

Research examines how study abroad preps teachers for diverse student population

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Providing study-abroad experiences that mimic some of the experiences of immigrant students and facilitate critical thinking about global issues is an effective method for preparing teachers of English as a Second

Language (ESL), according to two Penn State researchers.

Daniella Martin, associate professor of psychology at Penn State Brandywine, and Elizabeth Smolcic, assistant professor of education at University Park, explained that the effort to prepare [teachers](#) who are both knowledgeable about the multiple learning needs of English learners and comfortable interacting within culturally and linguistically mixed spaces is currently a critical concern for [teacher education](#).

"People in teacher education often do not recognize this as an important goal," Martin said. "As a result, a lot of diverse [students](#) in this country are inadequately served by teachers in our schools. Because today's teachers are not just dealing with native English-speaking students, they need a whole new set of additional skills."

Martin and Smolcic's research sets out to examine the ways in which ESL teachers' understanding of cultural differences and their confidence to teach are altered by participating in a cultural immersion experience in another country.

Participants came from a group of teacher-learners who recently completed Penn State's Teaching ESL Certificate Program with an applied five-week teaching and learning experience in Ecuador. The program included a mentored teaching practicum with Ecuadorian learners of English, a homestay with an Ecuadorian family, and the exploration of indigenous cultures.

Data were collected through one-on-one interviews conducted by Martin and her associates before, during, and after the trip. The study is funded by a Research Initiation Grant from Penn State's College of Education.

An important element of the program is that teacher-learners get a taste of what it's like to learn a new language by going through the process

themselves.

"They get a firsthand experience of what it's like to be a minority in a country they have never been to before, and how hard the process of learning a second language really is," Martin said. "Teacher-learners who complete the program talk about the incredible amount of compassion and empathy they feel for their students because they understand exactly what it's like to be in their shoes."

"Having been able to work with students in Ecuador helps us make sure that we're culturally aware in terms of where our students are from and what experiences they're bringing to the classroom," said Courtney Wood, a local teacher who completed the certificate program. "We can integrate that into how we're teaching English."

Martin said the study she and Smolcic conducted will also aid in the structuring of various study abroad programs, allowing administrators to know which elements of study abroad actually develop student teachers so they can tailor programs to better meet their learning needs.

"This study helps us understand what kinds of learning experiences will boost students' ability to connect with people across multiple nationalities, languages and countries, to become very effective teachers and global citizens," she said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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