

# Latinx students studying abroad can face discrimination, according to study

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University of Oregon study abroad students in Segovia, Spain. Credit: University of Oregon

U.S. Latinx students studying Spanish while studying abroad can encounter discrimination and condescending attitudes from their instructors, according to a growing body of evidence.

Those negative attitudes can be embodied and transmitted through

instructional practices that result in missed opportunities for learning Spanish among students who grew up speaking Spanish, known as heritage speakers, two University of Oregon researchers have found.

Devin Grammon and Sergio Loza, both assistant professors of Spanish sociolinguistics in the UO's College of Arts and Sciences, documented how such negative attitudes affected students at one study abroad program in a paper published in *Heritage Language Journal*.

A comment they heard from a Spanish language instructor in the study abroad program in Cuzco, Peru, exemplified those attitudes: "Many of the students here, for example, come from (U.S.) Latino families. But they don't speak ... I mean they speak Spanish, but they don't know anything about grammar. They speak Spanish very well, but no, they don't know anything about what it is, do they?"

Some instructors without the necessary training have a view that "there's something inherently deficient among children of immigrants of Latin Americans raised in the United States," Grammon said. "You saw that from the very top (of study abroad programs), from administrators to teachers, these negative attitudes playing out at different levels."

Those attitudes, and the focus on prescriptive grammar, stigmatized heritage learners' knowledge and ability in Spanish.

Grammon said he and Loza view study abroad programs and learning a foreign language as inherently beneficial for students, but they want to shine a light on the fact that study abroad programs don't always serve students well. This is especially true for students of color, especially when they're spending tens of thousands of dollars to participate, he said.

Previous studies have reported on negative study abroad experiences and limited learning outcomes for many heritage language learners who

faced rampant discrimination and marginalization while abroad.

That contrasts with the treatment of white students who did not grow up speaking Spanish and who are routinely praised for any knowledge of Spanish.

Grammon and Loza's paper focuses on the use of oral corrective feedback, a common technique in which an instructor corrects a student orally during a lesson. A growing number of studies have found that such feedback can lead to poor results for heritage speakers. For example, instructors may mock and correct students' lexicon, signaling their Spanish does not conform to academic standards, resulting in heightened student anxiety as well as sensitivity regarding the notion of "standard" Spanish.

To better understand how oral corrective feedback was affecting students, Grammon and Loza studied one instructor's interactions with two Latina students from the United States during a study abroad program in Peru over 12 weeks in 2016. The program's focus was on prescriptive grammar as taught by the Royal Spanish Academy.

They found grammar correction was the overwhelming focus of oral corrections, rather than focus on vocabulary, pronunciation or perceived influences from English.

One problem that limited learning was the use of exclusionary grammar terms such as "pluperfect," "preterit," and "imperfect subjunctive." The students were unfamiliar with the terms, leading to prolonged oral corrective feedback episodes in which the students appeared to struggle to understand the feedback.

When the instructor evaluated the students' grammar, she described their use of the language as "simplistic," "nonexistent" and failing to meet

expectations. Those evaluations contributed to the students' negative self-perception and caused them to withdraw from interacting with members of the host society.

In an interview with the program's administrator, Grammon and Loza found the same negative attitudes toward U.S. Latinx students. The administrator said any problems these students encountered were internal psychological ones and that such students were "arrogant," "in denial of their own Latino physical features," and "wishing to be treated like Americans."

One example where oral corrective feedback proved to be negative involved the use of the word "haiga" or "haigan." A form of is/are/have, haiga is like the word ain't in English in that it is widely used but technically incorrect.

When the students would use haiga, the instructor would simultaneously tell them that it doesn't exist and that it was widely used in the host community.

"What happens in these types of contexts, that form in particular becomes stigmatized in an academic setting," Grammon said. "It's only Latino students who are being targeted for this."

"For students, it's confusing," Loza said.

Loza, the son of Mexican American parents, said he encountered a similar dynamic when taking Spanish in college.

"In many ways it served to exclude ways I use language with my family, the way I was taught by my parents and how I talk with friends and my community," he said.

When they go home, if they speak Spanish as taught, "the educated Chicano steps back to the community and speak differently when compared to their own community. They become an outsider," Loza said.

"When you go home and speak that Spanish, your family is going to say, "We don't know who you are anymore," Grammon said.

Loza said he would like study abroad and [foreign language](#) programs to be aware of the issues raised in their paper and to encourage the programs to follow the type of teaching used at the University of Oregon.

"This is how you teach Spanish to Latinos who already come with Spanish from home," he said.

Said Grammon, "Not all programs are equal. Just because it's a [program](#) with a great name and reputation doesn't mean it will serve all students well unless we hold them accountable."

Many students feel stigmatized during their study abroad experiences, and have terrible experiences with their host families, Loza said.

"We're here to make sure in our corner of the universe in academia that our [students](#) have the best experiences," he said.

**More information:** Devin Grammon and Sergio Loza, Missed Opportunities: Oral Corrective Feedback, Heritage Learners of Spanish, and Study Abroad in Peru, *Heritage Language Journal* (2024).  
[brill.com/view/journals/hlj/21/1/article-p1\\_3.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/hlj/21/1/article-p1_3.xml)

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