the course is conducted primarily in Spanish, all 18 students had some Spanish proficiency, although to varying degrees. As part of the course, students were required to write detailed journal entries reflecting on their participation in the two major service projects, namely the dental brigades conducted over two days in Quito and the dental hygiene presentations offered to remote Afro-Ecuadorean schools in northern Ecuador (see Appendix B for the description of the journal assignment as it appeared in the syllabus). Students were allowed to write their two journal entries in English or Spanish and in each were asked to (1) describe their activities in approximately half-hour increments, (2) provide a personal reflection to those activities in regard to culture and language, and (3) relate their experiences to the concepts described in the assigned readings for the course.

Scholars in service-learning have repeatedly identified reflection as one exercise by which educators can increase the chances that students will delve deeper into their own personal development, their cultural and linguistic knowledge, or gaps therein (Ford, & Hale, 2005; Nero, 2009; Purmensky, 2006; Wessel, 2007). Reflection transforms experience into authentic learning. At the time of the experience, the students are "in the moment" and do not have time to fully understand the experience; it is only later, when they have time to write and reflect, that students begin to analyze their feelings, deconstruct their experience, and put it in the perspective of their previous schema.

## Students

With the exception of one graduate student in Spanish, all students were undergraduates. Of the 18 students enrolled in the introductory Spanish-translation course, approximately a third were male and two thirds were female, and the group represented a variety of racial backgrounds such as Anglo American, African American, Asian American, and Hispanic American. Only one student was a Heritage speaker of Spanish while the rest of the students were L2 speakers of Spanish. The proficiency level of the students covered an extremely wide spectrum, ranging from the native proficiency of the Hispanic student to the near-native competence of the sole graduate student to the somewhat elementary level of several undergraduate students who had only recently completed their first upper-level course in the Spanish major. While many were Spanish majors or minors, not all students were pursuing Spanish as a formal program of study at their respective universities.[2]

## Data Sources and Anslysis

The quantitative data came from a brief language survey (see Appendix A) completed by all 18 students in the translation class that aimed at determining students' perceptions of the impact of several aspects of the program and the international service-learning experience on their language development. The survey comprised three Likert-type questions and two rank-order questions which required students to focus on their expectations for their learning as well as assess those aspects of the program they deemed most beneficial. The surveys also included space for students to provide additional comments and clarify their survey responses. After reviewing all 18 students' responses, one student's responses to the rank-order items was excluded from the analysis since they were completed incorrectly and were not interpretable.

The three Likert-type items were analyzed using the calculation of a simple mathematical average across all students' responses as well as a Rasch-based analysis of students' responses which

allowed for comparisons of endorsability, or the likelihood that a certain item would receive a higher rating (i.e., agree or strongly agree). In the case of the rank-order items, an average rank for each item was computed rather than an inferential statistic, such as Friedman's test, due to the small number of surveys analyzed. The results of these analyses are outlined in the discussion section.

The primary objective of this research study was to examine this group of students' perceptions of the contribution of the service-learning component to their individual language and culture learning during their study-abroad program in Ecuador. The qualitative data for this study came from two lengthy journal entries from 16 of 18 total student journals written for the introductory translation course described above entitled *Advanced Spanish through Translation.*[3] Since the journal assignment instructions (Appendix B) required students to reflect on specific cognitive, linguistic, and cultural issues related to their participation in the service-learning projects, these topics served as a *de facto* coding scheme for the qualitative analysis. However, the researchers also included students´ references to constructs of an affective and conative nature, especially those that surfaced frequently across multiple journals. Rather than include a subheading for each of the many thematic areas touched on by students, noteworthy and representative excerpts were placed under one of two broad categories: *Language-related Learning* or *Culture-related Learning*. In general, excerpts included under *the Language-related Learning* rubric touched on topics such as regional variation; psycholinguistic processing; acoustic quality of the speech stream; nonverbal communication; task characteristics and task-specific demands; and self-assessed level of language proficiency, among others. The *Culture-related Learning* section highlighted instances in which students made comparisons between societal mores and values of the host country and those of their own, as well as personal reflections on familial and racial matters. Clearly, these categories should not be considered absolute or mutually exclusive as some comments could arguably be classified under both headings. Five of the students chose to write in Spanish while the remaining 11 opted to write in English. All journals were handwritten, and some students produced as little as two pages per entry while others wrote four or more pages per entry. Based on concepts recommended by Hubbs and Brand (2010) in structuring and analyzing student reflection, in this project students were guided by the instructor in their journal entries so as to provide direction and focus on the language they were using and their cultural experiences.

# Results

## Quantitative Survey Data

The results from the analysis of the three Likert-type items regarding students' expectations for their learning during the study-abroad program resulted in the following order, where (1) indicates the item most likely to be endorsed and (3) the least likely:

(1) cultural understanding of Ecuadorean peoples,
(2) contribution of service projects to language learning, and
(3) improvement of Spanish language proficiency.

However, in the space provided for short explanatory comments after each item, most students referred to language improvement, and only one student explicitly mentioned culture: "My understanding of the Ecuadorian culture tripled due to this experience, I also have a great appreciation for their ways. My Spanish has improved." Several students related their perceived improved Spanish proficiency to the service-learning projects, as one student did in the following way: "By participating in the service-learning I used my Spanish a lot and felt like my proficiency did improve." However, another student noted that "it was not necessary to use as much Spanish as I thought it would be—in the Service Projects we *could* use Spanish but because we didn't have to I

didn't feel that I spoke and improved as much as expected." These seemingly contradictory perspectives could be a reflection of students' differing expectations, proficiency levels, personalities, or previous experiences with study abroad.

When students reflected on their cultural competency on the survey, they reported a stronger feeling of improvement. Students overwhelmingly commented on cultural understanding and felt that their cultural competency increased more consistently than their language proficiency and that this was specifically due to the ISL component. This could be due to the lack of a homestay and a more consistent environment for L2 exposure. Students' perceptions of their linguistic improvement might also have been affected by their rather disparate levels of language proficiency at the outset of the program. Students consistently reported greater improvement of cultural understanding than linguistic-related learning, which may be because, for many, it was their first trip abroad.

The first rank-order item requested that students rank five aspects of their communicative competence in order from most improved to least improved with "1" indicating the facet that had improved the most. The second rank-order item elicited students' rankings of five particular activities that might have impacted their "overall Spanish language development" and also used "1" as the top rank and "5" as the lowest rank. Table 1 displays overall rank of the response options in descending order with the arithmetic mean in parentheses.

**Table 1.** Student Response to Language Survey

| Student Response Option | Final Overall Rank (Mean Rank) |
|---|---|
| Demonstrating sufficient confidence | 1 (1.76) |
| Communicating effectively orally | 2 (2.29) |
| Understanding language directed to me | 3 (2.82) |
| Producing grammatically accurate language | 4 (3.82) |
| Choosing culturally appropriate language. | 5 (4.29) |

In sum, students felt that the most improved aspect of their Spanish was their confidence "to engage others in conversation." Conversely, students ranked their ability to choose "culturally appropriate language" as the least improved. Several students' comments mentioned the development of greater confidence as the most improved aspect of their language competence overall. One student commented that "my confidence and pronunciation improved more than anything," while another noted that "I felt like I definitely improved in my confidence with Spanish skills." Yet another student expressed her satisfaction with overcoming fear of speaking with others: "I went into this program hoping to overcome my intimidation of speaking Spanish with more fluent or native speakers. I think I did a good job meeting that goal." This is consistent with the literature, as reported by Shively (2010), whose students felt that in studying language abroad, one of the areas where they perceived the greatest improvement was in the proper use of pragmatics, or contextualized social language.

In the case of the second rank-order item requiring students to compare the impact of five activities on their language learning, the results (Table 2) indicated that students perceived the completion of the service projects as the most influential activity on their language development and their use of Spanish with classmates as the least influential.

Several students mentioned the contribution of the service-learning projects to language learning, as exemplified by the following quotes: "The service projects definitely contributed the most to improving my language skills because I was able to build relationships with people and carry on long conversations"; "I needed to communicate with native speakers a lot during service-learning projects"; "The work at Yachana, Chota, and Quito was very beneficial because we actually spoke

**Table 2.** Impact of Activities on Language Development

| Student Response Option | Final Overall Rank (Mean Rank) |
|---|---|
| Completing service projects | 1 (1.41) |
| Completing daily tasks | 2 (2.00) |
| Completing assignments for Spanish class | 3 (3.59) |
| Using Spanish with professors | 4 (3.76) |
| Using Spanish with classmates | 5 (4.24) |

with the native population." Nevertheless, other student comments focused on the impact completing daily tasks had on their Spanish language development: "I can do HW in Spanish in the U.S. I can't order food or get around town in Spanish at home." "The interaction with the community is where my Spanish increased the most, buying food, touring the cities, etc." One student highlighted the lack of Spanish use among program participants: "Talking to people was what helped me more than anything. My classmates & I didn't take the initiative to speak in Spanish on our own accord."

## Qualitative Journal Data

The two lengthy journal entries the students completed as part of the translation course gave them an additional voice in reflecting on their own development as L2 Spanish users and represent a treasure trove of instances in which students make explicit connections between the service-learning experiences and their own linguistic and culture learning. As mentioned previously, students were guided by the assignment instructions to specifically focus on language and cultural issues in their journal entries. Understandably, students' journal entries ranged from simplistic observations to more complex, thoughtful reflections on language and culture learning, with several recurring themes emerging. The ensuing discussion represents a sampling of relevant themes with corresponding quotes from student journals that directly resulted from engaging in the service-learning projects. While we recognize that in many cases students' experiences could be classified as both language-related *and* culture-related, we adopted these broadly defined categories to facilitate readability and coherence. All Spanish-language comments have been translated by the authors into English, accompanied by the original, unaltered Spanish text. Similarly, English-language excerpts have been reproduced verbatim and have not been altered to standardize grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

### Language-related learning
In their reflective journals many students noted language-related episodes that were unique to using and learning Spanish in a Spanish-dominant society rather than in a classroom. The most commonly mentioned linguistic issue pertained to word usage and language variation. Students quickly recognized that in Ecuadorean Spanish the word *odontólogo* (dentist) was preferred over *dentista*; *microbio* (germs) over *gérmenes*; and *manilla* (bracelet) over *pulsera*. While many students reflected on the issue of variation in their journals, one student's comments were particularly insightful:

> [T]he teacher corrected one of the words in our presentation. She said to say "microbios" intead of "gérmenes" because the kids would understand better. My dictionary had given me both of these words when I looked up "germ".… However, clearly regional differences exist even within Ecuador.

Although several of these terms are used in other parts of the Spanish-speaking world and are not limited to "regional" uses, students ascertained that dictionaries, and by extension textbooks, are

limited in their ability to prescribe accurate real-world usage patterns. One student was able to extrapolate beyond the word level and mentioned dialectal differences after struggling to understand interactions with children: "It was a realization that Spanish too has dialects and some groups, especially remote groups like the AfroEcuadorian communities, are going to have a different way of speaking."

Given the realities of a service-learning experience abroad where language is not necessarily altered to facilitate comprehension, it was not surprising that students mentioned how much acoustics and the quality of the speech signal affected their comprehension. Two students noted the detrimental effect the protective face masks had on their ability to comprehend the Spanish-speaking dentists as they assisted them. "It was so hard to understand her when she had the mask on and I could tell she was getting frustrated with me." Another student commented, "that was very difficult for me…when I talked to the dentists, who had masks on, and I realized how much I depend on the movements of the mouth" ("*esto era muy difícil para mí. lo mismo ocurrió cuando hablaba a los dentista, quienes tienen máscaras, y realicé que depend mucho en los movimientos de la boca*"). Another student commented on the difficulty she had with ambient noise: "[S]ome of the communication was halted or complicated by noise and commotion....Physical distraction and unclear speech were the two biggest comprehension challenges for me." In contrast to these students' experiences, one student noted the tremendous aid paralinguistic strategies, such as hand gestures, represented for her: "I could figure out what he wanted me to do more based on his hand motions than really what he was saying."

Another language-related theme that figured prominently in student journals was the recognition that the context of language use and the nature of the target task drastically influenced the amount of language used as well as its quality. Without explicitly mentioning buzz words in L2 learning and teaching like *information gap activity*, *pushed output*, *task-based language teaching*, or *negotiation of meaning*, several students made mention of the benefits of these strategies and constructs unwittingly, as the following journal excerpt illustrates:

> It wasn't a situation where I could just give up and use English if something was too difficult to understand. I really had to keep working at it and seeking different angles to approach something until the patient and I could finally understand each other. It may have taken a while in some cases but when that "ah-ha" moment of realizing we both understood came, it was such a great feeling.

Other students' characterizations of their self-assessed language proficiency were much more emphatic, such as "There is no hiding it, my Spanish needs a lot of work," and even colorful: "[G]oing to the dental brigade was like throwing me to the lions!"

However, several students recognized that not all language tasks and contexts are created equal in terms of facilitating language learning. In reflecting on the dental hygiene presentations during the school visits, one student noted, "I didn't really have an excuse to start a conversation with anyone like I did with the *finchas [sic]* [medical history questionnaire] in the first brigade. I think being forced into the situation where I had to get information … made me use my Spanish." Similarly, a student used the word *interactive*, reminiscent of Long's (1996) work with the Interaction Hypothesis, in reflecting on the disparate tasks the two brigades offered: "I didn't have as much verbal interaction with the people at these brigades … because doing the *finchas [sic]* in Quito was so interactive and I didn't do that at the other brigades." These excerpts represent just a few of the instances in which students alluded to the drastically different nature of the tasks required of them during the dental brigade in Quito and the dental hygiene presentations in remote schools in northern Ecuador.

Several students noted that service-learning tasks were incredibly motivating as they felt that their contribution was meaningful rather than trivial. One student wrote that "Seeing the people so excited about dental information really made me feel like I was making a difference." Another

student focused on the active nature of the service-learning tasks by observing that "they assigned me as a translator and assistant to Dr. XXXX, which I really loved as it made me feel like I was in the middle of the action" ("*me acignaron como traductor y alludante [sic] de el Dr. XXXX, lo cual me encanto porque sentía que estaba en acción"*).

A final aspect of the context of communication that several students mentioned was the turning of the tables, as it were, while speaking with interlocutors who had little to no experience with limited-proficient Spanish speakers. Many students noted this aspect in a positive light: "Never had I been on the other side of a language barrier. The people were so nice ... I am a very aggressive and dominant person … but at the dental brigade I was conservative, just absorbing so much information… that was very new to me." Nevertheless, other students' linguistic weaknesses came directly up against the real-time exigencies of the service-learning task at hand as one of the Ecuadorean dentists apparently had had enough of trying to be understood, and "she stopped actually telling me what to do and instead began to move my hands where she wanted them." The student continues: "I'm sure it was frustrating for her working with someone who … couldn't seem to understand what she wanted." Another student encountered similar frustrations from a "37-year old man who didn't have a lot of patience with me and didn't understand why I couldn't understand him" *("un hombre de treinta y siete años no tuve mucho paciencia para yo y no entiendes mis problemas con su hable [sic]"*). Not all of the frustration originated with the adult Spanish speakers. Unlike many anecdotal accounts of native monolingual children being ideal interlocutors for second-language learners, one student reflected on his interactions with children in this way: "Speaking with the children was an entirely different experience compared to that of speaking with the adults…Whereas the adults were willing to speak … slower when I couldn't understand[,] the kids could not seem to comprehend that I couldn't understand them and would continue speaking in the same manner."

While some students were impacted by the difficulties of communicating in the L2 to native speakers, others reflected on how qualities such as compassion, attitude, and interpersonal skills transcended language. One student more proficient in Spanish was assigned to interpret for the American dentist and his wife as they extracted a tooth from a very nervous young girl, and after making a slight grammatical error she noted in her journal:

> But she didn't tell me I was incorrect… I learned that compassion is a universal concept. She didn't need me to speak perfectly. All she wanted was my support, my hand, a hug, and my eyes that said "Everything will be alright"…It was a very emotional revelation for me…I realized that we don't need language to transmit the concept of love. (*Pero ella no me dijó que yo estaba incorrecta…Aprendí que la compasión es un concepto universal. Ella no necesitaba que hablé perfectamente. Solo quiso mi apoyo, mi mano, mi abrazo, y mis ojos que dicen, "Todo va a estar bien"… Era una revelación muy emocional para mi…Realicé que no necesitamos una lenguaje para el concepto de amor.*)

Another student noticed the tremendous impact that attitude and the desire to communicate can have on interpersonal communication, both the desire of the non-native speaker to be understood and of the native speaker to understand. She writes: "[C]ommunication is more about attitude than language itself…. [I]f people see that you are serious, and trying to help them, they are always willing to work with you to communicate no matter your skill level." Similar reflections on the importance of the message arose from another student's journal: "I was able to communicate not only on a language level, but a … cultural level which was also very important in order to convey what I wanted … So much of translation is more than speaking the same language as the person." Finally, one student mentioned she felt more comfortable "due to my interpersonal skills … I feel like I could have all the language, analytical, listening and recall, etc. skills, and if I wasn't comfortable working with people I don't know, I would still be a little lost."

## Culture-related learning

While students included myriad references in their journals to what might be reasonably construed as culture learning, we have chosen, due to space limitations, to highlight those we felt were most reflective of what Kiely (2005a) has called "high intensity dissonance" in regard to cultural experiences. This dissonance was manifest in students' realization of the idiosyncratic nature of their own society's culture, worldview, and value system. Moreover, students' reflections on their place in our globalized society and their culturally-conditioned understanding of the *other* appeared to fall along a continuum from more to less aware. Some students did not go beyond a rather simplistic "benevolent American" point of view; for instance, one student noted her goal to "become a global citizen" immediately before declaring that she "felt like a 'mini-humanitarian'." She continues: "My heart is happy because so many people have it much worst *[sic]* than I do, I am truly blessed." While many students bristled at what they perceived as the Ecuadorean dentists' cold and indifferent attitude toward patients, others demonstrated greater awareness and were less quick to pass judgment, as this student's entry illustrates:

> Some of the students felt like some of the doctors from Ecuador were very harsh with their patients but I think more than anything it is foreign to see doctors deal w/ patients in a different way than we are used to seeing in the US.

One student made a very poignant observation about how she thought Americans would respond to a role-reversal if limited-proficient English speakers were assisting with dental care in the U.S.:

> I kept thinking what if places were switched & students from Ecuador with medium exposure to the English language was *[sic]* helping give free dental service to US citizens, I wonder how patient we would be – I thought I already knew the answer… & it's sad.

This student's insightful observation may have been triggered by a little boy whom she met who apparently told her that "it's necessary to learn English where he's from but for many people from the United States, they don't have to learn Spanish." She adds parenthetically, "Dang, it was so interesting…it was sad."

A rather detailed reflection on what one student perceived as the contrasting values and cultural mores of the American and Ecuadorean cultures surfaced when she compared children from the two cultures this way: "The children were so full of life and content to just color or play soccer. I kept thinking about the kids … at home and how they always complain about how bored they are if they don't have Nintendo DS, their i-pod, their computer, or their TV."

This same student was amazed at the surprised response of one girl when asked whether she got along well with her brother: "She stared at me blankly for a moment and then said, 'He's my brother. We don't argue.'" The student's final analysis of the two cultures was rather revealing as she observes that "I stopped feeling sorry for this community for having so little and started feeling a little sorry for our culture for often being so self-involved and dependent on our surroundings/situations/ material wealth to be happy."

After visiting several Afro-Ecuadorean communities in northern Ecuador, several students commented on the issue of race and how it influenced their perceptions of this segment of Ecuadorean society. As is the case in many Latin American countries, individuals of African descent tend to be marginalized by mainstream society. The marginalization of this particular group of Afro-Ecuadoreans is not only social but geographic since their small villages are relegated to extremely remote and mountainous areas of northern Ecuador, an apparent indication of the attention paid them by their government. Upon noticing a greater reticence among the Afro-Ecuadorean children to interact with the study-abroad group, one student hypothesized that "maybe the reasoning for this is that we were mostly white visitors and perhaps they thought we viewed ourselves as superior, just as they're used to being treated in Ecuadorean society." Another student, who was hesitant to mention

race when reflecting on the last-minute denial by the health minister of our group's proposal to offer free dental care to the remote villages, commented that "it just seems to be that people of color, especially of African descent seem to be so supressed *[sic]* everywhere around the world… [I]t just made me think what the real reason … behind not allowing free aid to those who needed it?! It's ridiculous!" For one of the African American students in the group, the visit to the Afro-Ecuadorean villages was transformative and generated a sense of solidarity:

> [T]hese two days have had an impact on my life, it was bigger than just improving my Spanish. Never have I seen black people who speak Spanish, they are my people, we look similar, have similar history, but they are Afro-Ecuadorians! There *[sic]* ancestors were taken to South America like mine were taken to North America. But yet they differ from me; they don't speak English, they don't live in the U.S., they don't have hot water, or shoes or paved roads, yet they are so happy and grateful to be where they are…I felt as if they trusted me; they asked me questions, kissed me on the cheek…

# (De-)Limitations

As primarily a qualitative and exploratory case study of one class of 18 students, comparisons of any sort (e.g., linguistic, cognitive, cultural, conative, affective, etc.) to traditional study-abroad programs or other naturalistic contexts would be unwarranted. While we cannot claim that the high-intensity dissonance and perceptually salient language-related episodes noted by the students would not have been experienced during a traditional, classroom-based study-abroad program, students' journal entries do serve as strong evidence that, in this case, the service-learning projects deeply impressed students linguistically, culturally, socially, and interpersonally. Clearly, future research should include more students so that more robust inferences could be made regarding the generalizability of these data. It would also prove beneficial if a more comparative approach were adopted that tracked the linguistic gains and levels of cultural sensitivity demonstrated by two groups of study-abroad students of similar composition, with one engaged in intensive, interactive, and frequent service-learning while the other follows a traditional approach with classroom-based learning and evening and weekend culturally based excursions.

# Conclusion

This study examined American US students' perceptions of their service-learning experiences via a short, quantitative questionnaire and individual journal entries completed for an introductory translation class while studying abroad in Ecuador. Rather than comment on logistical and programmatic issues in this paper or adopt a comparative, quasi-experimental approach, we have focused exclusively on students' perspectives and have quoted extensively from students' journals to give full voice to their perceptions and analyses of their lived experiences. As the journal and survey data attest, the international service-learning experience appeared to imbue cultural and linguistic *dissonance* to these students' study-abroad program. It remains to be seen whether this dissonance equals, surpasses, or fails to reach that achieved by traditional programs. Nonetheless, this dissonance seemed to enhance students' awareness of themselves as second-language users of Spanish by developing their confidence and motivation to use the language, to identify individual proficiency gaps, and to understand dialectal variation.  It also brought into relief certain aspects of their own perceived cultural mores and values (e.g., materialism, individualism, racism, etc.). In addition, many students mentioned how motivating it was to feel like they were making a difference and giving back rather than just taking from the host country and culture. Not surprisingly, we believe these learning outcomes are ones that second-language educators and university programs will need to achieve to adequately and appropriately prepare their students to become globalized

citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Indeed, these students' voices appear to argue for more, and more meaningful, service-learning in study-abroad programs at all levels of language learning.

# Appendix A
## Language Survey

Thank you for completing this anonymous language survey. Your honest, sincere responses will help us determine how your perceived your language learning experience during this study abroad program.
YOUR 4-Digit #: _____

1. Please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements in regard to your personal expectations/goals for this study abroad program where "1" indicates strong <u>disagreement</u> and "4" represents strong agreement and Not Applicable (NA) indicates no previous goals/expectations, written or otherwise.

a.) My Spanish language proficiency improved to the extent that I had expected.
(Strongly Disagree)        1        2        3        4 (Strongly Agree)        NA
b.) My cultural understanding of the peoples of Ecuador reached the level I had hoped.
(Strongly Disagree)        1        2        3        4 (Strongly Agree)        NA
c.) The contribution of the service projects to my language learning was what I had expected.
(Strongly Disagree)        1        2        3        4 (Strongly Agree)        NA
Please explain your response: _____
_____
_____

2. Please rank (1-5) the degree to which each of the following aspects of your Spanish language ability have improved where "1" indicates the most improved facet and "5" indicates the least improved:
_____ a. producing grammatically accurate language in Spanish
_____ b. understanding accurately language directed to me
_____ c. communicating effectively in oral, face-to-face encounters
_____ d. demonstrating sufficient confidence with my Spanish to engage others in conversation
_____ e. choosing culturally appropriate language specific to the dialect/region when communicating
Please explain your response:_____
_____
_____

3. Please rank (1-5) the impact each of the following activities have had on your overall Spanish language development where "1" indicates the activity that has most contributed to improvement and "5" indicates the least influential activity?
_____ completing homework assignments, readings, and projects specifically for my Spanish course during the study abroad
_____ completing the service projects that were part of the program, i.e., dental brigades in Quito, school visits in Chota, volunteer work at Yachana.
_____ completing daily tasks that arise from being in another country that are <u>not</u> unique to study abroad programs, i.e., buying food or other items, asking for directions, reading signage in the streets/hostels, hearing ambient Spanish spoken by others, etc.
_____ using Spanish as a means of communication with fellow study abroad participants outside of class time
_____ using Spanish as a means of communication with professors on the study abroad program outside of class time
Please explain your response: _____
_____
_____

# Appendix B
## Syllabus Description of Journal Assignment

**Interpreting Reflection Journal (15%)—Reflexiones sobre la interpretación**.
A major component of this study abroad program is the dental health fairs that students will assist in administering. In order to encourage student reflection and learning as they participate in the dental health fairs, students must draft a detailed journal entry after each day's participation of at least 275 words minimum. Each day's entry should include the following with its own clearly marked heading:

1. Description = Describe in objective detail exactly what you did throughout the dental health fair using approximately 30 min. increments to organize your narrative;

2. Reaction = Explain your subjective and self-critical thoughts, reactions, and emotions regarding the experience, the patients, your expectations, your role, and any other such emotions or reactions;

3. Concepts = Make explicit connections between your individual experience and the concepts discussed in the 2 preparatory readings making sure to use appropriate terminology. Also comment on specific structures, words, or phrases that were particularly easy or difficult for you to interpret. Finally, reflect on issues of language processing, short-term memory, language interference, pronunciation, cultural differences, etc., that facilitated or impeded your ability to offer quality interpreting services.

## Notes

1. Although we acknowledge the difference between second- and foreign-language learning—the former referring to contexts in which the language learned is also the majority language of the community and the latter to contexts in which the target language is not spoken widely in the surrounding community—we have chosen the commonly used acronym *L2* to refer to both types of contexts as a way to improve readability throughout the article. As such, our use of the phrase *second language* should be understood to subsume both types of contexts.

2. This demographic information was not formally collected from students but is reported here anecdotally from one of the co-authors who also was the instructor for the translation course.

3. All 18 students were asked for permission to use their de-identified journals for research purposes, and 16 journals were collected.

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