

INTERCULTURAL LEARNING ON SHORT-TERM SOJOURNS

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Abstract:

This paper presents an ethnographic case study of advanced second language (L2) students from Hong Kong who took part in a short-term sojourn in England after fourteen weeks of preparation. While abroad, they lived with a host family, took literary/ cultural studies courses, visited cultural sites, participated in debriefing sessions, and conducted ethnographic projects. Data consisted of interviews, an intercultural reflections journal, surveys, field notes, ethnographic conversations, and a diary. The Intercultural Development Inventory measured their intercultural sensitivity on entry, after the pre-sojourn preparation, and post-sojourn. The findings supported the primary assumption that underpins the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity: 'as one's experience of cultural difference becomes more complex and sophisticated, one's competence in intercultural relations increases' (Intercultural Communication Institute, 2004).

Introduction

The number of second language (L2) youth taking part in study abroad programs has mushroomed in recent years, especially those who take part in short-term sojourns, ranging from three to seven weeks (Chieffo and Griffiths, 2003; Spencer and Tuma, 2008). While many educators assume that residence in the host culture automatically spurs growth in L2 proficiency and intercultural sensitivity, study abroad researchers are discovering that this is not necessarily the case. Inadequate preparation, unrealistic/unmet expectations, and unsettling intercultural encounters can have detrimental effects on sojourner perceptions, adjustment, and willingness to engage with host nationals. Students may even return home with entrenched negative stereotypes of their hosts and the host culture (Allen, Dristas, and Mills, 2007; Bateman, 2002; Stroebe, Lenkert, and Jonas, 1988), ‘a strengthened sense of national identity’ (Block, 2007), and a higher dose of ethnocentrism (Isabelli-Garçia, 2006; Jackson, 2008). What steps can be taken to counteract this? How can we maximize the intercultural learning of student sojourners?

This paper reports on an ethnographic case study of a study abroad program that was designed to enhance the intercultural communicative competence of advanced speakers of the host language. By examining the trajectories of one of the cohorts, as they travelled from their home environment to the host culture and back again, we gain a deeper understanding of their intercultural learning over time and space. The findings suggest specific program elements that have the potential to promote deeper levels of critical reflection and intercultural competence.

Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

Bennett’s (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which served as the theoretical framework for the present study, centres on people’s awareness and response to cultural difference. Central to this theory are the constructs of ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism (Bennett 1993, 1997; Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Landis, Bennett & Bennett, 2004). In the former, ‘the worldview of one’s own culture is central to all reality’ (Bennett, 1993: 30); ethnorelativism is associated with ‘being comfortable with many standards and customs’ and the ‘ability to adapt behaviour and judgments to a variety of interpersonal settings’ (p. 26). Ethnorelative worldviews are considered more effective in fostering the mindset, knowledge, and skills linked to successful intercultural communication and adjustment in unfamiliar cultural settings (Bennett and Bennett, 2004; Kim, 2001, 2005).

The DMIS posits that ‘as one’s experience of cultural difference becomes more complex and sophisticated, one’s competence in intercultural relations increases’ (Intercultural Communication Institute, 2004). Individuals are thought to progress from ethnocentric stages (Denial, Defense, and Minimization) through ethnorelative stages of development (Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration) as they acquire intercultural competence. Individuals do not always advance to the next stage in

sequence, however; due to unpleasant intercultural experiences, for example, they may regress to a lower level of sensitivity.

Empirical research on intercultural competence and study abroad

Study abroad researchers from a variety of disciplines have drawn on the DMIS to track the intercultural learning of student sojourners. In the following studies, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer and Bennett, 2002), a survey based on the DMIS, was employed to measure the actual and perceived intercultural sensitivity of students before and after their stay abroad.

Engle and Engle (2004) assessed the intercultural sensitivity of American students who took part in either a semester or full-year-abroad program in France. The longer-term sojourners developed a higher level of intercultural communicative competence, with the most progress occurring in the second half of their stay. The IDI was also used by Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, and Hubbard (2006) to measure the impact of a faculty-led, short-term study abroad program on the intercultural sensitivity of 23 American business students in Europe. As a group, the participants became more willing to accept cultural differences, lessening their ethnocentric tendencies. Preliminary results suggested that well-designed short-term programs have the potential to foster the ‘overall development of cross-cultural sensitivity’ in student sojourners.

Employing both qualitative and quantitative measures, Medina-López-Portillo (2004) investigated the intercultural sensitivity development of 28 American university students who participated in either a seven-week program in Taxco, Mexico or a sixteen-week sojourn in Mexico City. The longer-term sojourners developed a more sophisticated understanding of the host culture and a higher level of intercultural sensitivity. Both cohorts had inflated opinions about their degree of intercultural sensitivity, rating it at least one stage higher than their actual level.

All of these studies investigated the intercultural sensitivity development of American students who participated in sojourns ranging from seven weeks to a year. Drawing on the DMIS and IDI, the present study examined the intercultural learning of Chinese students from a Hong Kong university who took part in a five-week sojourn in an English-speaking country.

The short-term study abroad program

In keeping with the home institution’s internationalization policy, the English Department established a study abroad program for its second year English majors. The program aims to enhance their English language proficiency, intercultural sensitivity, literary awareness, and intercultural communicative competence. In particular, it is expected that the participants will become more confident and display enhanced sensitivity when communicating in English with people from other cultures in a range of settings, including informal, social situations. The program consists of three phases: pre-sojourn,

sojourn, and post-sojourn; all courses, including sojourn fieldwork, are credit-bearing and integrated into the Bachelor of Arts program of studies. Experiential learning and guided critical reflection are core elements.

Pre-sojourn elements

The pre-sojourn phase consists of seminars in intercultural communication, ethnographic research, and English literature (related to cultural site visits/ theatre productions in the host culture). In the offering that is the focus of this paper, all of the courses took place during the 14-week semester preceding the sojourn. In the ethnography course, I introduced the theory and practice of ethnography (e.g., participant observation, note-taking, reflexive interviewing, the audio-recording/ transcribing/ analysis of discourse). After completing a series of tasks to hone their skills and understanding of this approach, the students carried out their own small-scale ‘home ethnography’ project. This assignment was designed to stimulate awareness of their environment and promote a systematic approach to cultural learning (Jackson, 2006). Selected topics were very diverse (e.g., code-mixing in a local family, the intercultural adjustment of an exchange student, the life of a social worker in Hong Kong).

In the ‘Communication across cultures’ course, I included both culture-general and culture-specific elements. Basically, I emphasized the application of intercultural communication theories to practical communication problems that can occur when people from different cultures interact. Activities in this experiential course included: readings, observation and analysis of videoclips, lectures, the writing of a language and cultural identity narrative, interviewing an exchange student, the analysis of critical incidents, discussions, simulations, and the writing of an intercultural reflections journal. Each week, an hour-long tutorial concentrated on preparation for daily life with an English host family (e.g., strategies to cope with culture shock, roles and responsibilities of hosts and ‘guests’, sociopragmatic norms of politeness in the host culture).

The course included two writing assignments designed to raise the students’ awareness of themselves as cultural beings and stimulate critical reflection about ways to enhance intercultural relations. The language and cultural identity narrative was written soon after they joined the program. By way of prompts, I encouraged the students to consider the impact of their cultural socialization on their self-identity, language choices, communication style, and attitudes towards people from other cultures. Throughout the semester, they recorded their reactions to intercultural experiences and course material in a journal. To facilitate deeper levels of reflection and analysis, I supplied a list of (optional) open-ended questions: (e.g., ‘How might the experience of studying/ living in another culture impact on a person’s sense of self? How might it broaden one’s identity? Why might it have the opposite effect?’) Their writing offered insight into their awareness of and reaction to cultural difference and provided direction for the selection of activities and other course material.

Five-week sojourn in England

To facilitate access to the local culture, the sojourn included residence with a host family; only one Cantonese-speaking student was placed in each homestay to promote immersion in the host language. At the host institution, the students took specially-designed literary and cultural studies courses and participated in excursions (e.g., visits to the theatre, museums, villages). They also had free time to explore the community and pursue individual interests.

At the beginning of each week and on the last day of the sojourn, a local cultural studies specialist and I facilitated a debriefing session, encouraging the students to raise questions about aspects of the host culture that they found confusing, interesting, or unsettling. Under my guidance, the students also investigated a cultural scene of their choice using the ethnographic skills that they had developed in Hong Kong. Most opted to learn more about a cultural activity linked to their homestay or hosts (e.g., lace-making, a youth group, the pub culture).

In a diary, on a regular basis throughout their stay, the students recorded their observations and reactions to sojourn experiences, including intercultural contact. To stimulate deeper levels of critical reflection and analysis, I again provided optional open-ended questions (e.g., Think about the values, beliefs and/or identities that you held before travelling to England. Compare that person with the person you are now. Are you changing in any way? If yes, how?).

Post-sojourn elements

Back in Hong Kong, the students wrote a final entry in their diary about their sojourn and re-entry experiences. During a 14-week semester, they developed a 30-page+ dissertation based on their ethnographic data (under my supervision) or explored a topic in English literature (under the tutelage of a literature professor). Those who chose to work with their ethnographic material were prompted to reflect further on their intercultural encounters. I also encouraged them to take stock of their learning and set goals for further linguistic, cultural, and personal enhancement.

The Study

Research design and aims

To better understand the language and (inter)cultural development of the selected cohort, I employed an ethnographic approach. I was able to get to know the students in both informal and formal situations during a 12-month period; this allowed me to build up trust and rapport as I gathered data. To provide an objective measure of their cultural sensitivity and add another element of triangulation, I administered the IDI periodically. I aimed to discover how the students perceived cultural differences and made sense of their intercultural experiences in both Hong Kong and England. To enhance the design and delivery of the program, I also wished to identify elements that appeared to stimulate deeper levels of awareness and critical reflection.

The group profile

The cohort under investigation was comprised of fourteen¹ (2 males and 12 females) full-time English majors in the second year of a three-year Bachelor of Arts program at a bilingual (Chinese-English) university in Hong Kong. When they joined the program, they had an average age of 20.1 years and a grade point average (GPA) of 3.3. All of them grew up in Hong Kong and spoke Cantonese as the first language. They had an advanced level of proficiency in English with an average of 'B' on the 'Use of English' A-level exam at the end of their secondary schooling. Most also spoke Putonghua (Mandarin) and at least one other language (e.g., Japanese, French, German).

Prior to the sojourn, three of the female students (S2, S6 and S13) had participated in short-term study abroad programs in English-speaking countries (the U.S., Australia, or the U.K.). Few had intercultural-intimate relationships and none had ever taken a course in intercultural or cross-cultural communication, anti-racist education, or multiculturalism. Their travel experiences had primarily consisted of short family trips to Mainland China or organized tours in other Asian countries. For most, their use of English (the host language for the sojourn) had largely been restricted to academic settings in Hong Kong. This meant that their exposure to informal, social English was very limited before traveling to England.

All of the participants signed a consent form as part of the home institution's research ethics review procedures. Although free to withdraw at any time, none did.

Instrumentation

Over a twelve-month period, I employed a range of both quantitative and qualitative measures to build up a thick, rich picture of the learning situation and track changes over time (e.g., host language and intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, self-identity).

Qualitative measures

Qualitative data collected prior to the sojourn consisted of: an application letter to join the program, the language and cultural identity narrative, the intercultural reflections journal, open-ended surveys, and an interview that prompted the students to reflect on: their cultural socialization, language use, identity, previous travels and study abroad experiences, intercultural contact, and aspirations/ concerns about the impending trip to England. During this phase, I recorded my observations and interpretations.

Qualitative data gathered in England included a diary and weekly open-ended surveys that elicited the students' perceptions of: their intercultural adjustment, awareness and reactions to cultural differences, language usage, identity, intercultural communication skills and sensitivity, and ethnographic explorations. At the host institution, their instructors and the homestay co-coordinator

also offered their views about the students' intercultural awareness and adjustment. I kept detailed field notes throughout.

Post-sojourn qualitative data included: an interview with the participants about their sojourn and re-entry experiences, an open-ended survey, and a diary entry. The interviewees were prompted to assess the impact of study abroad on: their intercultural awareness and sensitivity, self-conception, English language skills, and intercultural communication skills. During this 14-week period, I supervised the development of the ethnographic dissertations of those who chose this option. This afforded me the opportunity to engage in informal conversations with them about their sojourn and re-entry experiences. I continued to keep field notes during this phase of the study.

Quantitative data

To measure the students' intercultural sensitivity/ worldview orientation to cultural difference, I employed Version 2 of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)ⁱⁱ (Hammer & Bennett, 2002; Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003). Widely used in study abroad research, this psychometric instrument has demonstrated construct validity and reliability (Hammer et al., 2003; Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova & DeJaeghere, 2003) and is linked to the DMIS.

Respondents to the IDI indicate their agreement or disagreement to 50 statements using a 5-point Likert scale. In addition to measuring overall intercultural sensitivity, referred to as the Developmental Scale (DS), the IDI software yields scores for 5 subscales. *Denial and Defense* (DD) (combined) measures a worldview that simplifies and/or polarizes cultural difference. It ranges from disinterest and avoidance to a tendency to view the world in terms of 'us and them,' where 'us' is superior. *Reversal* (R) measures a worldview that reverses the 'us' and 'them' polarization, where 'them' is superior. *Minimization* (M) measures a worldview that highlights cultural commonality and universal values through an emphasis on similarity. *Acceptance and Adaptation* (AA) combined measures a worldview that can comprehend and accommodate complex cultural differences. It can range from a tendency to recognize patterns of cultural difference in one's own culture and in other cultures (acceptance) to a tendency to alter perception and behavior according to cultural context (adaptation). *Encapsulated Marginality* (EM) measures a worldview that incorporates a multicultural identity, where one's identity is separated from any specific cultural context form of integration (Hammer & Bennett, 2002).

As well as computing the group's (and individual respondents') fundamental worldview orientation to cultural difference (the actual overall development towards ethnorelativism), the IDI software identifies specific developmental issues that are yet to be resolved (e.g., a tendency to polarize cultural difference by reversing 'us and them,' whereby 'them' is deemed superior). The

software also measures the group's (and individual respondents') perception of their intercultural sensitivity and ability (Hammer & Bennett, 2002; Paige et al., 2003).

Procedures and analysis

Once the study got underway, I set up a project database in NVivo (Bazeley, 2007; Richards, 2005), a hypermedia, qualitative software program. Oral and written narratives, digital images, and IDI scores were entered into the database as soon as they were collected. Throughout the project, I categorized the material using an 'open coding' approach (Charmaz, 2006; Grbich, 2007); new codes emerged or were altered as I gained a better understanding of the students' developmental trajectories. Since all of the data was dated, I was able to link each student's oral and written narratives with the IDI administrations that were analyzed using IDI software. This allowed me to ascertain the group's (and individual member's) awareness of cultural differences and level of intercultural competence at strategic points in time.

Findings

This paper focuses on the intercultural sensitivity development of the group as they progressed through the program. In previous publications (Jackson, 2008, 2009), I examined the trajectories of individual students and included multiple excerpts from their oral and written narratives to illustrate changes in their intercultural sensitivity, language awareness (e.g., sociopragmatic development), and identity (re)construction over time. Due to space restrictions, I limit my current analysis to the group's overall actual and perceived IDI scores and make only occasional reference to narratives, field notes, and specific program elements that helped explain the group's developmental intercultural sensitivity profiles.

Table 1 presents the actual and perceived IDI results of the full group at three strategic intervals: on entry into the program, after the 14-week pre-sojourn preparation, and immediately after the five-week sojourn in England. The scores indicate the students' worldview development and position on the DMIS' ethnocentric/ ethnorelative continuum. The right hand columns of the chart compare their IDI scores (both actual and perceived) after the pre-sojourn preparation and post-sojourn; this provides a measure of their intercultural sensitivity development (or regression) during these time periods.

Table 1

Actual and perceived IDI scores: On entry into the program, after the 14-week pre-sojourn preparation, and post-sojourn

Students	IDI scores												Gain (+)/ Loss (-)			
	Actual						Perceived						Actual		Perceived	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4
S1 (M)	104.90	M2	81.20	DefR	112.49	M2	128.23	Ac	118.92	Ac	131.76	Ad	-	+	-	+
S2 (F)	74.97	DefR	82.20	DefR	100.14	M2	115.44	Ac	120.08	Ac	126.67	Ac	+	+	+	+
S3 (F)	92.91	M1	98.91	M1	98.81	M1	120.86	Ac	122.54	Ac	122.26	Ac	+	-	+	-
S4 (F)	83.49	DefR	76.34	DefR	99.38	M1	118.10	Ac	113.16	M2	123.08	Ac	-	+	-	+
S5 (F)	96.55	M1	95.30	M1	_____	_____	122.89	Ac	121.86	Ac	_____	_____	-	-	-	-
S6 (F)	119.97	Ac	119.31	Ac	115.13	Ac	133.71	Ad	133.19	Ad	132.05	Ad	-	-	-	-
S7 (F)	75.83	DefR	123.17	Ac	124.20	Ac	115.09	Ac	135.01	Ad	137.09	Ad	+	+	+	+
S8 (F)	77.66	DefR	88.31	M1	77.20	DefR	116.04	Ac	121.39	Ac	117.28	Ac	+	-	+	-
S9 (M)	96.65	M1	96.84	M1	129.07	Ac	123.35	Ac	123.52	Ac	136.36	Ad	-	+	-	+
S10 (F)	85.87	M1	118.50	Ac	125.57	Ac	117.74	Ac	134.69	Ad	137.73	Ad	+	+	+	+
S11 (F)	91.80	M1	86.65	M1	93.19	M1	123.59	Ac	119.84	Ac	121.36	Ac	-	+	-	+
S12 (F)	76.02	DefR	85.59	M1	94.87	M1	117.15	Ac	120.69	Ac	125.16	Ac	+	+	+	+
S13 (F)	90.25	M1	114.34	M2	106.46	M2	122.85	Ac	130.85	Ad	127.78	Ac	+	-	+	-
S14 (F)	68.37	Def	80.85	DefR	86.16	M1	114.59	Ac	117.99	Ac	120.92	Ac	+	+	+	+
Full group	88.23	M1	96.25	M1	104.82	M2	120.69	Ac	123.84	Ac	127.65	Ac	+	+	+	+

Key: M = male; F = Female

*S5 did not take part in the sojourn, leaving 13 in the study.

Band descriptors: Dn=Denial; Def=Defense, DefR=Defense Reversal, M=Minimization, Ac=Acceptance, Ad=Adaptation, I=Integration; Band scales measured by IDI scores: Denial and Defense (55-69); Defense Reversal (70-84); Minimization 1 (85-99); Minimization 2 (100-114); Acceptance (115-129); Adaptation (130+)

Actual scores: Columns 1 & 2 (IDI score/ Band descriptor on entry into the program); columns 3 & 4 (IDI score/ Band descriptor after pre-sojourn preparation); Columns 5 & 6 (IDI score/ Band descriptor after sojourn); *Perceived scores:* Columns 1 & 2 (IDI score/ Band descriptor on entry into the program); Columns 3 & 4 (IDI score/ Band descriptor after pre-sojourn preparation); Column 5 & 6 (IDI score/ Band descriptor after sojourn); *Gain (+) and/or loss (-) in actual intercultural sensitivity:* Column 1 (after pre-sojourn preparation); Column 2 (after sojourn); *Gain (+) and/or loss (-) in perceived intercultural sensitivity:* Column 3 (after pre-sojourn preparation); Column 4 (after sojourn)

On entry

The first administration of the IDI revealed that the ‘Overall Developmental Intercultural Sensitivity’ score for the cohort was in the first half of Minimization (88.32), an ethnocentric, transitional stage of development. This indicated that elements of their cultural world were experienced as universal and they had a tendency to expect similarities among cultures. As Table 1 shows, 13 of the 14 students were in an ethnocentric stage of development (6 in Denial/ Defense (DD) or Reversal; 6 in the first half of Minimization, and 1 in the second half of Minimization). S6, a female with previous sojourn/ travel experience and a current intercultural-intimate relationship, was the only one of the group in an ethnorelative stage on entry. According to the IDI, she was in the beginning of Acceptance. Her score indicated that she had begun to recognize patterns of cultural difference in her own and other cultures and refrain from making snap judgments about behaviors that were new to her.

This administration of the IDI also showed that all members of this cohort possessed inflated opinions about the level of their own intercultural sensitivity. On average, they rated themselves to be in Acceptance (120.69), 32.46 points higher than their actual level. While 13 believed they were in this ethnorelative stage of development, S6 was the only one whose actual IDI score was in this range; she perceived herself to be in Adaptation. Eight placed themselves one band level above their actual IDI score and 6 estimated their intercultural competence to be two band levels higher than warranted. This meant that overall they had a very unrealistic perception of their degree of intercultural sensitivity.

The pre-sojourn narrative data (application letter, pre-sojourn interview, first few entries in the intercultural reflections journal, pre-sojourn survey) offered further insight into the students’ level of intercultural sensitivity on entry into the program and was generally in accord with the IDI scores. In the writings and interviews of those in Denial/Defense (DD) or Reversal, I found many comments that disclosed perceptions of cultural superiority (e.g., stressing the virtues of Chinese or ‘Westerners’) and the belief that they were more interculturally sensitive than their behavior warranted. Those in the early stage of Minimization made statements that reflected a growing tendency to perceive people from other cultural backgrounds as similar to themselves. The only one in the Acceptance phase displayed curiosity rather than fear of cultural differences. Some of her statements showed that she was developing an understanding that behavior could be interpreted differently in diverse contexts.

After intensive pre-sojourn preparation

For 14 weeks, the students took part in the intensive pre-sojourn preparation which was designed to stimulate reflection, enhance their (inter)cultural awareness, and ready them for sojourn life. I was able to track their progress throughout this phase as the students divulged their thoughts and emotions in a range of narratives.

After the pre-sojourn preparation, the cohort progressed further in the first half of Minimization, the transitional stage of intercultural development, with a group score of 96.25 and an average gain of 8.02 points; this indicated that they were making an effort to avoid stereotyping but were still viewing their own values as universal. According to the IDI, 9 of the 14 participants developed a higher degree of intercultural sensitivity; among them, 4 remained in the same band level. One (S1) regressed to a lower level; 5 remained in the same developmental phase with a slight decrease in intercultural sensitivity. This administration of the IDI also revealed that the students still had inflated perceptions of their intercultural sensitivity, rating themselves, on average, in the Acceptance range (123.84), which was 27.59 points higher (one band level) than their actual score.

Their narratives (e.g., last entries in their intercultural reflections journal, pre-sojourn surveys administered just prior to departure for England) were generally in line with the actual and perceived IDI results of the second administration of the IDI. Those whose IDI scores were in Acceptance, an ethnorelative stage, wrote more detailed journal entries and were more engaged in the process of critical reflection. They displayed more awareness of cultural differences and a growing understanding of how their own behavior and attitudes might influence the outcome of intercultural encounters. By contrast, those with a more ethnocentric mindset still tended to stereotype or minimize cultural differences.

After the sojourn

One of the students was not able to travel to England, leaving 13 in the cohort. The post-sojourn administration of the IDI revealed that, as a group, the students moved from the first to the second half of Minimization (104.82), with an average gain of 8.57 points. Overall, they were still in a transitional state of development but moving closer to a more ethnorelative mindset. Nine of the 13 students experienced a gain in intercultural sensitivity; 5 advanced to a higher band level, 7 remained in the same phase of development and 1 (S8) slipped to a lower level, moving from Minimization to Defense Reversal. By the end of the program, she was the only individual in the combined Denial/ Defense (DD) or Reversal (R) Developmental Scale of the IDI.

The students continued to have inflated opinions about the level of their own intercultural sensitivity, rating themselves, on average, near the end of the Acceptance phase (127.65), 22.83 points higher than their actual level. Statements made by the participants (in their sojourn diary, weekly surveys, and post-sojourn interview) provided further insight into their intercultural adjustment and sensitivity during their stay in England and were, for the most part, in sync with their actual and perceived IDI scores. I observed that those who had developed a higher level of intercultural sensitivity according to the IDI had diary entries that were richer in detail and more analytical than those of their less ethnorelative peers. They were more aware of underlying cultural differences (e.g., values) and made more of an effort to refrain from making snap, negative judgments about unfamiliar

phenomena in the host culture. Their metacognitive awareness was better developed; accordingly, they displayed more awareness of gaps in their intercultural competence.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings generally supported the primary assumption that underpins the DMIS. As the students developed a 'more complex and sophisticated' understanding of cultural differences, their intercultural sensitivity and competence grew (Intercultural Communication Institute, 2004). Those who reached an ethnorelative stage of development displayed more awareness of differences between the home and host cultures, going beyond superficial observations of visible features in their environment. Willing to try new things, these individuals took an active role in debriefing sessions and were more profoundly engaged in the process of critical reflection. Their diaries and surveys contained more comparative, analytic elements and their ethnographic data was more substantive. By developing closer ties with their host families, they gained more exposure to the host culture and became more comfortable and confident communicating in English in informal, social situations. These results provided preliminary evidence that a short-term study abroad program, when appropriately designed and sequenced, can help students maximize their language and intercultural learning.

I also discovered that most of my students significantly overestimated their level of intercultural sensitivity, similar to Medina-López-Portillo's (2004) investigation of American sojourners in Mexico. Those who possessed an ethnocentric worldview were less mindful of host norms of behavior and gaps in their own intercultural communicative competence. Believing it was enough to just be themselves, they seemed blissfully unaware that some of their actions (e.g., communication style) might be impeding relationship-building across cultures.

Psychologists (e.g., Fischer, Greitemeyer and Frey, 2007; Kruger and Dunning, 1999; Taylor and Brown, 1994) have found that enhancing the metacognitive awareness of individuals can alert them to limitations in their knowledge and skills in a particular domain. With appropriate guidance and support, they can then set realistic targets for self-improvement. In this study, I learned that students become more cognizant of gaps in their intercultural communicative competence as they engage in experiential learning (e.g., purposeful intercultural contact) and guided critical reflection. Further, the IDI results indicate that as their 'overall developmental intercultural sensitivity' increases, they become more realistic about their limitations and areas in need of improvement (e.g., communication style). This discovery reinforced my belief that study abroad programming should include elements that promote (inter)cultural awareness and critical reflection at all stages (pre-sojourn, sojourn, re-entry) so that students can be propelled to higher levels of metacognitive awareness and ethnorelativism.

Finally, this research revealed that students may have an advanced level of proficiency in the host language and, yet, possess an ethnocentric mindset. As Kramsch (1998), Byram (1997, 2008), and Park (2006) caution, it is naïve to assume that intercultural competence develops at the same rate as linguistic ability in a foreign tongue. My study lends support to Durocher's (2007) observation that "studying a foreign language does not, in and of itself, cure ethnocentrism and make students ethnorelative" (p. 155). Moreover, residence in the host culture does not guarantee the development of interculturality and L2 competence. Fortunately, as this study suggests, well-planned pre-sojourn preparation, adequate socio-emotional support during the sojourn, and post-sojourn debriefings can prompt and sustain deeper levels of language and intercultural learning.

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Biography

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^{i i} One student, S5, did not participate in the sojourn due to an illness in her family.

ⁱⁱ The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) is available to administrators who have successfully completed a qualifying seminar organized by IDI, LLC (or, previously, by the Intercultural Communication Institute). (Contact www.idiinventory.com).