

Learning Spanish in Internships and Study Abroad

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1. Introduction

This paper analyzes linguistic abilities and cultural strategies that American college students can employ to solve problems in the workplace while performing internships with Argentine multinational and national corporations. The study concerns student acculturation to Argentine business practices, the use of Spanish, and effectiveness in the workplace.

We aim to build a bridge between academia and the business world by studying Spanish majors who work, study, and travel abroad (Gerner & Perry 2000, Koester 1986, Nathanson & Marcenko 1995). One cannot underestimate the importance of such work, given the new realities of the global economy and the emergence and expansion of supranational organizations such as the EU, NAFTA, and the Mercosur (Buchas 2000a, 2000b).

We support our arguments with a case-study of two American students from the University of Tulsa who participated in a semester-long of study abroad in La Plata, Argentina, a senior majoring in international business and language and a junior specializing in marketing. To my knowledge, there are no studies dealing with the acquisition and use of linguistic and cultural abilities by students working in Latin America (see Koester 1986, Rawis & Akpanudo 1981).

2. Method

2.1 *The students*

Data were obtained from a detailed case study of two female American students from the University of Tulsa who participated in a semester-long study abroad program in La Plata, Argentina. Student 1 is a 23 year-old Caucasian senior majoring in international business and language; she had previous experience in Latin America doing social work as a missionary in Chile for about three months. Student 2 is a 19 year-old African-American junior specializing in marketing; she has never been to Latin America. Student 2 has had some business experience working as an intern in support and auxiliary activities for Price/Waterhouse/Cooper in Oklahoma during the summer. Students were selected to participate in the program because, while they are both quite typical mid-western American students with little international background, they appear to be highly motivated to work, learn, and succeed in the business world and to adapt to foreign settings and culturally diverse situations. They were expected to participate in activities which could be measured for increasing performance, including dealing with Argentine co-workers and clients, conducting marketing studies, visiting work-sites with company sales personnel, doing customer service, telemarketing, etc., all in Spanish. It is worth noting, there are great cultural differences in the ways these business activities are conducted in Argentina and the U.S. (Buchas 2000b).

The first language of both students is English, and they had studied Spanish for five semesters prior to their study abroad experience. As part of their academic program in Argentina, which includes approximately 15 hours of classroom contact per week, they took an internship class at La Plata University. Students worked for nearly five months, approximately 120 hours at SIKA Argentina and at Geosur, a large Swiss multinational that specializes in building materials and a small Argentine company that provides engineering services, respectively. Students maintained almost daily contact by phone and e-mail with Juan Buchas, their supervisor and mentor, co-author of this paper, director of the Concrete Division at SIKA and owner/CEO of Geosur. Thus, Buchas

offered permanent field- as well as phone- and e-mail-coaching to the students throughout the length of the study.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

Some of the data were gleaned from eight reports dealing with concrete problems and case-studies analyzing differences in business practices, including the evaluation of sales, marketing, and customer service practices in, as well as the personality traits of personnel working for, Argentine (SIKA and Geosur) and multinational corporations (McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Home Depot, Coca Cola, Hilti, etc.), written by the students from the point of view of the American student working in Argentina. The reports were written in English. Students also wrote a final report in Spanish analyzing their experience in Argentina. Additional data were drawn from materials that document the students' practical work experience. Such documentation includes the following: records of students' contacts with clients in person and on the phone; a supervisor's evaluation of the student's acculturation to Argentine practices, language use, and effectiveness in the work-place; this includes analytic skills and problem solving strategies that the students developed in response to marketing, customer service, and troubleshooting problems similar to those affecting Argentine employees daily; and documents which demonstrate the students' strategies for keeping appointments and timetables, employing telemarketing strategies, for learning cultural differences during meetings, etc. It is worth noting, since the second week of the interview, students were 'in the line of fire', as it were, having contact with clients, while accompanied by sales personnel and technicians, at the headquarters of SIKA and Geosur and at work-sites and other sites.

Data were analyzed by Buchas, the students' supervisor, co-author of this paper, who was in close contact with the students throughout the study. Not only did Buchas lecture, provide reading materials in Spanish, evaluate, and correct them, but he served also as a mentor, helping and coaching the students during their tenure as interns in SIKA and Geosur (see above). The analysis includes: (i) acculturation to Argentine business practices (on a scale from 0 to 90); (ii) use of Spanish in the work-place (on a scale from 0 to 60); and (iii) effectiveness in the work-place (on a scale from 0 to 90)

3. Results and discussion

As noted above, both Student 1 (senior) and Student 2 (junior) appear to be willing to adapt to a foreign setting as well as to culturally diverse situations, both at work and in the foreign society in general. This is true since the first semester of the internship. For example, from the beginning of the internship, both students drank mate (an infusion very popular in Argentina), instead of coffee, at work and at home, and socialized almost exclusively with Spanish-speaking Argentines not only at work but during weekends and after work in coffee shops, night clubs, church, etc. However, during the first month of the internship, both students show low levels of acculturation to Argentine business practices, use of Spanish, and effectiveness in the work-place, as shown in Tables 1 - 3.

Table 1 Acculturation to Argentine business practices (from 0 to 90)

Student 1	Student 2
15	5
40	10
50	40
70	50
90	70

Table 2 Use of Spanish in the work-place (from 0 to 60)

Student 1	Student 2
20	10
30	20
50	25
50	35
50	35

Table 3 Effectiveness in the work-place (from 0 to 90)

Student 1	Student 2
20	10
40	20
60	20
90	60
90	70

Since the beginning of the second month of the internship, however, both students experience intensive contacts, and need to communicate in Spanish, with clients and suppliers as well as Argentine colleagues in the office and outside of it. At this stage, both students start showing increasing yet different levels of acculturation to Argentine business practices as well as to the use of Spanish and effectiveness in the work-place (see Tables 1 - 3). Student 1 shows more eagerness at work, is more aware of business details, appears to be more interested in learning about doing business in general, and uses Spanish at work more frequently than Student 2. This is not surprising, because, as noted in Section 2.1, Student 1, a senior, is older, more schooled and experienced in both Spanish language and business, and more traveled in Latin America than Student 2, a junior. Different levels of maturity appear to be related to both age and experience. In

addition, Student 2, perceives working at a corporation as something very far away in her future, while Student 1 is currently applying for her first job with Hilti in Madrid.

During the third month of the internship both students are required to fulfill assignments and to study case-studies of increasing complexity. Both students show similar levels of acculturation to business practices (see Table 1). For example, in a report dealing with a sales case-study, Student 1 is aware that the Argentine sales-person is a generalist. On a daily basis, he or she must fulfill assignments that the U.S. sales-person does not normally do to a high degree, such as delivery and customer service. She wrote:

“[One example of being customer focused] would be if Juan had delivered the product himself in his own car. That is what I called being customer focused. Treat the customers like there’s no tomorrow. That example fits in well with the suggestion of the author. He says “sell ideas, not just products”. Well, yes! You are selling you. You make the customer know absolutely that he will be taken care of...”

Most notably, Student 2 shows a fourfold increasing level of cultural awareness in this area as well (see Table 1). In a report analyzing the failure of Pizza Hut vs. the success of McDonald’s in Argentina, she is aware of key aspects of Argentine culture that need to be grasped in order to succeed with the marketing of new products. She wrote:

“[Many businesses fail] to fulfill their potential because of a wrong mindset. Many top level executives don’t want to face the fact that the tactics they are using aren’t working and instead of trying to modify their strategy, they ignore the problems until it gets to big to handle and the business goes down. For example, when Pizza Hut came to Argentina to start its business, they tried to use the same methods that worked in the United States. That turned out to be very ineffective because many Argentines come from an Italian background and they weren’t accustomed to the types of pizza usual in America. McDonald’s, however, has managed to make a name for itself here.”

During the fourth and fifth months of the internship, both students were required to work with much more independence in organizing joint operational and executive tasks with administrative personnel at Geosur, such as the design of time-tables for meeting clients and providers. In addition, both students had more freedom to initiate tasks, make appointments, and organize work plans in conjunction with the staff of Geosur. They met increasing demands to perform at work, to understand and to apply different methods of work found in Argentina that are at points very different from U.S. business practices, and to show a willingness and ability to correct mistakes during the performance of tasks. Both students maintain or increase levels of acculturation to Argentine business practices, use of Spanish, and effectiveness in the work-place (see Tables 1 - 3). For example, Student 1 is aware of key cultural aspects of Argentine business culture that are crucial to succeed, such as the lack of importance given to punctuality by the culture of the Argentine work-place and the informal relations between business people and clients. In her final report, she wrote (in Spanish):

“Diferencias culturales ¡Qué países distintos! Ya sabía que habría diferencias pero para trabajar con nativos [sic] y ver las diferencias cara a cara es increíble. Primero, la diferencia es la hora. Una vez, porque tuve un problema con un micro llegué media hora atrasada. Finalmente cuando entré en el negocio estuve disculpándome mucho [sic]. Juan [Buchas] me miró y me dijo: “No estás atrasada, es solamente 10:30.” Como si no fuera nada en particular. Me preocupo por la hora y no puedo llegar un minuto atrasada.”

[Cultural differences—what different countries! I already knew that there would be differences but to work with the natives [sic] and see the differences face to face is incredible. First, the difference is time. Once, because I had a problem with a bus I arrived half an hour late. Finally when I went into the business I was excusing myself a lot [sic]. Juan [Buchas] looked at me and

said: “You are not late, it’s only 10:30.” As if it were no big deal. I worry about time and I can’t arrive a minute late.]

“Había muchas diferencias en las relaciones con los clientes y como hacen negocios en Argentina. Las relaciones con los clientes son mucho mas informales. Sin embargo se tiene que tener una relación muy buena con alguien para hacer negocios con ellos. No es como en EEUU donde nadie sabe nada de nadie; y todos hacen sus negocios y regresan a la oficina. En Argentina todos hablan sobre sus familias y del fútbol, todo menos negocios. Luego de 40 minutos de charla hablan 15 minutos de negocios y vuelven a su oficina. Esta diferencia es gigante para la gente estadounidense. Esto no podría ocurrir en EEUU. Tenemos que acostumbrarnos.”

[There were many differences as far as relationships with the clients and the way they do business in Argentina. Relationships with the clients are more informal. However one must have a very good relationship with someone in order to do business. It’s not like in the USA where no one knows anything about anybody; and everybody does their business and then goes back to his office. In Argentina everybody talks about his family and soccer, everything except business. After 40 minutes of small talk they talk for 15 minutes about business and go back to the office. This difference is huge for people from the USA. We have to get used to it.]

In addition, in reports analyzing employee incentives and the interruption of crews during peak productivity times, Student 1 shows a keen awareness of key aspects of Argentine business culture, methods, and effectiveness in the work-place. She wrote:

“If goals are altered in the course of the incentive programs, there will be many problems. For example, an employee could be very close to winning something according to the old standards, then the standards change and he is very far from gaining anything. The employee worked hard to gain the prize initially and then after working so hard, because the standards changed, he has to work even more to gain the bonus. This harms the employees. If the standards keep changing, the employees are not going to keep trying to earn the incentives. This happens a lot in Argentina (standards changing).”

“In some parts of Argentina, it is very difficult to find workers who are well schooled in their trade or well educated (to work construction sites). Because of this, the instructions should also be simple when they are given here. The instructions should be frequent and simple. This will help avoid the interruptions. In the U.S. the instructions can be less frequent but they must be given. It must also be made sure that the workers understand the instructions. In Argentina, productivity does not necessarily drop with so many interruptions. Interruptions in due time saves time in the long run. This is different from the U.S. where workers need less supervision.”

4. Summary and Conclusion

We have analyzed linguistic abilities and cultural strategies that American college students, who participated in a one-semester study abroad program in Argentina, employed to solve problems in the work-place while performing internships with SIKA, a Swiss multinational corporation, and Geosur, an Argentine company. The study measured student acculturation to Argentine business practices, the use of Spanish, and effectiveness in the work-place. Throughout the study, we found that students that had intensive contacts with Spanish-speaking co-workers, clients, and other personnel, show an increasing acculturation, use of Spanish, and effectiveness in the work-place. Different levels of performance in these areas are due to the fact that Student 1, a senior, is not only older and more mature but she has had more experience with both Spanish language and business, in school and outside of it, than student 2. As the results show, throughout this study, both students acquired key insights about cultural aspects of doing business in Argentina. Further, as Tables 1 - 3 show, the acquisition of Argentine business culture and Spanish language appears to correlate with increasing effectiveness in the work-place by American

students. However, it seems that seniors can profit from the internship experience to a greater extent than juniors, because seniors are usually older, have more experience with language and business, and appear to be more interested in learning details about doing business. Most importantly, for juniors, working at a corporation may seem as something very far away in the future.

We believe that the participation of students in an internship program, and the cooperation between academia and the business world in the U.S., Latin America, and elsewhere can be of benefit to both the student and the corporation. The reasons are manifold. First, as the student becomes a business executive, it is possible to learn and apply further cultural and linguistic skills as well as to increase the effectiveness of the work-force in national and multinational corporations. Second, in order to enhance the acquisition of cultural, linguistic, and business skills, rather than relegating the student to support and auxiliary activities in the corporation, he or she can be empowered to participate in more challenging activities in both language and business, such as organizing operational and executive tasks with staff at the corporation, and meeting and talking on the phone with clients and suppliers, etc. Finally, as this study seems to demonstrate, it is important for both the student and the corporation to combine practical experience in business with academic activities, such as analyzing case-studies, participating in group discussions, writing reports, etc. Thus, in this paper we hope to have succeeded in providing a firm first step towards building a solid and lasting bridge between academia and the business world.

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