Developing intercultural communicative competence for the year abroad experience

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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

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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.

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 Food Way of thinking, different perspective of life, social conventions how a community goes about daily life Traditions, the way people act, what etiquete separates groups of people The way a country expresses itself etiquete is key food, music, dancing the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement What's unique to a country or a group regarded collectively. of people Different norms of societies n ting:) "20th century popular culture" synonyms: the arts, the humanities; Fmily and 7ne Missy duck More The language and lifestyle of the local What people look like and what their people e.g. food, daily routine, music memes are the ideas, customs, and social etc behaviour of a particular people or Culture society. "Afro-Caribbean culture" Values, ways of communicating, dealing Music synonyms: civilization, society, way of with things life, lifestyle; More Books music history art The individual style of a community food, language, religion, customs, identity FOOOOD History, language and traditions/customs. Language background, climate, language, food, Traditions Bob culture, traditions..., and the way people react to it Customs Highlandspring perspective of life/lifestyle Language, traditions customs Tradition, Social norms, Lifestyle Cool group Different customs Traditions, behaviour, language, values Mills and Holly Culture is the traditions and norms in Language, Histroy, Art, another country Traditions, politics & behaviour Art, music, dance, religion, history!

Traditions behaviour food

Mario, Cesar, Mimi

Culture is everything that surrounds us

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

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

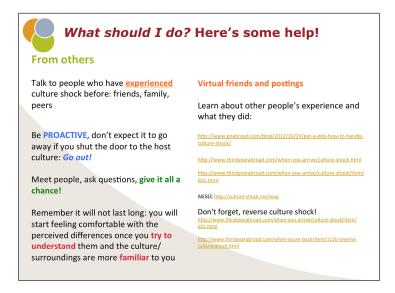


Figure 3. Week 3 – Follow-up discussion after a role-play activity on non-verbal communication

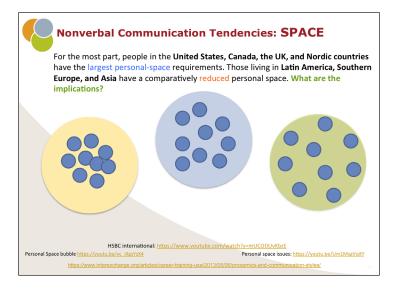
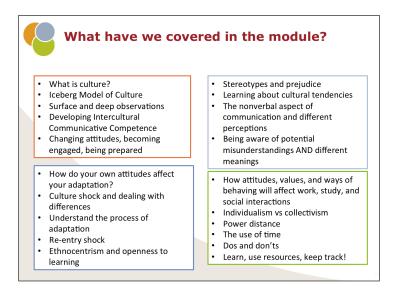


Figure 4. Week 4 – Overview of topics covered in the module



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 howto 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.

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