

# 8 Developing intercultural communicative competence for the year abroad experience

Sandra López-Rocha<sup>1</sup> and Fabienne Vailes<sup>2</sup>

---

## Abstract

Intercultural Communication Training (ICT) is crucial in the preparation of students who will study or work abroad as part of their degree programme. The promotion of key competencies will allow students to become aware of different perspectives, develop a more accurate understanding and appreciation of other cultures, and participate more integrally in the host culture.

**Keywords:** intercultural communicative competence, intercultural training, intercultural citizenship, awareness and attitudes, year abroad preparation.

---

## 1. Introduction

It is a fact that preparation for the Year Abroad facilitates students' adaptation to the host culture (Coleman, 1995) while developing an appreciation for the multi-layered elements of the host environment. This, in turn, translates into a better understanding of the culture, beyond stereotyping and constrained surface observations, a maximisation of their experience, and the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). In response to this need, UK higher education institutions are currently promoting ICC skills as part of the pre-departure preparation of students. This paper explores the content and perceived outcomes of a programme aimed at fostering the development

---

1. University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom; s.lopezrocha@bristol.ac.uk

2. University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom; f.vailes@bristol.ac.uk

**How to cite this chapter:** López-Rocha, S., & Vailes, F. (2017). Developing intercultural communicative competence for the Year Abroad experience. In C. Alvarez-Mayo, A. Gallagher-Brett, & F. Michel (Eds), *Innovative language teaching and learning at university: enhancing employability* (pp. 67-75). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2017.innoconf2016.656>

of ICC prior to and during the Year Abroad. In order to achieve this, we will first address the notion of ICC and the development of a training programme implemented at the University of Bristol's School of Modern Languages (SML), providing an overview of the content, an analysis of the students' perceptions of the programme, and suggestions for the future. The overall idea we intend to convey is that a programme of this nature is necessary to foster skills involved in the promotion of intercultural citizenship.

ICC emerged as a specialised field of study of interactions and abilities developed in a foreign country, taking into account the role of foreign languages in the development of skills and attitudes. [Byram \(2012\)](#) has been instrumental in the creation of a framework for the development of ICC integrating *skills* (to interpret, relate, discover, and interact); *knowledge* about the culture and interactions between members of different groups; *attitudes* to enhance self-awareness and appreciation of different cultural tendencies; and, *education* with regards to critical issues in the host culture. Furthermore, the model encompasses intercultural attitudes (*savoir être*) to develop curiosity, openness, and readiness to change views. This model also encourages the development of critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*) in the preparation of knowledgeable individuals able to reflect and engage effectively in a different cultural context. Similarly, [Deardorff's \(2006\)](#) influential model for the development of intercultural competence also promotes self-awareness, openness, and transformation. The pre-departure module currently implemented at the SML strives to align itself within these frameworks in order to enhance the second-year students' preparation for the Year Abroad, additionally incorporating the work of [Hall \(1997\)](#), [Hennebry \(2014\)](#), and [Jones \(2000\)](#).

Besides fostering the development of key intercultural skills, the module also intends to instil awareness with regards to intercultural adaptation and stress. Although it is often seen as a negative element in the process of adjusting to life in a different country, acculturative stress “may indeed have a positive effect on individuals, as it represents a source of constant learning and exposure to intercultural experiences” ([López-Rocha, 2014](#), p. 2270). Furthermore, this

process is linked to the development of resilience among students as it involves “adapting well in the face of adversity [...] or significant sources of stress, such as family and relationship problems, [...] or workplace and financial stressors. It means ‘bouncing back’ from difficult experiences” ([American Psychological Association, 2016](#), n.p.). The programme is designed to provide students with the opportunity to discover and develop new behaviours, thoughts and actions that they may not have previously considered, enabling them to cope with various situations in the host country, in addition to raising consciousness of the potential effects of reverse-culture shock upon their return to the UK.

## **2. Programme content**

The pilot programme, involving over 240 students of French and Spanish, consisted of a 4-week module implemented in the second part of their second year at university, prior to starting the third Year Abroad. Each week, the students participated in a one-hour seminar requiring some preparatory work (e.g. reading scenarios, answering questions and completing worksheets), as well as some follow-up tasks (e.g. reflecting on what was discussed and participating in a virtual site).

The sessions encompassed the introduction of ICC theory and practical exercises, directly drawing from and building on the students’ own experience. Classroom dynamics provided the opportunity for tutor-student open interactions, as well as for pair/group discussions and role-play.

In the first session, the notions of culture and ICC were explored, introducing the idea of culture-specific attributes and the value of considering different perspectives.

The second session focused on potential sources of intercultural conflict, adaptation, and culture shock, involving critical narratives based on experiences reported by our own students while abroad, to identify ways of addressing issues from different perspectives.

In the third session, we discussed the deconstruction of stereotypes and promoted the idea of cultural tendencies as a more accurate way to describe cultures, behaviours, and attitudes; furthermore, students explored differences in non-verbal communication, allowing for a discussion on preconceptions, perceptions of the self by others, and our natural tendency to interpret different behaviours based on our own values and beliefs. In the final session the students explored the way in which different attitudes influence interactions, received country-specific information, and further recommendations. **Figure 1**, **Figure 2**, **Figure 3**, and **Figure 4** below provide an overview of some of the materials used.

Figure 1. Week 1 – Students’ group postings on *Padlet*

**WHAT IS CULTURE?**  
1. Individually - write what you understand by culture. 2. Share it with the rest of your group. 3. Input a maximum of 3 items on this page.

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <p><b>Way of thinking, different perspective of life, how a community goes about daily life</b></p> <p>etiquete<br/>etiquete is key<br/>food, music, dancing</p> <p>Different norms of societies n ting:)</p> <p><b>Missy duck</b><br/>What people look like and what their memes are</p> <p><b>Culture</b><br/>Values, ways of communicating, dealing with things</p> <p>Books music history art</p> <p><b>food, language, religion, customs, identity</b></p> <p>background, climate, language, food, culture, traditions... and the way people react to it</p> <p><b>CeCe</b><br/>Tradition, Social norms, Lifestyle</p> <p><b>Mills and Holly</b><br/>Language, Histroy, Art,</p> <p><b>Art, music, dance, religion, history!</b></p> | <p>social conventions</p> <p>The way a country expresses itself</p> <p>the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively.<br/>"20th century popular culture"<br/>synonyms: the arts, the humanities; More<br/>2. the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society.<br/>"Afro-Caribbean culture"<br/>synonyms: civilization, society, way of life, lifestyle; More</p> <p><b>Kim K</b><br/>FOOOO<br/>Language<br/>Traditions</p> <p><b>Highlandspring</b><br/>perspective of life/lifestyle</p> <p>Different customs</p> <p>Culture is the traditions and norms in another country</p> <p><b>HAM</b><br/>Traditions, behaviour food.</p> | <p>Food</p> <p>Traditions, the way people act, what separates groups of people</p> <p><b>CMB</b><br/>What's unique to a country or a group of people</p> <p><b>Emily and Zoe</b><br/>The language and lifestyle of the local people e.g. food, daily routine, music etc</p> <p><b>-A</b><br/>Music</p> <p><b>Alex</b><br/>The individual style of a community</p> <p>History, language and traditions/customs.<br/>Bob</p> <p><b>Customs</b></p> <p>Language, traditions customs</p> <p><b>Cool group</b><br/>Traditions, behaviour, language, values</p> <p><b>Culture</b><br/>Traditions, politics &amp; behaviour</p> <p><b>Mario, Cesar, Mimi</b><br/>Culture is everything that surrounds us</p> |
|---|---|---|

Figure 2. Week 2 – Advice and support for dealing with culture shock

**What should I do? Here's some help!**

**From others**

Talk to people who have **experienced** culture shock before: friends, family, peers

Be **PROACTIVE**, don't expect it to go away if you shut the door to the host culture: **Go out!**

Meet people, ask questions, **give it all a chance!**

Remember it will not last long: you will start feeling comfortable with the perceived differences once you **try to understand** them and the culture/ surroundings are more **familiar** to you

**Virtual friends and postings**

Learn about other people's experience and what they did:

<http://www.goabroad.com/blog/2012/10/24/get-a-grip-how-to-handle-culture-shock/>

<http://www.thirdyearabroad.com/when-you-arrive/culture-shock.html>

<http://www.thirdyearabroad.com/when-you-arrive/culture-shock/item/601.html>

AIESEC <http://culture-shock.me/map>

Don't forget, reverse culture shock!

<http://www.thirdyearabroad.com/when-you-arrive/culture-shock/item/601.html>

<http://www.thirdyearabroad.com/when-youre-back/item/1120-reverse-culture-shock.html>

Figure 3. Week 3 – Follow-up discussion after a role-play activity on non-verbal communication

**Nonverbal Communication Tendencies: SPACE**

For the most part, people in the **United States, Canada, the UK, and Nordic countries** have the **largest personal-space** requirements. Those living in **Latin America, Southern Europe, and Asia** have a comparatively **reduced** personal space. **What are the implications?**

HSBC International: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUCODUvkbzE>

Personal Space bubble [https://youtu.be/vc\\_DXesYzX4](https://youtu.be/vc_DXesYzX4)

Personal space issues: <https://youtu.be/UmlMseVaitY>

<https://www.interexchange.org/articles/career-training-usa/2013/05/06/proxemics-and-communication-styles/>

Figure 4. Week 4 – Overview of topics covered in the module

**What have we covered in the module?**

- What is culture?
- Iceberg Model of Culture
- Surface and deep observations
- Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence
- Changing attitudes, becoming engaged, being prepared

- Stereotypes and prejudice
- Learning about cultural tendencies
- The nonverbal aspect of communication and different perceptions
- Being aware of potential misunderstandings AND different meanings

- How do your own attitudes affect your adaptation?
- Culture shock and dealing with differences
- Understand the process of adaptation
- Re-entry shock
- Ethnocentrism and openness to learning

- How attitudes, values, and ways of behaving will affect work, study, and social interactions
- Individualism vs collectivism
- Power distance
- The use of time
- Dos and don'ts
- Learn, use resources, keep track!

### 3. Outcomes

On completion of the module, the students were invited to participate anonymously in an online survey consisting of 14 items combining Likert scales and open-ended questions focused on evaluating the module's content, form of delivery and relevance for the Year Abroad. The overall results were indeed positive, although the fact that feedback was non-mandatory influenced the survey return rate as only 9% of the attendees responded. Nevertheless, the data still provided a good insight into how the programme was received. The quantified answers indicate that 68% of respondents attended three or four sessions, an encouraging number considering that these were an addition to their scheduled classes and took place towards the end of the teaching block, when students are engaged in revision for their final assessments. 73% of the respondents found being allowed to share their views in the sessions engaging. In addition, a combined 68% of students described the sessions useful, very useful, and extremely useful. Moreover, 60% of participants indicated that this

training should be a mandatory part of the preparation for the Year Abroad, while 77% stated that they would certainly recommend others to take the module. There is also an indication of consistency with the programme's objectives, as students identified skills they started to develop as a direct result of taking the module, namely an increase in intercultural awareness, a feeling of an improved adaptability in combination with a potential minimisation of culture shock, the development of skills involving intercultural competence, a better management of expectations, and a greater confidence to deal with intercultural issues. Furthermore, students were able to address specific aspects of ICC, such as the complexity behind the notion of culture and the importance of developing intercultural competence. Students also highlighted other factors as particularly positive, including content, the interactivity of the classroom dynamics and tasks, sustained interest, reassurance, and the tutors' friendliness and approachability.

Developing and implementing a programme of this nature has a number of challenges. Some of these involve helping students to more accurately understand and appreciate the development of ICC, not only for the Year Abroad, but also as part of the development of intercultural citizenship. This is also linked to the fact that ICC cannot be completely acquired; students will develop their own skills, learn about the host culture, and change their attitudes at their own pace. Although this programme is intended to provide the basis for the development of specific skills (c.f. [Byram, 2012](#)), ideally, it should be more integrally contextualised in terms of specific countries and sub-regions. This would require year-long units dedicated to particular aspects of intercultural communication, for instance, within a given sociolinguistic, communicative or ethnographic perspective, which requires the module leader to have a strong background in intercultural communication and related fields. Finally, students at this stage of preparation for the Year Abroad seem to be more concerned with immediate needs involving logistic matters, from securing a visa to finding accommodation. This became evident whilst analysing the results, as students were interested in what they considered 'urgent' matters and expected tutors to provide them with country-specific information involving those specific *how-to* items.

## 4. Future directions

Based on the results, the module will continue to be implemented with some adjustments. For instance, prior to the start, information on logistic matters will be made available giving students access to a live database where previous Year Abroad undergraduates have input relevant information and shared their experiences. This has already proved useful for those currently preparing for their Year Abroad, allowing them to first address what they consider their ‘immediate needs’, and to later focus on the ICC module’s content and tasks. The intended objectives will be provided prior to the start of the module to ensure that students have realistic expectations of content and intended outcomes.

In addition, returning Year Abroad students will also be invited to take part in some of the sessions (they currently attend general Year Abroad information sessions to share their experience working or studying abroad), giving second-year students an opportunity to more directly relate to their peers’ experiences.

Finally, to provide further information beyond Spanish and French students, a collection of critical incidents, involving languages taught at a degree level at the University of Bristol’s SML, will be created to explore values at work, in university settings and in social contexts, as well as situations requiring adaptation and problem-solving strategies, among others.

Our aim for the long term is to continue expanding the module to include all languages offered at the SML. Ideally, this will develop into a year-long formal unit for second-year students that would truly enable participants to embed the skills and knowledge presented in the module. Furthermore, we strongly believe there is an urgent need for ICC training to be included in the curriculum at the start of undergraduate studies and continued on to final-year studies, where critical topics in intercultural communication could be studied at an advanced level, integrating the students’ acquired knowledge and perspectives from the Year Abroad.



## References

- American Psychological Association. (2016). *The road to resilience*. <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>
- Byram, M. (2012). Conceptualizing intercultural (communicative) competence and intercultural citizenship. In J. Jackson (Ed.) *The Routledge handbook of language and intercultural communication* (pp. 85-97). London: Routledge.
- Coleman, J. (1995). The current state of knowledge concerning student residence abroad. In G. Parker & A. Rouxville (Eds), *The Year Abroad: preparation, monitoring, evaluation*. London: AFLS/CILT.
- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of studies in international education*, 10(3), 241-266. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002>
- Hall, E. T. (1997). *Beyond culture*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hennebry, M. (2014). Cultural awareness: should it be taught? Can it be taught? In P. Driscoll, E. Macaro & A. Swarbrick (Eds), *Debates in modern languages education* (pp. 135-150). London: Routledge.
- Jones, B. (2000). Developing cultural awareness. In K. Field (Ed.), *Issues in modern foreign languages teaching* (pp. 151-162). London: Routledge.
- López-Rocha, S. (2014). Stress and acculturation. In W. Cockerham, R. Dingwall & S. Quah (Eds), *The Wiley Blackwell encyclopedia of health, illness, behavior, and society* (pp. 2270-2272). Chicester: John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118410868.wbehibs123>

Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association  
Dublin, Ireland; Voillans, France, [info@research-publishing.net](mailto:info@research-publishing.net)

© 2017 by Editors (collective work)  
© 2017 by Authors (individual work)

**Innovative language teaching and learning at university: enhancing employability**  
**Edited by Carmen Álvarez-Mayo, Angela Gallagher-Brett, and Franck Michel**

**Rights:** This volume is published under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives International (CC BY-NC-ND) licence; **individual articles may have a different licence.** Under the CC BY-NC-ND licence, the volume is freely available online (<https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2017.innoconf2016.9781908416506>) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

**Disclaimer:** Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book are believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team, nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions that may be made. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

**Trademark notice:** product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

**Copyrighted material:** every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net  
Cover design and cover photo by © Raphaël Savina ([raphael@savina.net](mailto:raphael@savina.net))

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-49-0 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)  
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-50-6 (Ebook, PDF, colour)  
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-51-3 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

**Legal deposit, Ireland:** The National Library of Ireland, The Library of Trinity College, The Library of the University of Limerick, The Library of Dublin City University, The Library of NUI Cork, The Library of NUI Maynooth, The Library of University College Dublin, The Library of NUI Galway.

**Legal deposit, United Kingdom:** The British Library.  
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.  
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

**Legal deposit, France:** Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mai 2017.

---