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# Intercultural competence in pre-study abroad participants: Exploring intercultural attitudes, knowledge and ideas about intercultural communication prior to a sojourn

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## **Abstract**

Despite a more encompassing assessment of study abroad programs, assessment of study abroad programs are still dominated by pre/post, quantitative survey instruments (Salisbury, 2015). Quantitative instruments can help understand development over time, yet they are insufficient in the assessment of what is learned or developed during a study abroad program (Deardorff, 2015). A better understanding of current knowledge, attitudes, and skills can assist effective intercultural training prior to, during, and following a study abroad participant's sojourn. Through semi-structured interviews with participants ( $n=4$ ) prior to their study abroad, this study aims to discover an understanding of the intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills that students possess or believe are important in intercultural communication. Through semi-structured interviews, attitudes of curiosity and openness were monitored. Knowledge of the contact culture was largely surface level in nature. Finally, students described the importance of forgiveness, understanding, non-verbal communication, and flexibility in intercultural communication.

## **Introduction**

This study is part of a larger study where we endeavored to facilitate a more student-centered approach in helping students prepare to study abroad. One component of our seminar focusing on preparing students for their study abroad experience involved conversations with current study abroad students via Skype.

In video conversations over Skype, students planning to study abroad were able to ask current study abroad students about their experiences. The current study abroad students ( $n=4$ ) were in Australia, South Korea, and Canada. In the larger study, we were interested in both groups, the current study abroad group and future study abroad group.

For the current study abroad group, we were interested in their intercultural competence before, during, and following their study abroad. Research in study abroad tends to focus on the immediate study abroad experience and can often ignore long-term development. Study abroad is a relatively short period in one's university experience and little is known how students use or interpret their experiences later on in their university experience. Following a study abroad, students may say their attitudes, skills, or knowledge improved due to their study abroad experience. Without an understanding of the students' intercultural knowledge, skills, or attitudes prior to their sojourn, it is difficult to verify development. This part of our larger study aims at exploring their intercultural competence prior to study abroad. An understanding of the pre-study abroad intercultural competence may offer us better understanding of their experiences during and following a sojourn. This will support interventions during the sojourn, assess development, and enable long-term support throughout a higher education curriculum.

## **Theoretical background**

### **Intercultural competence**

For this study, intercultural competence is defined as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2008, p. 33). Effectiveness is the ability to accomplish one's goals in an interaction. Appropriateness is an ability to interact in a manner deemed satisfactory by the interlocutor (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Deardorff (2006) sees intercultural competence as a skill that takes years to develop.

### **Models of Intercultural competence**

Both Bennett's (1993) Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

and Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence conceptualize the development of intercultural competence as a process. Bennett's (1993) DMIS suggests that intercultural competence is a process that moves from ethnocentric positions of denial, defense, minimization to ethnorelative positions of acceptance, adaptation, and finally integration. While the DMIS is a helpful model, it does suggest that integration within a culture is the desired outcome. This might not be the goal for a sojourner based on their identity and differing values.

For this study, Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence provides a useful model to conceptualize the development of the participants in this study. The process model (see Figure 1) sees attitudes of curiosity, openness,

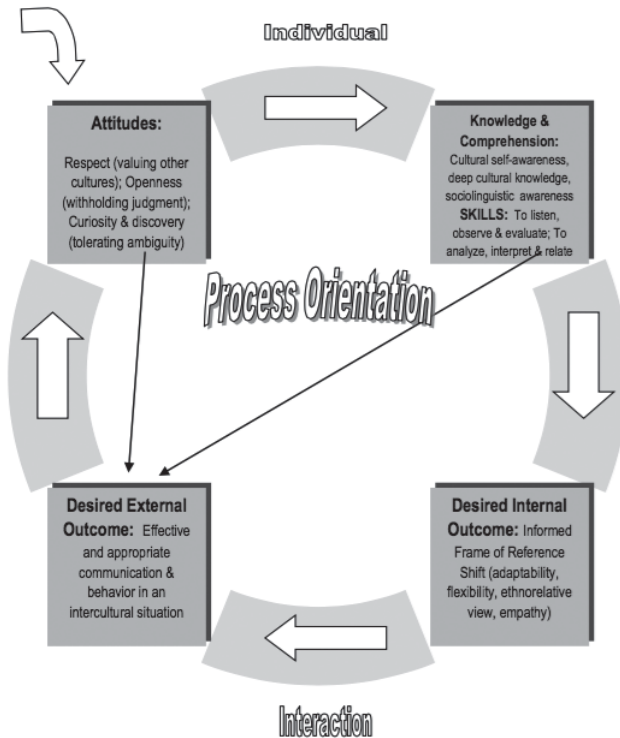


Figure 1. Process model of intercultural competence Deardorff (2006)

and respect as necessary to start the process of intercultural competence. Through a willingness to get out of one's comfort zone, and value other cultures, one can develop the necessary knowledge and skills for a certain degree of intercultural competence. To interact effectively and appropriately, one needs a certain degree of cultural self-awareness, cultural-specific knowledge, and deep cultural knowledge (Deardorff, 2006). To build one's knowledge, an intercultural speaker utilizes the skills of listening, observing, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, and relating. Knowledge and comprehension then can lead to a transformative learning experience where one's internal frame of reference is shifted. The culmination of attitudes, knowledge, and change of perspective lead to an interaction stage where one can interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations (Deardorff, 2012). Because of the importance placed on the initial attitudes of openness, curiosity, and respect, Deardorff's (2006) model provides a useful method of understanding the intercultural development prior to a sojourn.

## Method

### Participants

For this part of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants ( $n=4$ ) prior to the sojourn. Participants were third-year English majors at a small, foreign-language focused, private university in Japan. The participants selected to study abroad at universities in Australia, Canada, and South Korea (see Table 1). For convenience, participants were selected because they were students in our seminar course on study abroad.

Table 1. Participant information

Participant	Age	Gender	Destination
Participant 1	20	Female	Canada
Participant 2	20	Female	Australia
Participant 3	20	Male	Australia
Participant 4	20	Female	South Korea

## Procedure

Weeks prior to departure, participants were asked to participate in an interview. Participants were asked questions about their reasons for studying abroad, previous intercultural experience, expectations, knowledge about the host culture, concerns, coping in a new environment, and knowledge of intercultural communication. Interviews were transcribed and coded for components present in Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence.

## Results

Pre-departure interviews demonstrated some evidence consistent with the attitudes of openness, curiosity, and respect and knowledge of one's own culture. This section will highlight examples of the intercultural attitudes of openness, curiosity, and respect participants possessed. Next, this section will provide examples of knowledge of one's own culture as well as other cultures the participants share. Finally, this section concludes with the participants' ideas about intercultural communication.

## Attitudes

Participants were asked about their reasons for studying abroad. Responses from participants showed attitudes of openness and curiosity through a willingness to step out of their comfort zone. Learning different ideas was mentioned by two participants as one of their reasons to study abroad.

*I want to learn various ideas from various people and be independent.*(Participant 1)

*I want to go to Australia because I want to learn from different cultures and different ways of thinking.* (Participant 2)

*Australia has many countries people and is multicultural* (Participant 3)

Participant 4 mentioned their interest in the contact culture as a reason for studying abroad.

*I wanted to go Korea, so in order to go to Korea, I have to study in English, but I wanted to study Korean, but there is no (Korean language) class here (at our university) ...I like*

*K-Pop, but I also like the customs, history and language of Korea.* (Participant 4)

Another participant mentioned friendship as a reason to study abroad.

*I expect to be able to make many friends from all over the world.* (Participant 3)

When asked about what problems they may encounter, participant 3 describes how some Japanese may struggle to communicate abroad. However, participant 3 believes he has a willingness to communicate with others. This comment demonstrates a degree of cultural self-awareness.

*I am not so shy so I talk with people easily, but I cannot make myself understood very well. Japanese are shy, so they don't speak or talk to other so much and they will have a hard time to listen to English. They might get homesick or friendsick.* (Participant 3)

## **Knowledge**

The previous comment by participant 3 shows a certain degree of cultural self-awareness and stereotyping. In addition to deep cultural knowledge of the contact culture, cultural self-awareness is an important component of intercultural knowledge (Deardorff, 2006). When the participants were asked about what they knew about their destination, the contact culture, they mentioned the following:

*Canada is safe and many various people. Canada is near America. St. Lawrence in near Toronto. I want to go to Toronto. Toronto there are famous spots like Niagara Falls and there are a lot of nature, and food, maple syrup, sports...Canadian hockey and (it's) very cold. I don't know much (about the campus) but I search on Google Street, so I think it's a good place.* (Participant 1)

Participant 4 mentioned knowledge she had developed from her Korean friends.

*I have some friends from Korea. I know about school life and job hunting. Ah Korea students have it harder than Japanese because job hunting is more difficult. Most students*

*have study in the morning and after school and they go study by themselves. High school and university students do that. Oh, and there is no club activity. They really concentrate on studying, but they also like to hang out from school and even the girls in high school like make-up. There are many food stalls outside and they also like karaoke. Oh and Korean students go to university more than Japanese so Japanese high level students and just because you go to a good university, it does not mean you will get a good job, you have to perform to well.* (Participant 4)

Participant 2 attributed her knowledge of Australia from a class she took at her university on Australia.

*I took a class about Australia and I learned about Aborigines and immigrants from England. Big country. Third biggest country. Brisbane is not a big city, no beach, not countryside.* (Participant 2)

### **Intercultural communication**

Participants were asked about their ideas about the concept intercultural communication. Responses show an importance of knowledge, forgiveness, understanding, adaption, and non-verbal communication to communicate across cultures. Participant 1 offers a fairly straightforward conceptualization.

*Intercultural communication is communication with people who have another culture.* (Participant 1)

Participant 2 mentions an importance of knowledge of one's culture and the other culture in intercultural communication.

*To communicate with others from other countries and understand their culture. Talk about myself and my country with others.* (Participant 2)

Participant 4 describes the importance of forgiveness, understanding, and adapting one's behavior.

*I think it is forgiving and understanding. My friend went to Korea. She said Chinese students eat other student's food in the refrigerator. I was really surprised about that. But the Chinese students eat it. For Japanese, Japanese never do that. But almost all Chinese do that. It's a bad thing, but I will forgive or change my action. What is obvious is not obvious. This is stressful and can cause fights. (Participant 4)*

When asked to asked to elaborate more on the rationale behind the actions, participant 4 responds with the following comment:

*Well it's difficult to understand. But I think most Chinese do not have a brother or sister. It's related to politics. One child policy. I think...that's a big cause. Maybe they don't know about...If they have a brother or sister, so they understand, but they don't have such thinking. (Participant 4)*

The following comment from participant 3 shows an importance on non-verbal communication for intercultural communication.

*Ab...it sounds difficult, and we don't have to use the same language, we can express ourselves through body language, facial expressions, or atmosphere (Participant 3)*

The comments from four participants show the importance of communication, cultural self-awareness, cultural-specific knowledge, forgiveness, understanding, flexibility or adaptation, and non-verbal communication.

## **Discussion**

These initial interviews demonstrate an emerging degree of intercultural attitudes of openness and curiosity, knowledge of other cultures as well as one's own culture. Although the participants demonstrated some knowledge of the contact culture, their knowledge could be characterized as conventional, surface-level knowledge. Cultural stereotypes were also mentioned. Not enough is known at this time to assess the participants' knowledge of other cultures. According to Deardorff (2015), "Any assessment of culture-specific knowledge needs to go beyond the conventional surface-level knowledge of foods, greetings, customs, and so on" (p. 132). This does not imply that participants do not possess a deeper



knowledge of the contact culture. Rather, the nature of our interview questions may have elicited more surface-layer knowledge of the contact culture.

In regards to ideas about intercultural communication, two participants alluded to the importance of knowledge of one's own culture and the culture of others. Participant 3 mentioned the skill of non-verbal communication. According to Byram (1997), non-verbal communication is an important part of being able to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultures, yet it was left out in Byram's (1997) model because Byram thought it was unrealistic for foreign language teachers to spend time teaching and assessing culturally specific knowledge related to non-verbal communication. However, Poyatos (1989) believed that the foreign language-teaching field is too narrow in scope and only deals with non-verbal communication on a superficial level. Finally, participant 4 mentioned the importance of forgiveness in intercultural communication. Forgiveness is an illustrative component value within the values construct of benevolence that Schwartz and Bardi (2001) say that emerge consistently across cultures. Yet forgiveness is not specifically addressed in popular models of intercultural competence (e.g., Bennett, 1993; Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). Further exploration of forgiveness and other attitudes, knowledge, and skills in intercultural situations may provide new perspectives of intercultural competence. More diverse perspectives are necessary and crucial to providing a better understanding of intercultural competence (Deardorff & Arasartnam-Smith, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

This part of our larger study focuses on the findings of initial pre-departure interviews from four participants going to the following countries: Australia, Canada, and South Korea. Findings demonstrate attitudes of openness and curiosity that Deardorff (2006) suggests as the jumping off point in the lifelong process of developing intercultural competence. Knowledge of both one's own culture and the culture of others was monitored, yet for the most part it was limited to the surface-level, not the deeper culture that can cause misunderstandings in intercultural interactions. Interviews during their study abroad and following their study abroad will provide the opportunity for students to monitor and self-reflect on their development.

Future studies could use quantitative instruments like Kelly and Meyers' (1993) Cross-Cultural Adaptability Instrument (CCAI) and Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman's (2003) Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) to provide a baseline of intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills. This baseline will help validate claims of intercultural development. Statements in the CCAI or IDI instruments can provide ideas about the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that may help promote intercultural development. Knowing where students are in terms of intercultural development can allow for more effective intercultural training and support, prior to, during, and following their study abroad experience.

Limiting assessment of participants' experiences during short-term study abroad to a survey immediately following a sojourn cannot provide a detailed account of intercultural development. A longitudinal design that follows students' entire college experience can provide a better picture of intercultural development within higher education. A broader lens of the study abroad experience can offer a better understanding of how different programs like study abroad; volunteer work or fieldwork can support the development of intercultural competence in all students. Savicki and Brewer (2015) offer a metaphor of a good story with a beginning, middle, and end. Greater understanding about the beginning of the story will help stakeholders understand the middle, end, and beyond the sojourn. Finally, more information is needed on study abroad in a variety of contexts (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Research in intercultural competence and study abroad is heavily based in Western environments among higher socioeconomic students. Future studies in diverse environments with diverse participants will build our understanding of study abroad and perhaps unleash new conceptualizations of intercultural competence.

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