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Intercultural Competence and Languages: Inextricably Linked or Linked Inexplicably?

Keywords: intercultural education; language; modern foreign languages; global citizenship

Introduction

This forum examines issues of intercultural competence and language education, discussing the extent to which language courses provide students with intercultural competence and the extent to which intercultural competence and language skills are, or should be, linked. With language education in the West in inarguable decline we face the question of how we can continue to develop globally, necessitating an interrogation of the importance of language proficiency to developing an interculturally competent citizenry.

Schools and universities are training grounds for our society—students graduate and join the workforce in a range of careers where they will increasingly interact with people from diverse cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. Our increasingly politically and socially fraught international environments further support a widespread move toward focus on developing young people as global citizens (Engel and Siczek 2018). Highlighting the issue inherent in this process, Woolf (2010, 48) defines this global citizen as 'someone who is, or who aspires to be, broad minded, intellectually engaged with other cultures, aware of the interdependence of nations, committed to tolerance and understanding of difference, and so on', noting there is no discernible difference between a good citizen and this good *global* citizen, affirming the need for more discussion on these topics. In promoting intercultural development, we must be sure we can articulate the difference between related terms, that we can identify which linguistic skills relate, and that we can support interculturalism in instances where language proficiency is not possible.

As you will see in each of the following responses, intercultural competence is a complex and varied concept, influenced by the context and the role of an individual in that context. Language is typically an integral part of conversations on intercultural development. For instance, Byram and Golubeva (2012) write at length on being intercultural, with bilingualism positioned almost as an absolute requirement. However, definitions of intercultural competence, such as ‘knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs and behaviors; and revitalizing one’s self’ from Deardorff (2006, 247) intentionally exclude explicit reference to language. Byram et al. (2002, 10) describe it as the ‘ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and [the] ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality. In this paper, we make no claim as to which understanding of intercultural competence is the correct one, nor even that there is in fact a correct interpretation.

Starkey describes language learning as ‘by definition […] an intercultural experience’ (Starkey 2002, 98). Communicating with even one individual from another country or culture may mean crossing more than one cultural boundary, and interlocutors must learn how to position themselves in the space they both inhabit (Kramsch 2006). Kramsch goes further to note that ‘It is no longer appropriate to give students a tourist-like competence to exchange information with native speakers of national languages within well-defined national cultures. They need a much more sophisticated competence in the manipulation of symbolic systems’ (2006, 251). Referring specifically to English, Canagarajah (2006) notes that proficiency includes not just mastery of the language, but understanding of its varieties, and more broadly, these *symbolic*, *multidialectical* or *metacultural* (Sharifian, 2013) competencies have been argued to form part of what it means to be 'proficient' in a language. This paper is chiefly concerned with the linguistic element of intercultural competence, recognising that language teaching and learning exists in a cycle, with (some of) the learners eventually becoming the teachers. As outlined by Koglbauer (2017), a decline at the lower levels has a subsequent effect on provision higher up the system, in terms of student numbers and the languages taught, with languages taught in schools feeding in to the languages offered at universities. French, Spanish and German are the most commonly offered courses both in the US (ACTFL 2019) and in UK schools (Tinsley 2019), at UK universities (Bowler 2020) and extra-curricular language provision (Álvarez et al. 2018).

Although 'culture' is an element of school-level language study, in England this is often limited to a brief introduction to festivals, customs and cuisine, certainly at the lower levels. This 'little c' culture focuses very much on day-to-day life and serves as a vehicle for language teaching. It is not until A-Level, the courses taken by 16-18 year olds, that the curriculum includes elements of 'big C' culture, including the study of literary texts and films. The intercultural element here is often an 'incidental' by-product of the language teaching. Indeed, of the three exam boards which offer GCSE qualifications (taken by students aged 16) in French, only one explicitly includes the word 'intercultural' in its specification (Pearson Edexcel, 152).

At university level in the UK, there is a greater emphasis on big C culture. Course design at degree level is guided by 'benchmarks' provided by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), which are clear in the need for modern languages degrees to provide intercultural competence. They note that:

> the study of languages enables students to understand the similarities and differences between cultures, in the broadest sense of high culture, popular culture, material culture,

> traditional culture (national, regional, tribal and so on) and the customs and practices of everyday life. In this sense it is inherently intercultural (QAA 2019, 5).

They indicate that the development of 'intercultural awareness, understanding and competence' (QAA 2019, 6) is the second of four aims of language study and note that 'the ability to compare the view of the world from their own languages and cultures with the view of the world from the languages and cultures they have studied' (9) is a key competence developed, allowing graduates to 'compar[e], contrast and mediat[e] between the two (or more) societies with which they are familiar' (9).

The three perspectives presented here discuss the extent to which language courses and study abroad can provide students with intercultural competence and the extent to which intercultural competence and language skills are, or should be, linked. We turn first to English schools[1], where Ami Montgomery investigates the ways in which intercultural competence is, and is not, embedded in the compulsory curriculum for languages taught in primary and secondary schools. Abigail Parrish then looks at the study of modern languages in UK higher education. Finally, Jayme Scally moves away from the confines of language education to consider the impact of an alternative context in which intercultural competence can develop: study abroad. We argue that languages and intercultural competence are not inextricably linked. Whilst all young people in the UK undertake some language study, as Montgomery argues, they do not necessarily all develop a notable level of intercultural competence. Of the more than 2 million students in the university system in the year 2018/19, only around 20,000, or 1%, were studying modern foreign languages degrees (HESA 2020) and around 50,000 (2.25%) were taking standalone language modules (AULC-UCML 2018) which, as Parrish outlines below, do not tend to include a high level of cultural or intercultural content. Scally takes the position that language can be immaterial to the development of intercultural competence, and provides evidence of this in discussion of international programmes, such as study abroad where requirements for language proficiency or coursework can be wholly non-existent.

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[1] Education in the UK is devolved to the four nations; we focus here on England rather than Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

Rethinking language learning in schools and investing in an intercultural curriculum

Ami Montgomery

Languages in Schools

Research surrounding the importance of language learning in UK primary and secondary schools continues to highlight the ongoing concern for the low level of participation and uptake of languages at GCSE and beyond (Tinsley 2019; Lanvers and Coleman 2013). The National Curriculum for Languages in England maintains that studying languages provides pupils with an insight into other cultures and an opportunity to develop appropriate and effective ways to communicate with those from other cultural backgrounds (Sinecrope et al. 2007), a 'liberation from insularity... an opening to other cultures' (DfE 2014). Consequently, we are led to believe that language learning assists pupils with developing a greater understanding of what it means to be a global citizen and a chance to enhance increasingly important intercultural competencies and skills to effectively compete in the global market (Engel and Siczek 2018), competencies which will be even more vital in a post-Brexit world. These competencies and skills often include the ability to develop both targeted and effective knowledge, attitudes and behaviours, appropriate to intercultural interactions and can be observed in both the verbal and non-verbal acts adopted by individuals (Deardorff 2006; Woolf 2010; Engel and Siczek 2018). Nonetheless, despite the multiple benefits of learning a language, government policy in England does not support extended or in-depth study of the subject. This raises doubts about the intercultural experience, competencies and culturally responsive teaching, a research informed pedagogy that recognises the importance of embracing culture, that primary and secondary school pupils in the UK are exposed to during their education. This contribution to the Forum will discuss the extent to which language education in England is not currently inextricably linked to developing pupil's intercultural competence, highlighting ways in which it could—or indeed should—be.

The National Picture in England

Education in England finds itself amidst a language crisis, a nation of second-language illiterates where pupils leave school with limited linguistic knowledge and second language skills (Berman 2011). Language learning in English primary and secondary schools continues to be guided by government policy, and at present, it is compulsory for a selected language to be taught for pupils aged 7-14 (DfE 2013). Traditionally these include French, Spanish and German, with the government more recently encouraging teachers to expand the range of languages taught, beyond these European staples. Individual schools are free to decide whether to teach a language to pupils beyond the compulsory phase or not, resulting in a lack of consistency in policy and practice across schools. For secondary schools in England, this inconsistency in policy and practice can be seen beyond the language classroom, with the national curriculum for pupils aged 11-14 perceived as 'not a priority' (Kidd 2020, 51) and 'wasted years' (Ofsted, 2015). In a recent survey of teachers by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) 53% of respondents acknowledged that the number of subjects offered at GCSE was reducing, with some schools starting the preparation for fewer GCSEs as early as Year 7 (Staufenberg 2019). Displaying an education system for 11-16 year olds in danger of becoming 'impoverished' (Kidd 2020, 53) and 'hopes of a broad curriculum...nothing more than a dream' (Hyman, 2019). For some schools, languages are made compulsory for all pupils aged 14–16, in others they are made optional post-14, where pupils of higher ability may be encouraged to engage in further language learning post-14 (Education Datalab 2015; Lanvers 2017).

Primary 7-11

Official reports and languages surveys, including the Language Trends Report, aim to assess the impact of policy measures and analyse the strengths and weaknesses of language provision in schools. Such surveys continue to identify significant disparities in language provision between primary and secondary schools, particularly surrounding pupil outcomes and achievement. As a result of these imbalances, pupils encounter significant challenges when transitioning from primary to secondary education (Courtney 2017). These challenges include heightened barriers for pupils who seek to build on prior language learning and who wish to develop the desirable intercultural competencies to succeed and achieve overall progression. With the teaching of a language having become compulsory in in 2014 for pupils aged between 7 and 11 years, the groundwork for language learning, for pupils aged between 11 and 14, should have been laid, but this does not always lead to a successful transition (Chambers 2019). Although modest increases in pupil outcomes have been recorded, collaboration between primary and secondary education settings continue to decline (Tinsley 2019), and despite schools' best efforts, these inconsistencies in practice remain a challenge.

The 2019 Language Trends Report provides insight into teachers' thoughts on the growth in success and satisfaction in language teaching and learning at primary level. Attitudes towards the value of language learning for intercultural development continues to be positive, particularly at primary level, where languages are a way to embrace other cultures and a valued life skill (Tinsley 2019). Nonetheless, these positive findings do not represent the diminishing international engagement of schools (Tinsley 2019) nor the practice across all regions of England, where there continues to be a socio-economic divide at both primary and secondary level (Lanvers 2018; Tinsley 2019). For pupils attending primary schools in more disadvantaged areas with lower levels of attainment, language learning opportunities are far less, with pupils 'more likely to be taught languages for a shorter time and receive less systematic instruction without access to specialist teachers' (Tinsley 2019, 18). Interestingly, challenges concerning the delivery of languages in the lower key stages were less likely to be identified as issues or concerns for those primary schools in and around London. This was particularly the case for schools with higher numbers of pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) where school practices take account of the skills, experiences and aspirations of their pupils and teachers and 'invest considerable energy in mediating a challenging policy framework' to better support their pupils (Sharples 2016, 297). As a result we see the linguistic and cultural resources of pupils compensating for the restrictive curriculum and 'monolingualising' (Heller 1995, 374) environment that most commonly emphasises homogeneity and predictability (Sharples 2016).

Secondary 11-14

The 2018 Language Trends survey focused particularly on the socio-economic and educational variables associated with the decline in pupils choosing a language at GCSE, given that 'only half the pupil population take a language to GCSE, and only a third (33%) obtain a grade C or above' (Tinsley and Doležal 2018, 2). As a consequence of the removal of the subject as compulsory in 2004 for pupils beyond age 14, Tinsley and Doležal (2018) highlight that the proportion of pupils taking a language at GCSE had dropped from 76% in 2002 to 40% in 2011. The most recent report indicates a modest increase in language uptake from previous years, although the changes appear to favour the higher attaining pupils in both independent and state schools (Tinsley 2019). With the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) in 2011, schools are increasingly measured on how many of their pupils choose to take a GCSE in these subjects and how they perform. EBacc subjects continue to be identified as contributing to and assisting with pupils achieving career aspirations, and are described by the government as providing pupils with ‘access to a full range of employment options when they leave secondary school and the broad knowledge that employers are looking for’ (DfE 2020). Partly because of the EBacc, the proportion of pupils taking a language rose to 49% in 2014, its highest figure since 2004. However, the relative difficulty of attaining ‘good’ grades in a language compared to many other curriculum subjects (Coe 2008; Ofqual 2015) and increased concerns surrounding persistent grading severity over a period of several years presents a further challenge to the delivery of the subject (Taylor and Marsden 2014; Thomson 2016). This, combined with the introduction of other, competing, performance measures which do not include a language, has resulted in schools being reluctant to enter students for GCSE MFL (Education Datalab 2015; Lanvers 2017, Parrish and Lavers 2019).

Schools under increased pressure to improve overall performance indicators are more likely to reduce the offering of languages to focus on other subjects and provide a longer period of preparation for GCSE examinations (Tinsley 2019, 18). In these schools, pupils are offered a shorter study period for languages at KS3, where pupils can choose to drop their language subject before age 14 (Tinsley 2019), threatening the status of the subject (Fisher 2011). As a consequence, attitudes to language learning continue to be mixed, with studies on pupils’ motivation to learn a language in the UK generally indicating low levels from a young age (Parrish and Lanvers, 2019; Williams et al. 2002). In common with other anglophone countries, the global status of English can give rise to an ‘English is enough’ mentality (Lanvers 2017; Berman 2011). As a post-Brexit Britain becomes a reality, both pupils and parents have begun ‘questioning the need to learn a language’ (Tinsley 2019, 18). Despite language learning offering an ideal opportunity for providing pupils with an insight into the target language community and the chance to explore and celebrate sameness as well as difference across cultures, the programme of study for Languages at KS3 remains focused on grammar, vocabulary and linguistic competence (National Curriculum 2013, 2) With a culturally rich curriculum that incorporates authentic language materials, motivation to engage in language learning could increase (Dörnyei 1998).

Intercultural competence in the language classroom

Despite significant research surrounding language learning in Higher Education, there continues to be a gap in the context of primary and secondary schools (Hennebry 2014). Consequently, questions remain as to whether language learning in these contexts provides sufficient exposure to culturally responsive teaching and sufficient focus on the development of pupil's intercultural competence (Baker, 2015). The Department for Education highlights how languages offer pupils an important range of knowledge and skills (DfE 2020), as one of the core subjects that make up the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), a performance measure that demonstrates the proportion of pupils in secondary education who achieve a Grade C or above in a suite of academic subjects including English, mathematics, a science, history, geography and a language. Whilst proficiency continues to lie at the heart of language learning, it is not the main objective in the language classroom. Learning a language is not solely about enhancing a pupil’s intellectual and cognitive capacity or simply amplifying their metacognitive awareness of linguistic issues of both their second and native languages (Grenfell, 2002). It is equally important to acknowledge that intercultural competence exceeds cultural knowledge (Aktor and Risager 2001; Vigneron 2001). Language learning should provide pupils with an opportunity to deepen their understanding of other cultures and the world around them (Pachler et al. 2014) To provide a language learning experience which promotes intercultural competence, provision should be designed to assist pupils with becoming effective communicators in a linguistically and culturally diverse society. Pupils are required to develop an ‘appreciation of human plurality and the diversity of cultures around the globe’ otherwise they limit themselves to a ‘narrowly normative culture’ (Berman 2011). Effective, purposeful and contextualised language learning in schools offers pupils the opportunity for both the acquisition and development of language and culture simultaneously (Sudhoff 2010).

Scoping ICC development at school level

Regardless of the frequent acknowledgement of the intrinsic connection between culture and language (Koro 2016), England’s education system remains monolingual and monocultural at a policy level. Due to current constraints of the national curriculum, little time is afforded to the development of intercultural understanding within language learning in schools. Yet in an increasingly globalised world, there is a heightened need for pupils to develop their intercultural awareness to meet the demands of global trade (Campos 2009). Particularly when over half of the European population can hold a conversation and communicate to others in a second language at the same age, young monolinguals are at a significant disadvantage in the global economy (European Commission 2012). As Brexit brings increasing geo-political changes, the UK’s current socio-political climate is at times hostile towards the speaking and learning of foreign languages, even xenophobic (Graham and Santos 2015; Lanvers and Coleman 2013), making decisions surrounding language learning policies crucial. The teaching of intercultural competence has surely never been more important (Coyle et al. 2010).

Developing intercultural competence at university level in the UK: two unequal opportunities

Abigail Parrish

It is no secret that language learning in the UK is in decline. Although there is strategising around internationalisation at a government level, this is focused on economic and political benefits rather than cultural or linguistic (Engel and Siczek 2018) and annual reports have chronicled a declining trend in uptake of languages at post-14 and post-16 level (see Tinsley 2019 for the most recent), exemplifying an ongoing crisis in language learning in England (Lanvers and Coleman 2013; Bawden 2013). This crisis has a subsequent effect on language learning at post-18 level, where provision can be divided into two categories. Students can enrol on degrees in a range of languages, or on degrees which include a languages component, taught within departments of languages and area studies. Students can also follow institution-wide language programmes (IWLP), which are usually run from a stand-alone language centre by staff who do not contribute to research activity and are often part time (Álvarez et al. 2018). As noted by one language teacher, ‘it is important not to put [the two types of] provision on the same level – it is not comparable at all’ (Álvarez et al. 2018, 13). The continued decline in language learning at all levels has led to university language departments closing (Bawden 2013) and a decline in the number of students enrolled on languages degrees (Kershaw 2017; HESA 2020). At the same time, enrolment on IWLPs has overtaken the number of students on dedicated language degree programmes (Skrandies 2016), creating a shift in the type of languages education received by those graduates who have language skills. This response will discuss the extent to which these patterns of language learning in UK higher education support the development of intercultural competence.

Traditional modern languages degrees at undergraduate level in the UK include a Year Abroad in one of the countries where the target language is spoken. Generally, students choose between studying at a university, working as a language assistant in a school or undertaking a work placement. This year is intended to give students access to a range of linguistic and cultural experiences that they would not otherwise experience, including living with native speakers of the language in many cases. The benchmark standards set out for languages degrees note that:

> students should be able to demonstrate a knowledge, awareness and understanding of one or more cultures and societies, other than their own, that will normally have been significantly enhanced by a period of residence in the country, or countries, of the target language(s). (QAA 2019, 19)

By contrast, IWLPs tend to focus purely on the language being learned without any explicit cultural elements. These courses, which are also known as ‘languages for all’ programmes, can generally be studied as optional modules as part of a degree or as an ‘extra-curricular’ option alongside undergraduate or postgraduate study. There is generally no requirement for students to have previously studied a language (AULC-UCML 2018).

Languages at university for intercultural competence

For Byram and colleagues, intercultural competence is embedded in the ability of an individual to see and interpret relationships between cultures (Byram et al, 2002). Where university language courses include a cultural element, for example modules covering aspects of the society or history of one of the countries where the language is spoken, there is a clear link to intercultural competence. Where language courses do not include this, the link is much weaker.

To illustrate this, five UK universities were identified whose websites advertised both IWLPs in French and BA courses in French or French Studies. In light of the socio-economic divide in language learning outlined above, the sample chosen were a subset of the Russell Group of universities[2], the UK equivalent to the US Ivy League, comprising 24 of the leading institutions. French was chosen in light of its status as the most commonly learned language in the UK at both school (Tinsley 2019) and university level (Bowler 2020).

The indicative content of the lowest and highest level courses in the IWLP and of each year of the BA was scrutinised for reference to both culture and intercultural competence. It should be recognised that the institutions chosen are not intended to represent the full picture in the sector; nor does the indicative content included on the websites represent the complete content of the course.

Intercultural competence on IWLPs

Not surprisingly, all five institutions included language at all levels of study. Of the five institutions, four included some reference to culture in their learning outcomes at Beginner level of the IWLP, as shown in the table below:

[Table 1 near here]

By the most advanced level, the same institutions included references to culture:

[Table 2 near here]

At beginner level, both Cambridge University and the University of Sheffield include specific reference to intercultural elements: Cambridge specifies that students will be able to 'compare the differences' between cultures, and Sheffield's course outcomes include being able to '[take] intercultural differences and language barriers into account'. At advanced level, only Sheffield refers to such skills, specifying that students will be able to ‘demonstrate proficiency in […] intercultural and language awareness’.

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[2] https://russellgroup.ac.uk/

This illustration suggests that some IWLPs include a level of generalised cultural education on their syllabus, although the language itself very much dominates the list of course outcomes. Although centralised data is not collected on the number of students enrolling on courses at each level, a case study at the London School of Economics found that around half of all enrolments at their language centre were on beginner-level modules (Skrandies 2016) and it is likely that this picture is repeated elsewhere. This means that students following such programmes may gain ‘an initial insight’ into the culture of the target country, but may not progress to ‘an understanding’. The cultural element seems to be a somewhat loose inclusion of ‘little c’ culture, looking at the day-to-day aspects of life in the target countries, with limited scope for developing intercultural competence at a meaningful level.

Intercultural competence on undergraduate degrees

The picture is somewhat different on languages degrees. At undergraduate level, the cultural content was found to increase as the years progressed, and to focus on ‘big C’ culture. These modules often formed part of the menu of optional courses from which students could select, as opposed to the core course content which was dominated by language; indeed almost all of the optional modules listed seem to be culture-focused, covering aspects of art, literature, history, philosophy and society. Such ‘big C’ content may form part of a nascent intercultural competence developed through the course.

In addition, all five institutions included a Year Abroad in their undergraduate programme, as is standard across the sector. Of the five, four explicitly mentioned the cultural benefits of the year, although, in common with the IWLPs, these seem focused on ‘little c’ culture, referring to ‘immersing yourself’ in the culture, and did this alongside outlining the linguistic gains that would be made.

[Table 3 near here]

In order to further consider the prevalence or otherwise of intercultural competence in language degrees in the UK, a sample of university websites were scrutinised, this time comprising all 24 Russell Group universities. Of these, 21 were found to offer single-honours BA French courses. The ‘course overview’ and ‘year abroad’ pages were inspected and mentions of ‘culture’, ‘cultural’ or ‘intercultural’ recorded.

All but one institution made mention of ‘culture’ on their degree pages, often in a phrase such as ‘language and culture’, and 16 of the 21 also mentioned it on their Year Abroad pages. Whether this referred to ‘little c’ or ‘big C’ culture was not always clear, but all courses included ‘big C’ culture modules.

In total, four mentions of ‘intercultural’ were found. Three institutions referred to ‘intercultural awareness’ and one to ‘intercultural competence’; three of these mentions were on ‘Year abroad’ pages. A further two institutions referred to ‘cultural awareness’, one to ‘cultural understanding’ and one to ‘cultural knowledge’. In addition, one institution flagged ‘cross-cultural experience’ gained on the Year abroad and another the development of ‘culturally-aware professionals’.

Conclusion

The brief illustration provided in this contribution has shown that, whilst culture is a key part of language degree courses in the UK, intercultural competence is not always foregrounded, and it appears to rarely be a focus of IWLP courses. The higher proportion of students on these programmes may lead to higher levels of language skills amongst graduates, but many will likely not meet a definition of intercultural competence after Byram. Those students who graduate from languages degree programmes, by contrast, will gain both ‘little c’ and ‘big C’ cultural knowledge and are much more likely to gain intercultural competence through their studies, particularly the Year Abroad, although this is not often an advertised benefit. Graduates of such courses will gain both language skills and intercultural competence in a way that is inextricably linked.

What do we really mean by intercultural competence?

Jayme Scally

Intercultural competence is a concept important to the globalisation of education; one which has many facets and is known by a variety of terms, commonly used as synonyms or at least considered as closely related, such as world mindedness, cross-cultural competence and global citizenship (Braskamp et al. 2009; Deardorff 2006). Deardorff (2006, 247) defines intercultural competence as ‘knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs and behaviors; and revitalizing one’s self’. Importantly, language abilities are not explicitly stated anywhere in Deardorff’s model. This is due to the lack of agreement on its role among scholars. It is noted as being an important skill, but in no way sufficient on its own; alone, language ability does not guarantee successful intercultural experiences without the presence of the other aspects identified.

International opportunities in university are widespread, open to students from any academic major, for credit or not. These programmes are offered with a range of motives, including raising the institutional profile or strengthening research connections with partner universities, but the prevailing assumption is that they will internationalise campuses and develop global citizens (Woolf 2010). This global citizenship is an integral piece of, or accompaniment to, intercultural competence. Through international experiences, learners should become more adept at navigating relationships with other cultures (Murphy et al. 2014). They develop skills as intercultural communicators through greater understanding of differences and experiences, facing and overcoming the barriers these differences may present (Asada 2019). A global citizen shows knowledge of and ability to integrate and empathise with diverse others, and it is their level of intercultural competence that determines how well they may do so.

University efforts to develop intercultural competence

Many universities make a point to mention their commitment to international education in their mission statements, though most use vague terminology and little to no substance to support their claims or to signify how they assess that this pledge is being met (Engel and Siczek 2018). Specific to study abroad, the goals of strengthening students' understanding of international issues, cultural awareness, language skills, specific course content, and developing students' ability to be global citizens are often mentioned (Engel and Siczek 2018; Hadis 2005; Murphy et al. 2014; Pellegrino 1998; Zhai and Scheer 2002). Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill (2009, 101) state that the goal of undergraduate education is to develop students as whole human beings, 'higher education leaders and faculty are not only concerned with intellectual development and learning but also moral, social, physical and spiritual development'. They also use the term 'global learning and development' as it clearly acknowledges both the inner and external growth of students. University is an optimal time to address intercultural competency as students are constantly confronted with new people, places, and ideas while also being supported by the academic and welfare professionals in their institutions.

Participation in study abroad varies widely across national education systems and across the different universities within them. US Open Doors data from the 2018-19 academic year shows that 341,751 students studied for academic credit abroad, and 16% of all bachelor degree graduates study abroad at some point in their degree. Additionally, another 38,401 US students studied on non-credit programmes, internships, volunteering, and research abroad. Universities UK (2017) data from 2015-16 (the most recent that could be found) showed that 26,025 students, or 1.4% of the overall UK-domiciled enrolment in higher education participated in some form of international experience, though it should be noted that this number includes both credit and non-credit experiences. Highlighting the potential and prevalence of English language instruction in international education programmes, for US students, England, Ireland, and Australia host 18% of the total study abroad participation, while the other most popular destinations, including Italy, Spain, and increasingly China, often have fully developed programmes with course and extracurricular offerings in English (Open Doors 2019). Included in the top ten destinations for UK students studying abroad are the US, Canada, and Australia (Universities UK 2017), as well as other Western European countries with strong traditions of optional English language medium provision for international students, such as Spain, France, and Italy. This shows that while language can clearly be developed in such a programme, this growth is in no way assured or, in some cases, even a goal.

Language and international study

Language education at university level in the UK is designed in such a way that language and the associated cultures are often taught as separate modules (Parks 2020), leading to a clear and obvious hindrance to the development of ICC in the language classroom. However, more broadly, we can choose to see language ability in two ways: meeting the standard accepted norms and forms to prove accuracy, or to facilitate interactions with diverse others, regardless of form or accuracy. Language learning on a study abroad programme has been shown clearly to develop the latter in terms of oral proficiency and communicative competence, but has shown less effective in improving competence in grammatical areas (Pellegrino 1998).

Pellegrino (1998) identified students who perceived that the functional use of their language skills in daily life abroad was more beneficial than their classroom study, noting improvement in spoken fluency, rather than grammar or language structure.

Opportunities for interaction in the host community enables students to pick up phrases and usage patterns and then have them verified or put into context by instructors in the language classroom. This perception of competence in day to day interactions has the additional effect of boosting their self-confidence and cultural awareness (Asada 2019). In a comparison of Spanish language acquisition in the domestic US classroom and abroad in Spain, Segalowitz, et al. (2004) found the abroad group showed greater gains in oral proficiency and fluency while the home group showed superior gains in grammatical proficiency. Study abroad students also showed greater comfort in conversing in the second language.

Speaking directly to one of the areas most often claimed to influence and to be influenced by language, the homestay, host parents have not found language ability to be a major factor in student adjustment or intercultural development (Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart 2002), but instead their initial attitudes of openness to experience. In fact, they found that hosting multiple students from the same home country at the same time provided support for meaningful cross-cultural interaction.

Recalling the prevalence of English-speaking destinations and English language instruction in most study abroad programmes, the question of whether language is valued for its accuracy, or for the ability to facilitate intercultural interaction becomes more important. If the latter, it would seem that international experiences have an increasingly important role to play. Marginson (2014, 7) describes international higher education as ‘a process of self-formation within conditions of disequilibrium in which student subjects manage their lives reflexively, fashioning their own changing identities, albeit under social circumstances largely beyond their control’. This context can support intercultural competence, cultivating cognitive, behavioural, and affective development.

Intercultural competence development and international study

According to Paige (1994), there are three main factors that comprise the intercultural experience: intensity of emotions or culture shock, knowledge areas that incorporate cross-cultural differences that the student finds difficult to understand, and the actual cultural differences that influence how people evaluate information. While language proficiency may aid in some of this, there is significant research to show that it is not a required piece. I will briefly outline some of these findings in the context of the cognitive, behavioural, and affective domains often invoked in discussions of intercultural competence.

The cognitive domain concerns the development of abilities and includes knowledge, comprehension, and critical thinking (Immetman and Schneider 1998). While language acquisition would fit here, it has been discussed earlier. Very broadly, Gonyea (2008) concluded that students returning from study abroad demonstrated intellectual development, being more engaged than non-study abroad peers and more likely to take deep approaches to learning, specifically through integrative learning and reflective learning, through this more profound engagement with their own learning. Zhai and Scheer (2002) found agricultural study abroad participants reported that they gained ‘appreciation, respect, and understanding of their host country and culture’ (Zhai and Scheer 2002, 26) as well as increases in their ability to understand themselves and the US through non-US lenses, again showing intellectual growth through increased self-awareness of cognitive issues.

The behavioural domain concerns the acquisition of observable skills that affect the building of relationships and understanding within them (Immetman and Schneider 1998). In developing in the behavioural domain, a student will learn to accept and be comfortable around others, often with different personal values, growing their status as a global citizen. Hadis (2005) reported positive changes in the areas of global-mindedness and having a higher curiosity about world events in a programme that granted students a degree of agency in selecting experiences. Gonyea (2008) also found that students who had participated in a study abroad programme were more likely to be involved in diversity activities on campus upon their return. Similarly, Zhai and Scheer (2002) found increases in awareness of global issues and events, specifically with relation to their interaction with and influence on their home country. A key goal of intercultural competence development, in the perspective of our universities, is development of employability skills. Trooboff, Vande Berg, and Rayman (2008) provide significant support for the notion that human resources professionals are likely to value international experiences, specifically for the interpersonal skills that often come as a result of prolonged interaction with a foreign culture. While Wallace (1999) found that participants expressed belief that their study abroad had a moderate to significant influence on their career, with almost three quarters of respondents stating that study abroad influenced their career in a constructive manner.

The affective domain involves the development of the adult personality (Immetman and Schneider 1998). This should lead to a greater awareness of personal strengths, values, and personal characteristics as well as one's sense of self. While abroad, a student may be faced with many challenges that cause them to question their identity within their expanding and diversifying worldview (Asada 2019; Nguyen, Jefferies, and Rojas 2018). Lindsey (2005) found development in morals and values among US social work students in Scotland, reporting being more open to accepting and considering new perspectives and ways of thinking, as well as increased self-awareness and insight, which Lindsey says is 'intrinsic to values development' (2005, 237). This growth prompted students to be more likely to reflect on their personal and professional values, as well as allowing them first hand insight into the development of societal values, facilitating them in understanding the environmental influences (Asada 2019). Self-efficacy development was also found to benefit from study abroad, specifically the realization of ability to cope with living in a different country, successfully develop travel skills and confidence in being able to articulate their international experience to others (Nguyen, Jefferies, and Rojas 2018; Zhai and Scheer 2002).

Moving forward with intercultural competence

While I make no attempt to devalue skill with a second or foreign language, the persistent assumption of a necessary link between language and intercultural competence is inexplicable; proficiency in multiple languages is not vital to developing intercultural competence. Regardless of what research says about the importance of language skills, it is undeniable that, at least in Western education systems, language education will become increasingly rare, and will continue to a lower level of proficiency in the instances where it is available. Accordingly, it is necessary for us to reframe our conceptualization of intercultural competence, moving away from language dependency and focusing more on the other elements, such as thought processes, behaviour choices, and attitude. Failure to do so may result in a loss of the potential for intercultural competence, alongside the loss of language ability.

As our world becomes increasingly global and interconnected, facilitating effective interaction between people from opposite sides of the world with various technologies, the value of the ability to appropriately and successfully interact with different cultures has become clear. My assertion is that, with the low enrolment in language degrees and still low, but not to the same extent, rates of participation in study abroad, investing our time and energy into growing participation in international opportunities and strengthening those programmes to intentionally support the development of intercultural competence is a better use of our limited higher education resources.

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