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Intercultural Competence in the ESL Classroom: Challenges and Successes

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Intercultural Competence in the ESL Classroom: Challenges and Successes

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural Competence in the ESL Classroom: Challenges and Successes

Breno Santos Rodrigues Pereira

This action-based research study investigated the challenges and successes involved in the teaching of intercultural competence in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. Most studies on intercultural competence take place in English as a foreign language classroom, and very few are centered on ESL instruction. It is this gap in the research that motivated the present study, in which the following research questions were posed: 1) How do targeted training practices in the classroom promote the development of intercultural competence as demonstrated by quantitative data?; 2) What challenges are associated with teaching intercultural competence to ESL learners?; 3) Which classroom practices are most effective in helping ESL learners develop intercultural competence? The study focused on eight ESL students at the Intensive English Program at West Virginia University in the United States between the summer and fall terms of 2022. The data collection tool utilized was a survey, which was conducted at the beginning and end of each semester. The survey included questions about participants' personal backgrounds, a Likert scale where participants ranked statements about intercultural communication based on the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements, and two open-ended questions about intercultural interactions. Findings of the study were also based on participant observations and a reflective journal by the teacher-researcher. Results of the research indicated that targeted practices in the classroom helped learners to change their attitudes toward U.S. culture and become more aware of cultural differences and nuances. The reflections from the journal provided insights into the challenges and successes involved in developing intercultural competence among ESL learners. Implications for teaching and the ESL classroom moving forward include strategies for encouraging deep learning about intercultural competence and promoting critical reflections about culture. Finally, the thesis serves as a call for ESL teachers (domestic and international) to discuss and share their own experiences about teaching intercultural competence.

For me, who learned to believe in myself and never stopped,

for my parents' love and commitment to make me the best they could,

for Alan Carroll and his amazing support throughout this journey,

for all the educators that (have) inspire(d) me to be better.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

In a recent communication skills class, a Vietnamese student shared that, in some parts of her home country, eating dog meat is not only legal but also a customary activity practiced in local restaurants. That may not come as a surprise to some people, but it definitely seemed to shock some of my Middle Eastern students. The situation took place while I was teaching a lesson about table manners and etiquette. As students discussed questions on a handout that aimed to develop their cultural awareness, one of them shared the piece of information that led to the unfolding of a debate in class and provoked a variety of reactions. Although this was a conversation that arose from a class activity, this kind of topic is definitely not restricted to the classroom. We often deal with a multitude of culturally sensitive topics in our native cultures on a daily basis and are challenged by them; such encounters can be even more challenging for second language learners living abroad and interacting with a cultural background that does not belong to them or is different from their own.

Considering the context of ESL learners in the United States, where students commonly interact with not only U.S. culture, but also cultures from around the world, the acquisition of skills for navigating such multicultural settings are critical. In addition, situations like the aforementioned example spark fruitful reflections and discussions about how language teachers can successfully guide students in becoming more sensitive to topics of cultural diversity and learning how to deal appropriately with them, both linguistically and in terms of sociocultural appropriateness. The fact that globalization and technology have enhanced the way intercultural encounters take place in modern society seems to be a consensus amongst language researchers (Catalano & Barriga, 2021; Kramer, 2020; Perry & Southwell, 2011). These important factors directly impacted language education and pushed the field of world languages teaching to

incorporate the intercultural dimension as an essential part of language teaching (Garrett-Rucks, 2018; Moeller, 2014). As a result, these changes promoted new understandings about how language learning should include not just linguistic information, but also knowledge and skills to prepare learners to communicate in intercultural settings.

Concepts of Culture and Intercultural Understanding

Intercultural competence, which will be discussed more thoroughly in the literature review, is based on a variety of related terms, all involving layers of intercultural understanding and openness. One related term is intercultural communication, which refers to communication across cultures. In 2016, The University of Minnesota Libraries published a book on the field of Communication Studies that included a section on intercultural communication, highlighting the importance of communication in the development of intercultural competence. According to their definition, intercultural communication is "communication between people with differing cultural identities" (University of Minnesota, 2016, p. 403). This description points to the idea that intercultural communication takes place when individuals from different cultural backgrounds converse and interact with each other. Similarly, Byram (2002) defined it as "communication on the basis of respect for individuals and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction" (p. 9). His description indicated foundational aspects of intercultural competence that are at the core of successful intercultural interactions. It evidenced the importance for learners to be considerate of cultural differences and adapt their behavior accordingly to ensure efficient communication. Conversely, these abilities can be achieved through the development of intercultural competence.

Another term related to intercultural competence is interculturality. Dai and Chen (2015) conceptualized interculturality by weaving it with the term "intersubjectivity," which relates to

the social connections that individuals build, including both mutual understanding and disagreement. Based on that premise, they define interculturality as the following:

> Interculturality, based on the concept of intersubjectivity, therefore can be defined as the multiple connections between cultures, in which culturally different individuals endeavor to reduce cultural distance, negotiate shared meanings and mutually desired identities, and produce reciprocal relationships in order to achieve communication goals. (p. 101)

Through interculturality, individuals not only learn about the culture of the other from a passive perspective but create connections to their own culture and learn to embody them. Therefore, interculturality allows people to go beyond shallow perspectives of cultural phenomena and acquire deeper comprehension of culturally valuable products, practices, and perspectives. As a result, it promotes mutual understanding between the parties and ensures successful intercultural communication.

Intercultural sensitivity is also related to intercultural competence. Hammer et al. (2003) defined it as "the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences" (p. 422). In other words, it is the processual practice of critical observation, evaluation, and interaction with new cultures. It is related to interculturality when it comes to the importance that both terms apply to *empathy*, which makes them complement each other (Dai & Chen, 2015). As learners become more interculturally sensitive, it is expected that they learn to decenter themselves and see things from the perspectives of the other, which develops their empathy for other cultures. Furthermore, the higher levels of intercultural sensitivity learners present, the more they will succeed at being interculturally competent (Hammer et. al, 2003). Intercultural sensitivity helps learners identify critical aspects of cultural differences and adapt their attitudes and behaviors to the cultural contexts they are presented with, which helps them thrive in intercultural settings.

The concept of intercultural competence is an overarching term which encompasses the previous concepts and borrows from research in anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics, and

applied linguistics. It is a skill through which language speakers can observe cultural phenomena in different cultures, internally and externally attached to a society, from a critical point of view. Therefore, it enables language learners to successfully navigate multicultural settings and engage in intercultural experiences appropriately. Different definitions of intercultural competence and elements of intercultural competence will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Considering how globalization and technology have greatly changed society in the past few decades, the urge for more culturally sensitive language users has been evident in recent years. Unlike in the past, people can now travel, call, do business, create relationships and have all sorts of interactions with people(s) of other cultures. Kramsch (2013) discusses how computer-mediated communication (CMC) has shaped a new way for people to engage in multicultural communities and changed the approach of intercultural competence in language classrooms. Such impacts, according to her, exemplify a new approach to teaching culture; one that does not take traditional views of culture but a new perspective that accounts for all the new forms of interacting in the present world.

The NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements were designed as a framework for world language teachers and students to help them understand and establish goals for language and intercultural skills (ACTFL, 2017). The Can-Do Statements are based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the ACTFL Performance Descriptors for language learners, providing levels ranging from novice low to advanced. Its intercultural communication section provides situational statements that serve as a benchmark for assessing cultural knowledge and intercultural competence, considering different levels of proficiency. This tool comes in handy in guiding teaching professionals in curriculum design and evaluating, not only student

performance, but steps toward codifying how intercultural competence should be taught in world language classrooms.

The English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom is an exceptionally fruitful environment for the development of intercultural skills. Unlike the usual context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), where students commonly need to be pushed to interact with the target language and culture, ESL learners are surrounded by them inside and outside the classroom. In fact, given that most ESL learners come from diverse cultural backgrounds, they are also more likely to encounter and interact with other cultures that are not their own. Talking specifically about ESL learners in the United States, their gains tend to be even more evident, considering that they put their intercultural skills to the test regularly based on interactions that are a part of daily life, such as going to the grocery store, attending events, interacting with friends and co-workers, among other things. The cultural knowledge of these learners enables them to navigate such settings and engage in these experiences appropriately, but it is vital that teachers support students in the development of skills that foster the investigation of cultural practices and the enactment of appropriate intercultural interactions.

With the concepts of interculturality of intercultural competence in mind, the present study aims to explore students' intercultural skills to move beyond an exploration of cultural products, practices, and perspectives toward the ability to both investigate culturally appropriate behaviors and interact in socioculturally acceptable ways. It also intends to examine teacher best practices in promoting intercultural learning in the development of intercultural competence. The following research questions will guide this study:

1. How do targeted training practices in the classroom promote the development of intercultural competence as demonstrated by quantitative data?

2. What challenges are associated with teaching intercultural competence to ESL learners?

3. Which classroom practices are most effective in helping ESL learners develop intercultural competence?

The examination of these questions and their outcomes as well as an analysis of sample practices designed to guide learners in their intercultural learning define the purpose of this study and the methods used to test the research questions that frame it. This will be done through an action-based approach that focuses on looking at intercultural competence as a pertinent issue for ESL learners, implement structured interventions, and reflect on the outcomes. This type of research was ideal for the kind of investigation I set out to do because my main goal was to help develop my students' intercultural competence. In this study I have actively engaged both as a researcher and a participant in the classroom, which helped me take action in my own classroom and gather important reflections to share with fellow educators.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Before discussing the teaching of intercultural competence, it is important to define more carefully and in a more nuanced way the details of the term and its parameters with regard to both learners and educators. An examination of research on the term shows that there is no clear consensus on how to define intercultural competence. Often different nomenclatures are used and include terms such as intercultural sensitivity, interculturality, intercultural competence (IC), and intercultural communicative competence (ICC), among others (Bennett, 1993; Byram, 1997; Dai & Chen, 2015; Fantini, 2007; Sinicrope et al., 2012). For the purposes of this study, I will use the term *intercultural competence* as it is the most frequently used in recent literature (Perry & Southwell, 2011), and it captures the essence of the other designations. The term intercultural competence also serves as the foundation for the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements for Communication and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ACTFL, 2017) that were created for classroom use. [1] To avoid confusion, I will first highlight other terms that are cited or mentioned throughout the work that I use in conjunction with intercultural competence.

Defining Intercultural Competence

A general understanding shared by researchers is that, regardless of the exact term used, learners who possess intercultural competence have the ability to navigate contexts in cultures other than their own both effectively and appropriately. Sinicrope et al. (2012) explained that, as a theoretical concept, the term intercultural competence became more prominent in the second half of the 20th century, as the need for cross-cultural interactions increased based on increased overseas travels. Over time, research in the field has raised multiple views and understandings of

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[1] The ACTFL-NCSSFL Can-Do Statements also make use of the term intercultural communicative competence, albeit not in the title of the document. Intercultural communicative competence refers specifically to how learners use intercultural competence when interacting with others.

what it means to be interculturally competent and the role of language learning in that competence, thus generating different terms and definitions. If, in the past, the development of intercultural skills was not deemed as important during intercultural encounters, with the advent of globalism they have taken on an important role at the forefront of language learning. While basic linguistic and cultural knowledge may be sufficient to manage a trip to a new country, it does not ensure the understanding of and successful interaction within another culture. As researchers attempted to delineate the essential components necessary for successful exchanges among persons of different cultures, the task of defining it has become a laborious one.

According to Byram (1997), one of the first major researchers in the field of intercultural studies, the term intercultural communicative competence expands on the principles of Canale and Swain's (1980) communicative competence as the goal of communicative language teaching. Byram argued that focusing only on developing linguistic aspects in learners is not sufficient to guarantee their ability to communicate effectively and in a culturally appropriate manner. In his words, "the efficacy of communication depends upon using language to demonstrate one's willingness to relate, which often involves the indirectness of politeness rather than the direct and 'efficient' choice of language full of information" (p. 3). In other words, effective communication requires more than just having knowledge of the language; it is also necessary to have an openness to the attitudes and behaviors that enables speakers to negotiate meaning effectively. Byram also argued that it is impossible for someone to cast aside their own cultural identity when interacting in an intercultural situation. Asking a learner to embody the native speaker's identity would result in a "linguistically schizophrenic" speaker and should not be the focus of language learning (p. 11). Byram further described what should be cultivated in learners stating that the goal is for learners to:

see and manage the relationships between themselves and their own cultural beliefs, behaviours and meanings, as expressed in a foreign language, and those of their interlocutors, expressed in the same language—or even a combination of languages—which may be the interlocutors' native language, or not. (p. 12)

As an example, English-language learners are often taught that if they bump into someone on the street, an appropriate way of apologizing in the target language is to say, "I'm sorry" or "Excuse me." In contrast to some Middle Eastern cultures, many western cultures, when making an apology, see as common gestures a slight touch on the shoulder or a gentle holding of the other person's arm to keep them from falling. These gestures are, however, not acceptable in all cultures. In conservative Muslim countries, where physical contact is restricted between men and women who are not related, such simple actions could be interpreted negatively or elicit responses of discomfort. These examples illustrate how significant it is to develop cultural sensitivity alongside linguistic competence in language learners.

Arasaratnam (2016) showed that the concepts of *effectiveness* and *appropriateness* are commonly associated with intercultural competence. These terms ensure that speakers can achieve their individual goals in intercultural exchanges (effectiveness), considering the contextual expectations and culturally accepted behaviors (appropriateness). Interculturally competent students incorporate their linguistic knowledge into their discoveries about the target culture(s) as a way to negotiate meaning, explore deeper layers of cultural identities, and tackle intercultural communication effectively and appropriately.

Fantini (2007) investigated the impact of intercultural experiences resulting from service projects in three cooperating countries (Great Britain, Ecuador, and Switzerland). As part of the study's initial stage, Fantini conducted an extensive review of literature that aimed to conceptualize and assess intercultural competence. In his study, he briefly defined intercultural communicative competence as "a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and

appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (p. 9). According to this definition, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) comprehends a set of skills that speakers utilize to perform and interact in intercultural settings in an effective and appropriate manner. Considering the extensive work involved in his study, his perspectives provide insightful information on the importance of ICC for intercultural communication.

Similarly, Jokikokko (2005) carried out a phenomenographic study that gathered data from specialized teachers in the field of intercultural studies, regarding their conceptualizations and perceptions of intercultural competence. The project contributed significant data for the conceptualization of intercultural competence that brought together perspectives from different professionals in the field and shed light on its components. The findings from this study indicated three main categories in the conceptualization of intercultural competence. First, intercultural competence can be viewed as an "ethical orientation," which relates it to interpersonal traits and values that guide one's way of thinking and behaving (Jokikokko, 2005, p. 75). Its "efficiency orientation" relates to "the ability to act and successfully cope with different situations" (p. 79), which includes managing struggles and taking on different roles while engaging in intercultural exchanges. The "pedagogical orientation" focuses on ways teachers can best aid learners, including more knowledge about intercultural theories and skills, and differentiated instructions to students (p. 78). Therefore, the three dimensions explored in this study indicated that being interculturally competent has to do with having a holistic approach to culture and considering a multitude of aspects when interacting interculturally.

Deardorff (2006) conducted a study in which twenty-four higher education administrators and twenty-three intercultural scholars were asked to rate seven different definitions of

intercultural competence. Her goal was to comprise a definition of intercultural competence that reflected the highest agreement among researchers in the field. Some findings and conclusions from this study are particularly relevant to the present discussion. First, although scholars were not united on specific aspects of the concept, the definition of intercultural competence most agreed upon was "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 247). Second, the author concluded that it is possible to measure intercultural competence, even though it is a complex process that should be done progressively and over time (p. 257). These conclusions indicate that, although researchers still have not been able to agree on one definition of intercultural competence that includes specific components, there is a major agreement on broader components (knowledge, skills, attitudes) that can be measured using diverse assessment methods.

In short, research has shown that there is no one single way to define intercultural competence. Just like culture, the concept of intercultural competence evolved over time and has been redefined as more studies are conducted. There are, however, elements and aspects of it that are consistent in the literature, which help us understand its complexity. Reflection on such ideas is fitting to a discussion of important guidelines and models designed for teaching and assessing intercultural competence in the language classroom.

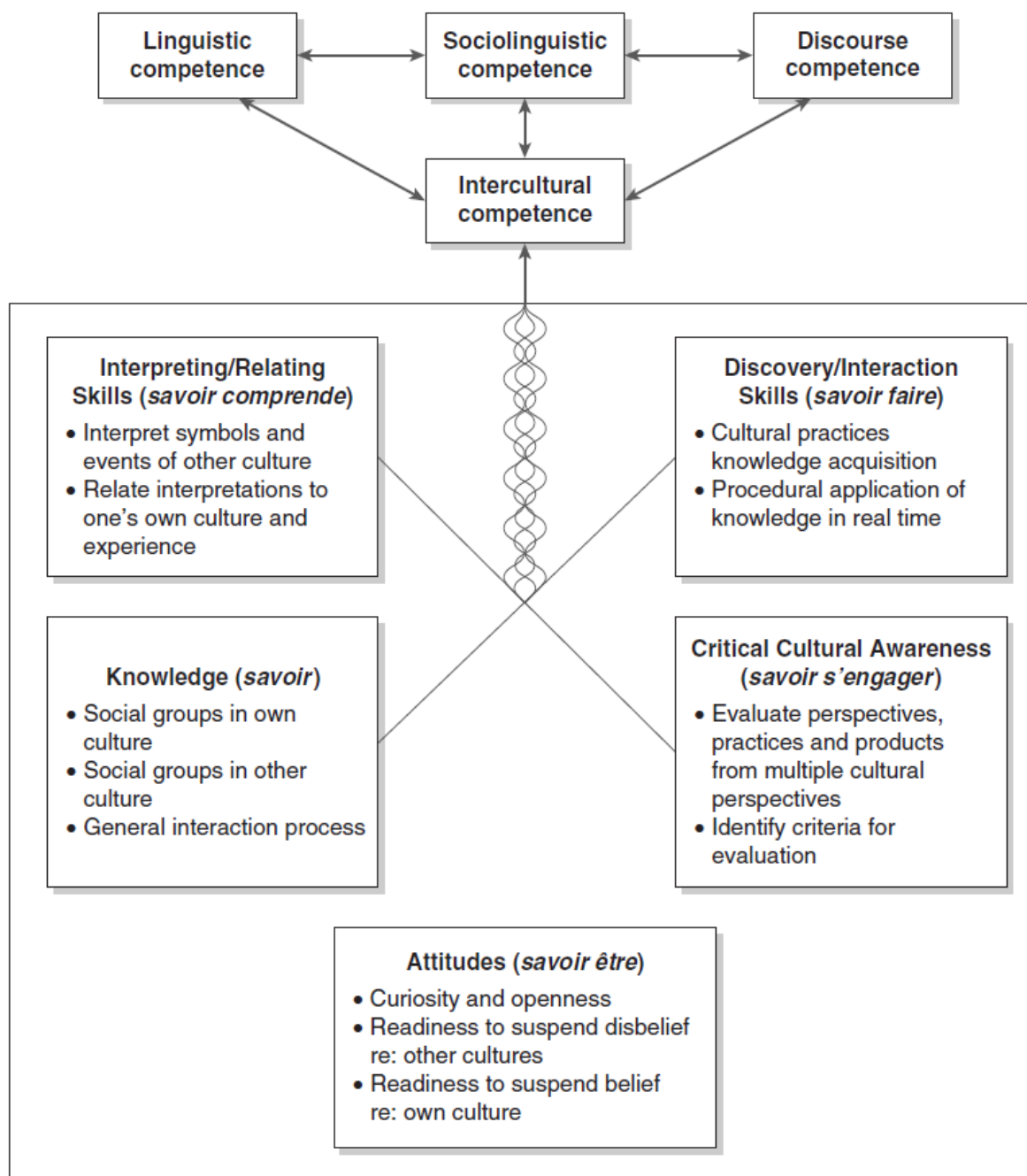**Models for Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Competence**

In contrast to definitions of intercultural competence, which describe the end goal, researchers have also developed models that describe the processes involved in acquiring the ability to interact effectively and in culturally appropriate ways. Byram's (1997) five-factor model provided foundational guidelines for teaching ICC in the world language classroom. He

designed the model, taking into consideration different interpretations of intercultural competence from preceding works in the field. According to Byram's model, five main components are essential to forge the intercultural speaker: 1) *attitudes*, 2) *knowledge*, 3) *skills of interpreting and relating*, 4) *skills of discovery and interaction*, and *5) critical cultural awareness*. Simply put, "attitudes" (also called "motivation*"* in Byram's study) refer to being open and willing to see things from the eyes of the other, avoiding judgment and exercising self-relativization when reflecting about the cultural practices involved on both ends (p. 34). Byram stressed that this component is fundamental for the development of ICC. "Knowledge" involves learning about cultural practices, from social groups to individual level, both in one's culture and the foreign culture (p. 35). "Skills" are divided into two categories: 1) skills to interpret and relate, and 2) skills to discover and interact. These have to do with 1) the analysis of documents/events in the foreign culture, relating them to one's own culture; as well as 2) identifying and acquiring knowledge about foreign cultural phenomena, correlating their meanings and relationships with other phenomena (p. 38). Finally, "cultural awareness/political education" is the ability to apply critical evaluation to perspectives, practices, and products of one's own culture and the foreign culture (p. 53). Together, these five factors comprise ICC and accompany linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies (p. 48). A visual representation of Byram's model is provided by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009), as follows (Figure 1):

Figure 1

Byram's (1997) Model for Intercultural Communication Competence

Linguistic competence ↔ Sociolinguistic competence ↔ Discourse competence

Intercultural competence

Interpreting/Relating Skills (*savoir comprende*)
- Interpret symbols and events of other culture
- Relate interpretations to one's own culture and experience

Discovery/Interaction Skills (*savoir faire*)
- Cultural practices knowledge acquisition
- Procedural application of knowledge in real time

Knowledge (*savoir*)
- Social groups in own culture
- Social groups in other culture
- General interaction process

Critical Cultural Awareness (*savoir s'engager*)
- Evaluate perspectives, practices and products from multiple cultural perspectives
- Identify criteria for evaluation

Attitudes (*savoir être*)
- Curiosity and openness
- Readiness to suspend disbelief re: other cultures
- Readiness to suspend belief re: own culture

Since its publication, intercultural researchers have used Byram's (1997) model as a basis for improving our understanding of intercultural competence. Sinicrope et al. (2012) pointed out that many European researchers in the field, including Byram, worked together and introduced INCA (intercultural competence assessment) as a tool to guide both the assessor and the examinee in the evaluation process of ICC (p. 6). In the assessor's version, this expanded model

presented six different dimensions of intercultural competence, including 1) *tolerance for ambiguity*, 2) *behavioural flexibility*, 3) *communicative awareness*, 4) *knowledge discovery*, 5) *respect for otherness*, and 6) *empathy* (p. 7). The examinee had a simplified version that included the concepts of *openness*, *knowledge*, and *adaptability* (p. 7). The proposed framework provided an amplified view of key aspects that are essential in the process of effective intercultural communication. They build upon Byram's core concepts and expand on important features that deal with concepts like mutual understanding, relativization of self, adaptation, and critical reflection of cultural phenomena. Across the literature, these concepts appear on a frequent basis as essential elements of intercultural competence that must be fostered in the classroom and assessed holistically through different tools.
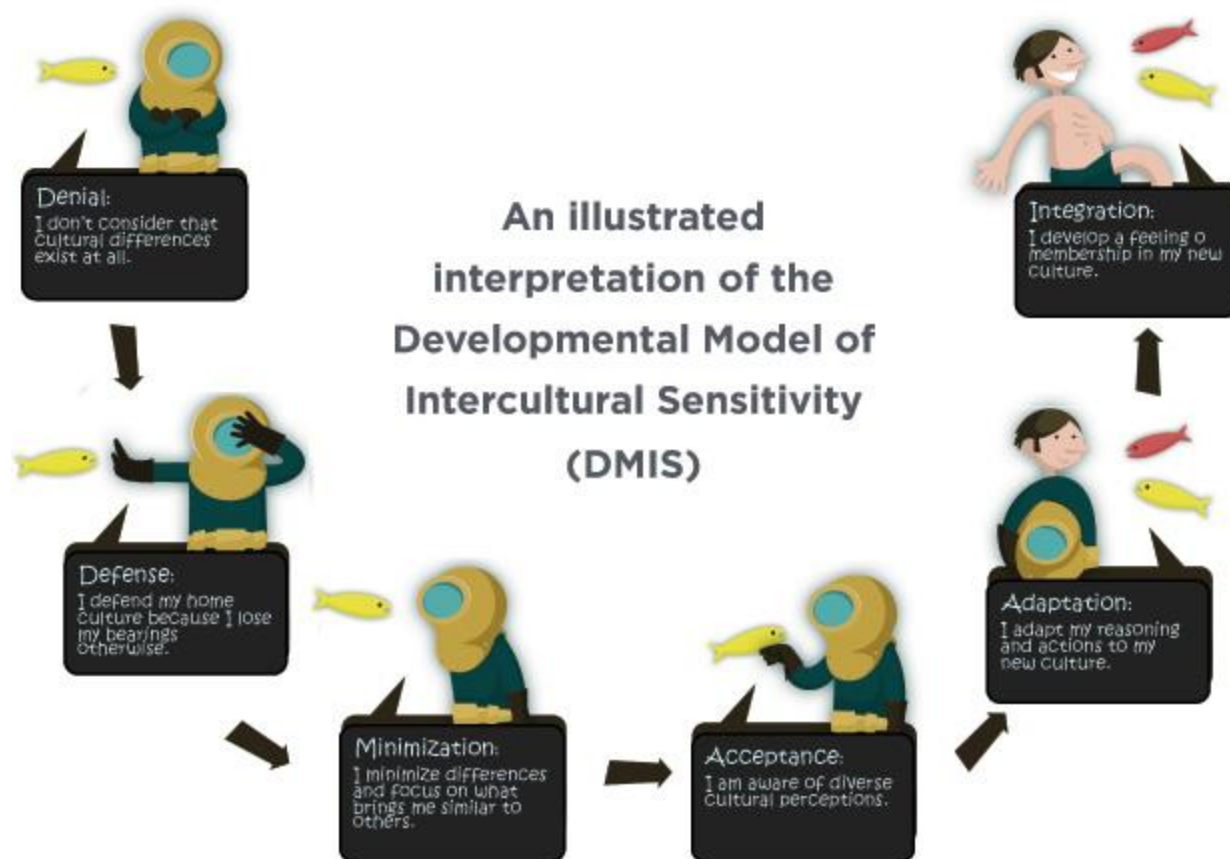
Bennett (1993) theorized the complex processes involved in the development of intercultural competence in his Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The DMIS presents six orientations that reflect the different stages of intercultural development by learners (Hammer et. al, 2003). These orientations are divided into ethnocentric stages (denial, defense, minimization) and ethnorelative stages (acceptance, adaptation, integration), represented as a continuum of progression in intercultural sensitivity (p. 424). Hammer et. al characterizes each of the six stages in detail. According to his analysis, *denial* sits at the negative extreme of the spectrum and represents complete failure to identify/acknowledge differences amongst cultures. Learners in the *defense* stage are able to discriminate between cultural differences but tend to separate themselves as the assumed right culture. This often leads to negative stereotypes and a separation between "superior" and "inferior" cultures (p. 424). The last stage of the ethnocentric orientation is *minimization*, where learners recognize the difference between cultures but generalize them as essentially similar (Sinicrope et al., 2012). The process starts to

take an ethnorelative perspective when the *acceptance* stage is reached, where all cultures are perceived as equally complex, including one's own culture. However, learners at this stage still struggle with seeing values from a relative point of view, causing them to fail "value relativity" (Hammer et. al, 2003, p. 425). Next, we have *adaptation* where "the individual develops the ability to shift his frame of reference to other culturally diverse worldviews through empathy and pluralism" (Sinicrope et al., 2012, p. 9). It differs from the sixth stage, *integration*, because in this last one the individual is able to incorporate other worldviews into their own.

Sinicrope, Norris, and Watanabe (2012) stated that this model has been utilized as a basis for assessment of intercultural competence, highlighting that communication plays an important role especially in the ethnorelative stages (p. 9). It comes in handy for the purpose of this study as a tool to help understand the different stages that students go through while dealing with a new culture and raise awareness on the best practices to help them move towards developing intercultural sensitivity. Figure 2 helps illustrate the different stages described by Bennett (1993).

Figure 2

Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

Denial: I don't consider that cultural differences exist at all.

An illustrated interpretation of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

Integration: I develop a feeling o membership in my new culture.

Defense: I defend my home culture because I lose my bearings otherwise.

Minimization: I minimize differences and focus on what brings me similar to others.

Acceptance: I am aware of diverse cultural perceptions.

Adaptation: I adapt my reasoning and actions to my new culture.

Note. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity as published on Weebly.
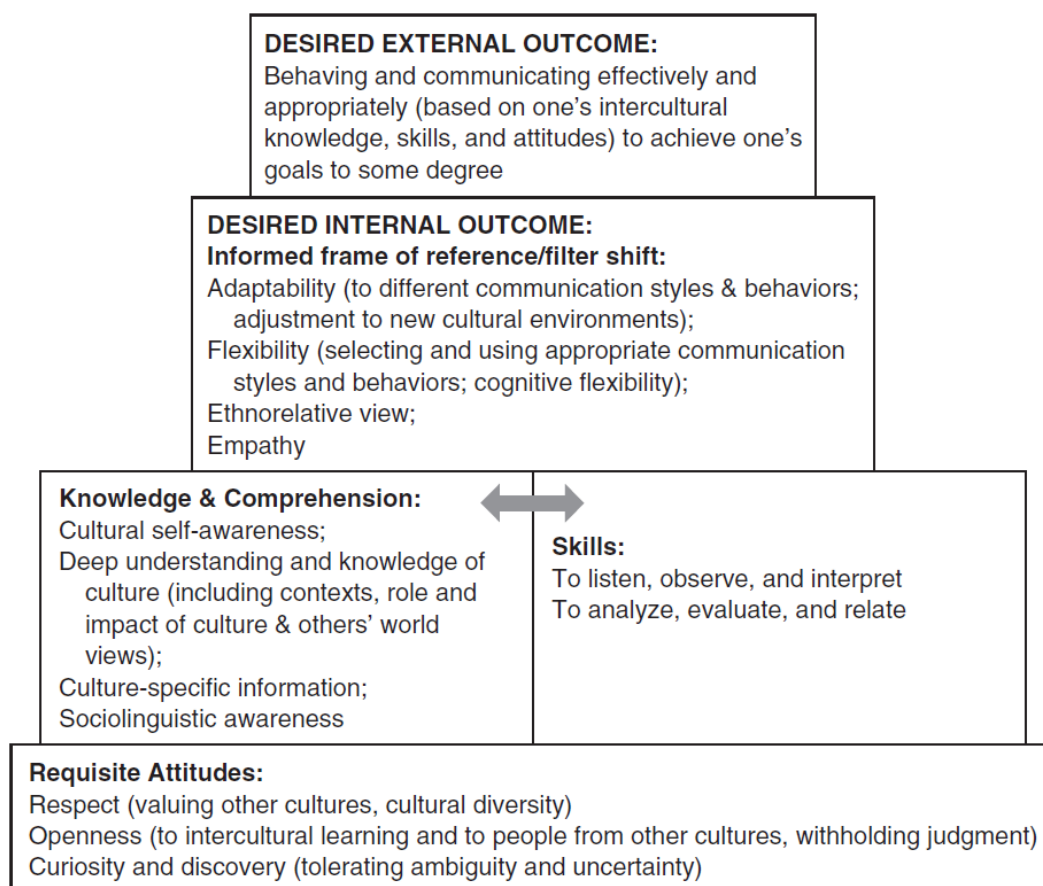
Bennett's model serves as a very useful tool to measure the level of intercultural sensitivity of students because it provides detailed information about each stage, highlighting common behavior and perceptions. In the context of this study, it helps us determine how acute the participants' perceptions of the target culture are, and whether or not they have reached the ethnorelative orientation. It also helps us understand what other characteristics students need to acquire in order to move up to the next stage.

Deardorff (2004) established two models for assessing intercultural competence. They result from the consensus among the many intercultural researchers and administrators that participated in her project. Her goal was to identify the elements that were agreed upon by 80% or more of those participants and include them in a visual manner to contribute with the

assessment of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). Although these models are not meant to suggest that they include all of the components involved in the development of intercultural competence, they display the main ones, which are "*attitudes*, *knowledge*, *skills, internal outcomes*, and *external outcomes*" (p. 255).The first model was in the shape of a pyramid (Figure 3) to represent the different levels of intercultural competence, starting from the bottom (lower level), escalating up to the top (higher level). Each component has specific descriptions that are either related to more individual (attitudes, knowledge, skills) or interactive aspects (outcomes).

Figure 3

Deardorff's (2004) Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence

DESIRED EXTERNAL OUTCOME:
Behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately (based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes) to achieve one's goals to some degree

DESIRED INTERNAL OUTCOME:
Informed frame of reference/filter shift:
Adaptability (to different communication styles & behaviors; adjustment to new cultural environments);
Flexibility (selecting and using appropriate communication styles and behaviors; cognitive flexibility);
Ethnorelative view;
Empathy

Knowledge & Comprehension:
Cultural self-awareness;
Deep understanding and knowledge of culture (including contexts, role and impact of culture & others' world views);
Culture-specific information;
Sociolinguistic awareness

Skills:
To listen, observe, and interpret
To analyze, evaluate, and relate

Requisite Attitudes:
Respect (valuing other cultures, cultural diversity)
Openness (to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures, withholding judgment)
Curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty)

Deardorff's Pyramid Model provides a detailed description of the elements involved in the building intercultural competence, highlighting how the lower levels serve as basis to upper levels, supporting their development. This model plays a significant role in this study as it sets more comprehensible understanding on what each part entails, as well as the relationship between the elements involved in it. In that sense, it helps inform instructional practices and the assessment of intercultural competence.

The second alternative presented by Deardorff (2004) is the process model of intercultural competence (Figure 4). She explained that this model "depicts the complexity of acquiring intercultural competence in outlining more of the movement and process orientation that occurs between the various elements" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 257). In that sense, it complements the first model in showing how each part of the cycle impacts its subsequent component. It is also aligned with Byram's (1997) understanding of *attitudes* as a central part of the process, thus being the initial position for the intercultural speaker from an interpersonal level to an intercultural interaction. Additionally, as mentioned by Byram, the acquisition of intercultural competence is continuous and never ending. The Process Model presents the essential elements involved in the process of intercultural competence by highlighting its cyclical characteristics, reinforcing how it is "a continual process of improvement" (p. 257).

Figure 4

Deardorff's (2004) Process Model of Intercultural Competence
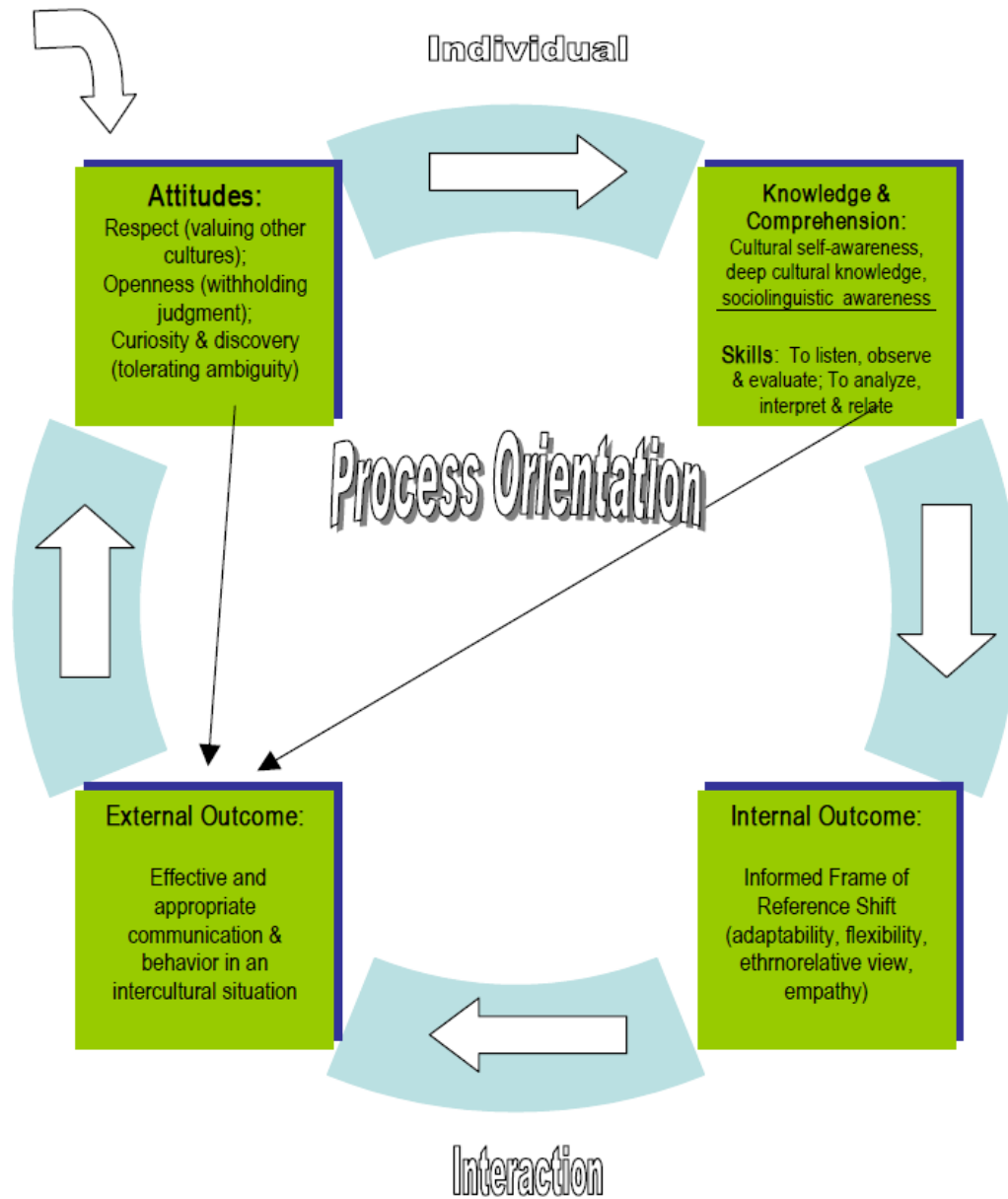
The procedural approach presented in this model displays it in a brief and practical way, connecting the four different parts together as they represent the main stages of intercultural development. This model aligns with the objectives of this study as it provides an easy way to identify the different stages and what is involved in each of them and locate learners throughout the process.

In conclusion, over the years different models have emerged and were involved in the evolution of new frameworks for teaching and assessing intercultural competence. Many different alternatives have emerged in the literature, and they account for different perspectives that contribute to a better understanding of how to effectively evaluate learners' development of intercultural competence. Among these approaches, similar themes are evident, such as the importance of having positive attitudes toward the new culture, being curious and eager to learn about it, and developing skills that will enable appropriate navigation of the new culture (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). In addition, the development of intercultural sensitivity is also a process that happens gradually and shifts one's worldview from an ethnocentric place to an ethnorelative place (Bennett, 1993). Similarly, concepts such as *tolerance for ambiguity*, *behavioural flexibility*, *communicative awareness*, *knowledge discovery*, *respect for otherness*, and *empathy* (Sinicrope et al., 2012, p. 7) are important to be taken into account when measuring how interculturally competent learners are. Consequently, these are significantly important to the goals of the present study because they serve as guiding theories in the teaching and assessment of intercultural competence.

Teaching Intercultural Competence in the Language Classroom

When it comes to the context of language teaching, several authors have contributed with research that impacted the recommendations for how intercultural competence should be approached in the classroom. Here, we will review studies that propose ideas and suggestions for best practices related to intercultural competence, as well as studies that deal with it in a situational/practical approach theoretical framework in the context of language teaching. It will be divided into two categories: recommendations and case studies, as a way to examine both theoretical and practical approaches to the topic.

As previously mentioned, intercultural communicative competence has been the focus of studies related to language teaching over the past few decades. These studies highlight the importance of generating cultural understanding that goes beyond the acquisition of basic skills required for survival in the culture, like cultural "fun facts," or simplified novelties (Garrett-Rucks, 2018). The language classroom is a place for the exploration and enactment of practices that will allow learners to move out of their comfort zone, explore deeper understandings about culture, and develop more critical approaches to it. Moloey and Harbon (2010) highlighted that, in the context of language learning, intercultural practice "asks students to think and act appropriately within a growing knowledge of the culture within language" (p. 281), which reinforces the need for greater depth of critical engagement with culture in the classroom. Considering how far we have come in understanding the relationship between culture and language and the needs individuals have when engaging in intercultural exchanges, it is vital that teachers make room for activities and projects that prepare learners for this reality.

Kramsch (2013) discussed a shift in the perspectives of teaching culture in language academic settings. She explained that a modernist perspective of teaching culture, which takes into account concepts of Big C (literature, arts, music, religion) and little c culture (habits, traditions, beliefs), represents an approach that has been adopted for a long time (pp. 64–66). However, new ways of understanding and looking at culture have led applied linguists to propose a postmodernist perspective of teaching culture, where the focus is on subjectivity of each speaker and the discursive practices taking place in the moment of interaction (p. 67). Bearing that in mind, we can say that this is a more inclusive approach that takes into account the nationalist aspect of culture while respecting the multitude of identities that each individual brings into intercultural communication. As a result, such perspectives go hand in hand with core

ideals for the development of strong intercultural competence because they aim to explore

students' ability to change subject positions (p. 67) and develop a more critical understanding of

the culture of the other.

Rodríguez (2015) conducted a study that analyzed the effect of deep discussions of

culture in an advanced EFL class with pre-service teachers in Colombia. He focused on reading

and exploring short stories in lessons that dealt with prominent cultural elements of U.S. culture

as a way to develop students' ICC from a critical point of view. His approach was based on

group work activities, presentations, and response papers that aimed to elicit students' attitudes,

knowledge, and skills and push them to learn about practices, products, and perspectives of the

target culture in order to improve their intercultural communicative competence. Additionally,

each activity and project fostered the building of critical views of the target culture through

meaningful, profound discussions and reflections. The participants were interviewed and shared

insights that provided a better understanding of their perspectives (p. 51). The findings from this

project demonstrated that, after being exposed to deep cultural themes, students were able to

develop intercultural communicative competence and critical thinking skills related to topics of

the target culture. Similarly, students acknowledged and recognized the importance of such

themes for their own development in the target language, thereby demonstrating the intrinsic

relationship between language and culture (p. 57). Rodríguez's experiment serves as evidence to

show the importance of designing language lessons that approach culture from a critical

perspective, avoiding surface concepts of culture and exploring elements that help develop

intercultural competence. However, it also illustrates how most studies on the topic take place in

EFL classrooms and not ESL instruction. Considering that ESL students are constantly

surrounded by the target language and culture, it is essential that more studies examine their context and expand knowledge on this area.

The present study provides insightful discussions and findings about intercultural competence in the ESL classroom, shedding light on the importance of the topic to the field. Furthermore, it contributes to the literature in intercultural studies in language learning and helps fill the gap in studies approaching this theme.

Defining Action Research

Action research can be defined as "the systematic collection and analysis of data relating to the improvement of some aspect of professional practice" (Wallace, 1998, p. 1). It is usually done in a cyclical process that aims to refine the improvements achieved through this type of research. In general terms, action research involves three main stages: 1) locating the problem; 2) conducting some kind of action; and 3) evaluating and reflecting on the outcomes (Calvert & Sheen, 2015). In the language teaching environment, this kind of research helps teachers identify which classroom practices are effective and which ones need adapting. According to Baum et al. (2006), an integral part of action research is "collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves" (p. 854). Such reflections point out the interactive aspect of action research, where both the researcher and the participants are working collaboratively in the process. In the context of the language classroom, the teacher will participate actively in classroom dynamics, while also carrying out the research. There are many different frameworks to the design of action research, but they usually follow similar phases. These include the development of research questions, strategizing how to answer those questions, collect data that is relevant to those questions, and implement analyses to evaluate the

effectiveness of the strategies applied (Slobodzian, 2014, p. 44). This circular process produces results that help in the improvement of practices and processes in the classroom, potentially generating new questions and inquiries.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

The following chapter highlights the structure of the study, its research questions, the tools utilized to collect data, and the classroom actions taken based on the data. Given the definitions and theoretical understandings presented in the previous chapter, an action-based research approach seemed ideal for the kind of investigation I wanted to pursue with this study. My goal was to reflect on my students' learning and my own practices as a teacher regarding intercultural competence, and an action research study allowed me to explore all of those aspects. I began the study with a survey-based investigation of learners' baseline understanding of U.S. culture and its products, practices, and perspectives. Understanding the cultural knowledge students brought to the classroom allowed me to determine the best approaches for helping them to develop intercultural competence, given that cultural learning forms the framework in which the development of intercultural competence can occur. My role in the study was to take the information I collected to inform the creation of activities and lessons that would cultivate intercultural investigations and interactions among the students in my class.

The following research questions guided the work that I conducted through two semesters:

1. How do targeted training practices in the classroom promote the development of intercultural competence as demonstrated by quantitative data?

2. What challenges are associated with teaching intercultural competence to ESL learners?

3. Which classroom practices are most effective in helping ESL learners develop intercultural competence?

By exploring these questions in the course of the study, I hoped to better understand the level of intercultural competence among intermediate-low ESL learners when they enter the classroom

and determine ways to help them develop their abilities to investigate the culture and interact

within it. I also sought to identify the greatest challenges and critical issues involved in this

process and provide solutions in the form of effective classroom practices and activities.

Ultimately my goal was to share what I learned and provide a practical toolkit for other ESL

teachers seeking to guide their students in their intercultural learning.

Discussion of Research Questions

The first question, "How do targeted training practices in the classroom promote the

development of intercultural competence based on quantitative data?" aimed to evaluate the

efficacy of instruction targeted at the development of intercultural competence. By administering

a pre-survey to determine students' perceptions of their own abilities upon entering the

classroom and a post-survey to determine the efficacy of the work I did with them, I could gauge

the progress students made in their development of intercultural competence, whether it be a

raising of awareness about the culture or an improvement in their ability to interact. This

question ultimately allowed me to measure both my students' progress in intercultural learning

and my own in the teaching of intercultural competence.

The second question, "What challenges are associated with teaching intercultural

competence to ESL learners?" focused on the challenges I encountered when working with my

ESL learners on tasks targeted at developing intercultural competence. In asking this question, I

sought insights into different aspects of the learning process that were challenging specifically

for ESL learners from a variety of cultural backgrounds. I also reflected on their learning needs

and the instructional strategies I could utilize to address those difficulties.

The third question, "Which classroom practices are most effective in helping my ESL

learners develop intercultural competence?" revolved around my own classroom practices and

what I could share with other teachers facing the same challenges as I. By exploring this question, I hoped to provide concrete instructional practices that evolved out of my own work with this unique audience and thereby contribute to the literature on teaching intercultural competence to ESL learners. Based on my research, I have collected activities and approaches, which I will describe in more detail below, that can help raise students' awareness about their level of intercultural competence and set them on a path to developing intercultural competence once they leave my classroom. On the basis of the theoretical mapping derived from the literature review, as well as the findings, reflections, and conclusions from the practices employed in class, the highlighted activities in the appendices provide ideas for how ESL teachers can address the teaching of culture and intercultural competence in their classrooms.

Context and Participants

As part of the action research conducted in this study, I was an active participant both as a researcher and teacher and will therefore describe my background first. I am an English teacher, originally from the southeast of Brazil. English is my second language, and I started learning it at the age of 11. I have been teaching world languages for nearly ten years, mainly English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Brazil to varied levels and ages. Over the years, researching culture-related themes became a great interest of mine, which resulted in two research projects conducted in Brazil that focused on the teaching of culture. In 2021, I started my master's program in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at West Virginia University (WVU), where I also work as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), teaching ESL classes for the first time at the university's Intensive English Program (IEP).

As a way to document successful and challenging experiences, I kept a journal with field notes that included observations of what went well in each class and what could have been

improved. I also added comments on students' reactions to the activities and their behavior toward themes of intercultural communication. At the end of every class, I wrote down notes and made recommendations to myself for the following classes, including the second semester. I also considered the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements as I designed the activities and used them to highlight desired outcomes (Table 2). As a result, I adapted the activities from the first semester to the second, recycled relevant activities, and refined my instruction based on my initial experiences and practices.

This study was carried out in the IEP at WVU during the summer and fall semesters of 2022. The IEP is one of the programs offered by WVU's English Language Learning Institute (ELLI). The program prepares students whose English skills are still emerging by integrating them as regularly enrolled students in the university, helping them develop the linguistic proficiency required to attend academic-level courses at the university in the future. It offers non-credit courses that, in addition to improving students' English, help introduce them to the U.S. academic environment. The IEP curriculum focuses on targeted skills, including the core courses of Communication Skills, Reading, Writing, Vocabulary, and Grammar. The classes are offered in Level 1, 2, 3, and 4, for all courses in the IEP. For the purpose of this research, I focused on classes targeting oral skills and allowed for content critical discussions and reflections.

The selected classes were Vocabulary (summer) and Communication Skills (fall semester). The vocabulary class provided students with vocabulary practice and allowed them to develop vocabulary-learning strategies while also acquiring knowledge about daily life and the academic world. Because it was a summer class, this was a three-month long class, where students from similar levels were grouped together, due to low enrollment numbers. Student

proficiency varied from beginner to intermediate levels. Additionally, the assigned textbook for this class was not the same material used in the regular classes. Students in the summer class were mixed, including novice and intermediate-low learners. In the fall semester, students took the Communication Skills class, which focused on improving their listening and speaking skills to enable them to participate in everyday and academic interactions successfully. Students in this class were at the intermediate-low level and utilized the regular textbook for this course. Both classes explored students' oral skills and allowed for discussions and exchange of opinion, as well as a variety of assessment tools, such as presentations, quizzes, interviews, and weekly journals.

The participants were international ESL students from different cultural backgrounds who did not speak English as their first language. Some of the students had already been studying English in the U.S. prior to the start of this study, and some were new to the program. It is important to note that, due mostly to the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollments in the IEP classes in both terms were very low, and that impacted directly the number of participants in this study. All students in Vocabulary and Communication Skills (8 students) were contacted and invited to participate in the study. In total, 8 participants responded to the questionnaire (5 participants from the summer semester and 3 participants from the fall semester). The complete list of survey questions about participants are listed in Appendix A, but Table 1 provides a general overview on participants' profiles, including noted personality traits that impacted their learning.

Table 1

Overview of student participants

Student Pseudonym	Gender	Country of Origin	Main Language	Semester at IEP	Learner Characteristic
Kurtis	Man	Saudi Arabia	Arabic	Fall 2022	Kurtis was reserved, serious, and quiet. He did not talk more than necessary and often preferred to abstain from discussions.
Emmanuel	Man	Kuwait	Arabic	Summer 2022	Emmanuel was enthusiastic and easygoing but at times impatient because of his low proficiency in English.
Michael	Man	Kuwait	Arabic	Summer 2022	Michael was communicative and easygoing. He showed interest in U.S. culture and openness to discussion.
Yoshua	Man	South Korea	Korean	Summer 2022	Yoshua was naturally shy and reserved. In his culture, students are not allowed to interact in class, which made him uncomfortable participating in discussions.
Monica	Woman	Kuwait	Arabic	Fall 2022	Monica was very talkative and participative. She demonstrated excitement and engagement in class. She also showed interest in learning more about U.S. culture and language.
Amber	Woman	Saudi Arabia	Arabic	Fall 2022	Amber was quiet and introspective but participated when necessary. She was committed to her studies and willing to learn new things, but not necessarily curious about culture.
Riley	Woman	Japan	Japanese	Summer 2022	Riley was polite and quiet. Just like Yoshua, she came from a culture where students do not interact in class. She, however, felt comfortable presenting and talking, but only when necessary.
Maggie	Woman	Afghanistan	Pashto and Persian	Summer 2022	Maggie was respectful, polite, and easygoing. She participated even if not called upon and had no difficulties speaking up.

Research Design

In order to maximize my own learning in this study and to create tangible materials that could be employed by others, I focused the study on participant observation (focused on student perceptions) as well as my own reflections on their learning and the teaching strategies I used. Action research formed the framework of this project in the form of a pre-survey and post-survey

with targeted teacher-designed activities in between to help students attain the desired

intercultural competence goals. A pre-survey was conducted with participants named Group 1

(summer term) and Group 2 (fall term). During the course of the semester, I incorporated a series

of activities to promote the development of intercultural competence. I based these activities,

which will be described in detail below, on both Byram's (1997) and Deardorff's (2004) models

and stages of intercultural competence development. Finally, a post-survey helped me determine

the efficacy of the activities I had employed.

The Survey

For the purpose of gathering data related to students' level of intercultural competence

based on their own perceptions, I created a survey that consisted of quantitative and qualitative

components that would help create a more holistic view of students and their perceptions. The

survey consisted of three parts: 1) demographic questions; 2) questions related to daily life; and

3) questions related to academic life. The questions in Parts 2 and 3 were structured around the

NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements for Intercultural Communication (ACTFL, 2017).

These statements were originally conceived as a self-assessment tool for world language

students, but I believed that they described well the experiences of ESL learners who must adapt

to a variety of intercultural situations upon their arrival in an English-speaking region. I chose 22

out of the 36 original Can-Do Statements at the intermediate level and used statements related to

both daily and academic life. Multiple factors influenced my selection of the specific statements,

such as the timeframe of this study (two semesters), the themes covered in the classes, the

relevancy of statement topics to the students, etc. It is important to highlight that, out of the 22

statements selected, only 16 were addressed in classroom instruction due to lack of time and/or

lack of alignment with the classroom content. I adapted the language used in each statement to facilitate participant comprehension.

Each set of items based on the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements was divided into *investigate statements* or *interact statements.* Investigate statements evaluated students' ability to conduct research and gather information about the target culture. Interact statements measured their ability to communicate both verbally and nonverbally and act in socio-culturally appropriate ways during communicative encounters with members of the target culture.

Part 1 of the survey was designed to gather personalized information about participants' experiences in the target culture and their perceptions of what would help them to become more culturally competent. It included questions about gender, race/ethnicity, time spent in the U.S. prior to IEP, time spent in the IEP, and level of comfort navigating U.S. culture. Part 2 required participants to evaluate their existing knowledge of the target culture with regard to daily life and the private sphere. Similarly, Part 3 required students to rank, investigate and interact statements as they relate to their academic studies and life at the university. At the end of Part 3, open-ended questions asked participants about struggles they may have had navigating intercultural interactions and how they coped with them. It also asked them to contribute with themes and strategies they believed to be important for them to understand the target culture and interact appropriately in intercultural exchanges. As seen in the full list of statements in Appendix A (Part 2), questions marked with a magnifying glass refer to investigate statements, whereas questions marked with the silhouette of two people refer to interact statements.

In the analysis of the pre- and post-survey results, I analyzed the data both quantitatively and qualitatively, calculating the statistical numbers and interpreting the participant answers for the open-ended questions. The data were subjected to quantitative analyses of descriptive

statistics to calculate sums and means. Results are presented via a description method and charts that help illustrate the percentages and the responses in a more practical manner. The questions were targeted using a variety of activities, such as input and output activities, which will be discussed in more detail in the section that follows.

The Activities

I used the results of the pre-survey (which will be discussed in the Findings chapter) to inform my creation and implementation of activities in class. I targeted instruction around nine activities that included a variety of tasks. The activities were divided into two parts: daily life and academic life, which mirrored the categories represented in the survey. The topics included 1) formality vs. informality in greetings and in culturally appropriate behaviors; 2) cultural practices and perspectives related to foods and meals; 3) time and punctuality as culturally determined principles; 4) sports in college life; 5) classroom culture in U.S. universities; and 6) generational changes in cultural behaviors and values.

I selected the themes and types of activities considering my students' preferences and learning interests. In the beginning of each semester, I surveyed them to learn which topics they were most interested in exploring. The types of activities were also influenced by the curriculum and the textbook, which were chosen at a programmatic level. These topics also demonstrate the cultural situations with which students would be confronted in their daily lives outside the classroom. The activities were based on the ACTFL modes of communication and included interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational work. Each activity usually included interpretive input (video, reading passage) that activated students' prior knowledge and focused on linguistic features of English. In each activity I also requested some kind of output, mostly in the presentational mode and targeting both speaking and writing skills. As a result, the activities

included discussions, spoken presentations, field research, and short written reflections. A brief

description of the themes, activities, and desired outcomes are summarized in Table 2:

Table 2

Description of activities employed in class.

Theme	Activity	Intended Outcome
1. Varied Themes (U.S. holidays, college sports, historical landmarks, formal vs. informal events, etc.)	Students are assigned topics and given guiding questions for research. Students prepare and deliver presentations about culture-related themes. The whole class engages in brief discussions afterwards.	Students will be able to exercise interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational skills to investigate cultural products, practices, and perspectives regarding U.S. culture and relate it to their own culture.
2. Eating Habits	Audiovisual source with information about the cost of eating healthy in the U.S. Follow-up discussion about eating habits in American culture and students' own culture.	Students will be able to exercise interpretive and interpersonal skills to investigate cultural practices regarding meals in the U.S. and discuss different perspectives on eating habits.
3. Tipping Culture	Audiovisual source depicting arguments for when people should (not) tip in U.S. restaurants. Follow-up debate between pro-tipping vs. anti-tipping groups.	Students will be able to exercise interpretive and interpersonal skills to investigate cultural practices and perspectives related to tipping in the U.S. and interact appropriately in restaurants and bars.
4. Greetings and Introductions	Audiovisual source depicting greetings and associated gestures/behaviors in different cultures. Follow-up discussion and reflection on cultural differences and (in)formal appropriateness.	Students will be able to exercise interpretive and interpersonal skills to identify culturally appropriate greetings and behaviors for the U.S. context and compare them with similar contexts in their own cultures.
5. Generational Changes in Culture	Reading passage discussing cultural differences related to "being on time." Follow-up discussion about how different cultures view time, both U.S. culture and students' own culture.	Students will be able to exercise interpretive, interpersonal skills to investigate cultural practices and perspectives regarding time and punctuality, relating it to their own culture.
6. Sports Culture in US Colleges	Audiovisual source depicting a trailer for the movie "National Champions." Follow-up discussion about the role of sports in student athletes' life in U.S. colleges.	Students will be able to exercise interpretive and interpersonal skills to investigate cultural practices and perspectives regarding the role of sports in U.S. colleges and compare it to their own culture.

7. U.S. Classroom Customs	Audiovisual source depicting common U.S. college cultural norms and practices. Students discuss some common customs and practices in U.S. classrooms and compare it to their own culture.	Students will be able to exercise interpretive and interpersonal skills to investigate cultural practices and perspectives regarding classroom culture in U.S. learning environments and compare it to their own culture.
8. Time and Punctuality	Reading passage discussing generational changes in cultural behaviors and values. Follow-up discussion about generational changes in culture and ways to adapt to it.	Students will be able to exercise interpretive skills to investigate cultural practices and perspectives pertaining to generational changes in culture and compare them to their own culture.
9. Small Talk Topics	Audiovisual source discussing appropriate and inappropriate small talk topics. Students discuss the small talk topics in the video and compare it to their own culture. Students conduct field research to investigate which topics would be (in)appropriate in given contexts.	Students will be able to exercise interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational skills to investigate cultural practices and perspectives regarding small talk topics in U.S. culture and compare them to their own culture.

As I proposed the different activities, my goal was to ensure the selected themes were as meaningful to students as possible, relating them to both personal and academic experiences they could have outside of the classroom. The activities also aimed at building skills for intercultural communication that they could use as they navigated difficult situations in the real world. Interestingly, students showed more interest in topics that related to daily life themes. They felt more enthusiastic talking about something that they could relate to and interact with real contexts. Considering their diverse learning styles, some students responded better to some types of activities than others, but generally speaking, they preferred discussions and activities that would include active interaction. These aspects are described in more detail in the following chapter, including discussions of the most challenging parts of this study as well as the most successful ones.

Chapter 4 - Findings

The following pages present a discussion of the pre-survey data, the ensuing classroom

activities, and the post-survey results as they relate to the first research question. I also discuss

the second and third research questions in light of my experiences teaching ESL learners and

highlight the challenges during the process and what worked well. It is important to mention that

I have analyzed side-by-side the pre-survey and post-survey responses for Groups 1 (summer

term) and 2 (fall term). As mentioned in the methodology chapter, only sixteen of the statements

were targeted in class. For the purpose of the present study, this chapter will include information

that was specifically addressed in class to show students' development on issues related to those

sixteen statements.

Part 1: Participants' Background

The participant group represented a small but diverse population of students taking

English courses at the IEP. As presented in Chapter 3 (Table 1), half of the participants identified

as men and the other half as women. They come from Middle Eastern and Asian countries.

According to the collected data, when asked how much time they had spent in the U.S. prior to

starting at the IEP, 37.5% of participants said they spent less than a semester and 37.5% that they

had spent between one and two semesters. When asked the number of semesters they had

completed in the IEP, 75% answered "between one and two semesters" and the remaining 25%

"less than a semester." The survey also asked them the types of media they used to inform

themselves about the United States. The collected data shows that 87.5% of respondents selected

the option "internet," 50% selected "social media," 25% marked the "movies" and "music"

options. Only 12.5% of participants selected "print media (newspaper, magazines, books, etc.)"

and 12.5% selected the option "other" and wrote "Snapchat" as an answer. Finally, when asked

about how comfortable they felt navigating U.S. culture, 50% of participants answered, "extremely comfortable" and 37.5% responded "somewhat comfortable." Only 12.5% answered "somewhat uncomfortable." This information helped us identify their level of familiarity with U.S. culture when first entering the classroom and thereby have a baseline to explore our first research question (How do targeted training practices in the classroom promote the development of intercultural competence as demonstrated by quantitative data?).

Part 2: Statements about Daily Life

In Part 2 of the survey, participants rated statements related to daily and private life. Table 3 contains a summary of their responses, including the percentages for each statement and how their responses changed from the pre-survey to the post-survey.

Table 3

Statements about daily life categorized by "Investigate" and "Interact"

Pre-survey   Post-survey

Questions	Strongly Agree		Somewhat Agree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Somewhat Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
Investigate										
Q1: In my own and other cultures I can compare traditions and beliefs that drive interactions within an informal setting.	33.3	25	50	37.5	0	12.5	16.7	0	0	25
Q2: In my own and other cultures I can compare traditions and beliefs that drive interactions in a variety of formal situations.	37.5	57.1	12.5	28.6	12.5	14.3	12.5	0	25	0
Q3: In my own and other cultures I can compare how people express time and think about it in similar and different ways.	57.1	37.5	14.3	12.5	0	12.5	28.6	25	0	12.5
Q4: In my own and other cultures I can compare attitudes toward food and mealtimes in daily life based on factors such as geography, economy, or attitudes toward health.	42.9	37.5	42.9	25	14.3	0	0	0	0	37.5

Questions	Strongly Agree		Somewhat Agree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Somewhat Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
Interact										
Q5: I can dress and interact appropriately at an informal party, barbecue, or other gathering.	42.9	50	57.1	12.5	0	0	0	12.5	0	25
Q6: I can dress and interact appropriately in a formal situation, such as weddings, public presentations or ceremonies, etc.	66.7	50	16.7	12.5	16.7	0	0	0	0	37.5
Q7: I can consider socially appropriate times and punctuality when attending official events, classes, or inviting someone to go out informally.	50	37.5	33.3	25	16.7	0	0	12.5	0	25
Q8: I can demonstrate culturally appropriate behaviors as I discuss and try unfamiliar food and drink.	71.4	37.5	28.6	12.5	0	0	0	12.5	0	37.5

Some of these results show a strong change from pre-survey to post-survey. In the pre-survey, all participants agreed with Q8. In the post-survey, half of them disagreed on some level. When answering Q5, all participants agreed on some level in the pre-survey. In the post-survey, 37.5% disagreed on some level. When it comes to Q3, the pre-survey numbers showed that 71.4% of participants agreed on some level. The post-survey numbers showed that 37.5% disagreed and 12.5% were neutral. Finally, the pre-survey results for Q6 show that 83.4% of participants agreed and 16.6% were neutral. In the post-survey, 62.5% of them agreed and the remaining 37.5% strongly disagreed.

Part 3: Statements about Academic Life

In Part 3, participants ranked statements related to academic and university life. Table 4, contains information about the percentages for the pre-survey and post-survey responses.

Table 4

Statements about academic life categorized by "Investigate" and "Interact"

Questions	Strongly Agree		Somewhat Agree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Somewhat Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
Investigate										
Q9: In my own and other cultures I can compare school/learning environments and curricula to determine what is valued.	57.1	42.9	42.9	28.6	0	0	0	14.3	0	14.3
Q10: In my own and other cultures I can compare teacher/student roles in the classroom and the interactions between them (who speaks when, asking and answering questions, etc.).	28.6	71.4	42.9	14.3	14.3	0	14.3	0	0	14.3
Q11: In my own and other cultures I can compare the role of sports in school, university, and daily life and identify the link between sports, spectatorship, and a feeling of belonging.	71.4	42.9	14.3	14.3	0	28.6	14.3	0	0	14.3
Q12: In my own and other cultures I can compare the role of academic honesty and regulations regarding plagiarism in coursework.	71.4	57.1	28.6	28.6	0	0	0	0	0	14.3
Interact										
Q13: I can meet with an advisor in the target culture to select courses that match my preferences and academic goals.	57.1	42.9	14.3	28.6	14.3	0	14.3	14.3	0	14.3
Q14: I can ask and answer questions at appropriate times during class and contribute to discussions with my teachers and classmates in appropriate ways.	42.9	71.4	42.9	14.3	0	0	14.3	0	0	14.3
Q15: I can follow the rules and etiquette when playing a sport with peers and engage in appropriate rituals surrounding spectatorship at sporting events in the target culture.	57.1	42.9	28.6	42.9	0	0	0	0	14.3	14.3
Q16: I can follow the rules regarding academic honesty and plagiarism while completing course assignments, projects, and papers.	71.4	71.4	14.3	14.3	14.3	0	0	0	0	14.3

Most statements about academic life did not show significant changes in responses. As an

example, in Q9 all participants agreed on some level in the pre-survey. In the post-survey, 71.5%

agreed on some level, and 28.5% disagreed on some level. For Q11, in the pre-survey, 85.7%

participants agreed on some level and 14.3% somewhat disagreed. In the post-survey, 57.2%

agreed, 28.6% were neutral, 14.3% strongly disagreed. For Q12, in the pre-survey, all

participants expressed agreement. In the post-survey, 85.7% agreed on some level, and 14.3%

strongly disagreed.

Open-ended Questions

The last two items in Part 3 of the survey were open-ended questions. The goal of the

first question was to gain insight into students' experiences with struggles in intercultural

communication, including how they behaved in a variety of situations and coped with cultural

differences. The second question targeted their perceptions on themes and strategies that would

help them interact in the target culture.

For the first question, (Have you ever had a situation in which you struggled to engage

successfully in an intercultural exchange? What happened and how did you adjust your

behaviors?), I grouped the responses as "negative" and "positive" in general. Given that

participant responses were short and non-descriptive, they are not displayed in full detail (see

Figure 5).

Figure 5

Open-ended Question 1: Have you ever had a situation in which you struggled to engage

successfully in an intercultural exchange? What happened and how did you adjust your

behaviors?

Have you ever had a situation in which you struggled to engage successfully in an intercultural exchange? What happened and how did you adjust your behaviors?
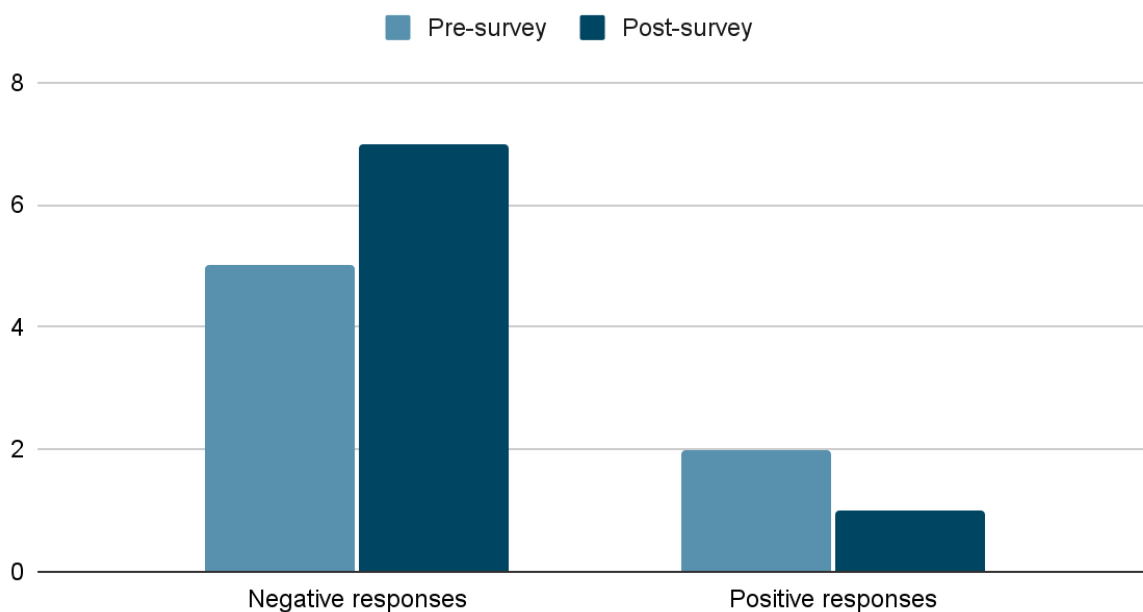

In the pre-survey, most of the participants (71.5%) responded negatively, saying either that they have not experienced any struggles interacting in the target culture or that they have not experienced difficulty in this regard. The only positive response that provided more description was the following: "Yes, I have. My host family was Russian who speak Russian and were hard to understand English. So, I used easy English words and sometimes used translator." In the post-survey, the majority of participants continued to respond with "negative" responses, that is, they either reported that they have never struggled to successfully engage in an intercultural exchange, or that "it wasn't a big deal." One participant described the following brief situation: "Yes. I couldn't understand her language Spanish. We used translator."

As displayed in Figure 6, the responses for the second open-ended question (What classroom topics and strategies could help you to understand intercultural exchanges and interact in culturally appropriate ways?) identified three general concepts: conversational classes, cultural communities, "American culture," and "communication and discussion."

Figure 6

Open-ended Question 2: What classroom topics and strategies could help you to understand

intercultural exchanges and interact in culturally appropriate ways?

What classroom topics and strategies could help you to understand intercultural
exchanges and interact in culturally appropriate ways?

■ Pre-survey   ■ Post-survey
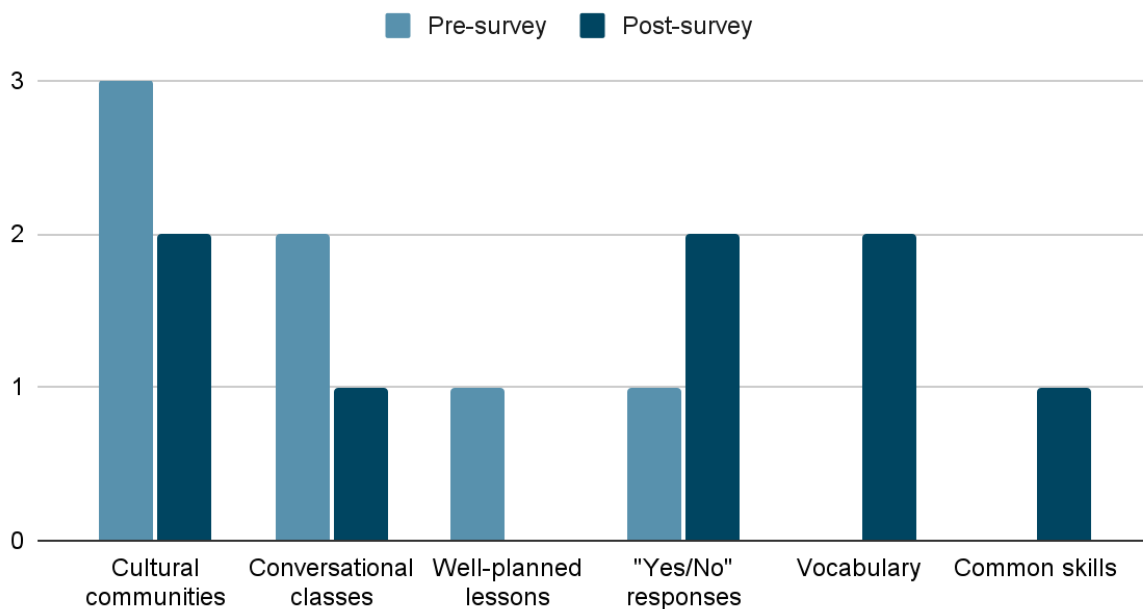
One participant referenced a different IEP class as a source of assistance and underscored the

importance of learning about the local community to improve intercultural interactions. Another

participant indicated diversity of people in the classroom as a relevant factor. In one of the

answers a participant responded "Yes," which showed a discrepancy among the other responses

and, for that reason, was not considered. In the post-survey, two of the responses were negative

responses that did not provide descriptive answers to the questions, such as "No" or "Nothing."

Two of the participants mentioned vocabulary. In the remaining answers, one response was

"common skills," and another "cultures around the world."

Discussion of Findings

In the following, I discuss the survey results presented in the previous section through the lens of the first research question. I start by determining the baseline knowledge to measure student progress toward intercultural competence. Then, I examine student reactions to the activities about the target culture that engage skills in intercultural competence. To answer Research Question 2, I discuss the hurdles that both students and I faced during the semester, as well as the strategies used to overcome them. Finally, I share my perceptions of what went well during the study in terms of progress toward intercultural competence. I describe notes, perspectives, observations, and reflections on the activities implemented to provide insights into successful practices that helped students develop over the course of the semester.

Research Question 1: How do targeted training practices in the classroom promote the development of intercultural competence based on quantitative data?

Responses in the pre-survey indicated that students possessed a high level of confidence with regard to the statements they were evaluating. Contrary to what I had expected, most participants indicated that they felt extremely comfortable navigating U.S. culture. One question did not show a high level of agreement (In my own and other cultures I can compare how people express time and think about it in similar and different ways); responses indicated that only half of the participants still agreed on some level.

Additionally, according to the pre-survey results for the first open-ended question (Have you ever had a situation in which you struggled to engage successfully in an intercultural exchange? What happened and how did you adjust your behaviors?), most participants responded that they did not have any issues or difficulties in intercultural exchanges in the target culture. The only response that indicated some sense of challenge described the use of

technology (an online translator) to manage difficulties with the language. Also, the participants were unable to provide concrete examples of the strategies and techniques they used to manage those situations. According to Dearforff's (2004) model, one notable trait of interculturally competent individuals is the critical evaluation of intercultural exchanges and demonstrated skills to interact in them. The level of confidence about cultural knowledge participants identified was higher than what I expected for learners at their proficiency level.

Throughout the semester, students were exposed to intercultural activities in classes, and they gained more experiences in the target culture. My expectation was, therefore, that students would present a higher level of agreement with the statements in the post-survey than at the beginning of the semester. I believed they would either maintain their levels of agreement or show higher levels of confidence with regard to situations involving intercultural competence. Surprisingly, the post-survey data analysis revealed opposing results to this assumption. I observed in the data that, although most participants still maintained levels of agreement with the majority of the statements, they clearly exhibited higher levels of disagreement and/or neutrality with regard to some statements. Looking at the models for the assessment of intercultural competence, I have identified some factors that can be linked to these results.

Based on Deardorff's Process Model (2004), the first step in improving intercultural competence is the development of attitudes that demonstrate respect toward the new culture, including openness to new perspectives and curiosity to discover more about the culture. As discussed above, the pre-survey results illustrate how most participants expressed overfamiliarity with the target culture and the belief that they can navigate intercultural challenges without major problems. In the post-survey, however, a number of the participants showed more thoughtfulness and caution when in intercultural situations; such responses demonstrated less confidence and

more neutrality than in the pre-survey. Based on Deardorff's model, this change can be related to the acquisition of deeper cultural awareness and a shift in attitudes. Considering the continuum in intercultural learning, learners move from believing they have mastered the knowledge of the target culture to questioning everything. Questions arise from more critical views on cultural phenomena as they gain deeper knowledge on cultural differences and learn to relate to them. Therefore, I interpret participant responses as an indication that some students started to develop more critical attitudes toward the target culture based on more cultural awareness.

Similarly, Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1993) serves as a relevant tool in measuring the improvement of learners' intercultural competence. Based on this model, the development of intercultural competence is part of the process of becoming interculturally sensitive in general. It is important to remember that, in order to achieve intercultural sensitivity, learners must go through the stages of the model and move from an ethnocentric orientation (denial, defense, minimization) toward an ethnorelativist one (acceptance, adaptation, integration). The results of this study show students' progress through the phases of this model.

During the pre-survey, students were at the minimization level, where individuals tend only to acknowledge cultural differences, and see cultures as essentially the same. As seen in the results, participants had informed themselves about the target culture prior to their studies and life in the U.S. Their preparation indicates that participants were not oblivious of the target culture and had some knowledge of it. The predominance of participant agreement with the statements in the pre-survey, however, show that students believed they were progressing in terms of intercultural competence and their level of cultural knowledge was sufficient to navigate U.S. culture successfully. Their responses indicated a lack of sensitivity toward the target

culture, considering that participants did not show expected ethnorelative attitudes, such as consideration of cultural diversity, cultural self-awareness, accurate perception of cultural phenomena, etc. In the post-survey, students begin to show more hesitation when ranking the same statements, which is represented by higher numbers of disagreement and neutrality in the statistical results. The data therefore suggests that the participants started to develop a more critical view of the target culture and started to question whether or not the assumptions they previously held were accurate.

To conclude, the changes in the pre-survey and post-survey results demonstrate a shift in attitude as well as the development of cultural awareness by the participants. It is important to highlight that, although students had not spent a long time at the IEP, most of them had spent more than one semester in the program. The fact that they had spent some time in an academic setting in the U.S. prior to their time at WVU means they had already received formal education in ESL and interacted with U.S. culture in some capacity before the beginning of this study. Based on my quantitative analysis of the data, I argue that changes in attitudes and awareness about the target culture emerged after I exposed students to activities that targeted intercultural competence and fostered critical investigation of culture. As discussed earlier, the class work we completed helped them become more sensitive to nuances of the target culture and, consequently, improve their intercultural competence. In conclusion, the study indicates that target activities in class can help ESL students develop intercultural competence. Although I am certain that different aspects influenced these changes, especially experiences outside of the classroom, it is evident that only interacting with the target culture is not enough. Learners must acquire skills to interact more effectively and appropriately, and, in that regard, targeted practices help bridge the gap and equip them with the necessary tools to do so.

Research Question 2: What challenges are associated with teaching intercultural competence to ESL learners?

When note-taking and reflecting about the hurdles I faced during the implementation of this study, different challenges arose from my reflections. Some of them are particularly pertinent to the development of intercultural competence in ESL learners. In response to Research Question 2, I will share some general difficulties commonly related to teaching culture in the language classroom, as well as specific ones I encountered on my journey. It is important to point out that the following reactions are based on personal teacher journaling, documented activities and assessments, and general perceptions that struck me as I carried out this study.

One of my first big challenges was student motivation. Motivating learners to be interested in learning a new language is a hard task by itself, and when it comes to delving deeper into aspects of culture, it can be even harder. As a fresh practitioner of ESL teaching, my assumption was that it would be an easier task compared to EFL. The target culture is all around us, and these students come from all parts of the world to experience it, so presumably there is a higher interest in learning more about it. However, my experiences contradicted such assumptions. Some of my students were openly disinterested in learning about U.S. culture or having deep discussions about it, which sometimes affected the level of our discourse in class. Some of their cultural beliefs (which will be discussed below) also impaired how engaged they were in the process of intercultural learning. For instance, Kurtis expressed disengagement in many of the activities proposed, and Amber mentioned that "she wasn't interested in U.S. culture and only moved here [to the United States] because of her husband." Although they did not represent all students in the class, these examples help illustrate how motivation was a factor in our daily classroom experience.

Students' cultural beliefs and behaviors posed some challenges to my practices as a teacher. Dealing with a culturally diverse student population pushed me to be more careful and adaptive in lesson planning and to consider specific cultural constraints while in the process of teaching a lesson. For instance, my Muslim students shared cultural beliefs that would not make them feel comfortable being too close to someone of the opposite sex, which influenced my decision in designing activities that did not include physical contact. Similarly, I learned that the Asian students in my classroom were not used to asking questions and making comments during discussion, which was also exacerbated by some of their personality traits. As a result, they did not speak as much in class, which required me to redirect questions to them and to encourage their participation and contributions. Although they seemed open to exploring new experiences, creating lessons that allowed them to do so demanded extra preparation from me to understand their boundaries and work around the gaps.

Another significant challenge I experienced   was related to my perception of my own authority in teaching about U.S. culture. As someone who was not born in the United States and has lived in this country for no more than a few years, I often felt unprepared to teach about the target culture and lead deep discussions. Although I have been extensively exposed to aspects of U.S. American culture, both formally and informally, I battled with the feeling of not being competent enough to teach about it. To address this issue, I had to do more than just informal investigations online and in daily endeavors. Therefore, I registered to take a class entitled "American Culture," as part of my master's program at WVU, to gain more formal knowledge about it. I found comfort in my readings and discussions for that class, which presented me with new interpretations of what "American Culture" and "U.S. culture" are. Through these new perspectives, I learned that the diverse identities included in the cultures of the United States do

not belong to a select social group, which empowered me to take on the role of teaching aspects of culture with new eyes. Such reflections made me remember my personal teaching philosophy, where educators take on the role of a facilitator and not the absolute knowledge holder. I came to the realization that, by exploring deeper layers of cultural knowledge alongside my students, I was also improving my own intercultural competence. This helped me strengthen my beliefs and strive for improvement of my cultural knowledge rather than perfection.

All in all, different challenges were associated with teaching culture and intercultural competence to my ESL students. These challenges often demanded extra preparation and research, strategic lesson planning, consideration of learners' culture and personality, and motivational strategies. It is impossible to dissociate language from culture, and ESL learners experience this connection firsthand inside and outside the classroom. In my experience, embracing those challenges instead of overlooking them provided me with an opportunity to deepen my own understanding of what intercultural competence entails, learn more about U.S. culture, and learn how to best support my students in their own investigation of it.

Research Question 3: Which classroom practices are most effective in helping ESL learners develop intercultural competence?

Throughout this study, I adopted a range of methods, approaches, and strategies to implement instructional practices that aimed to develop my students' intercultural competence. As an essential part of my intervention, the intercultural activities I designed played a significant role in the exploration of aspects of the target culture. They were consistent with the ACTFL communication modes (interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational), and I integrated at least two of these modes into each activity I developed. The activities involved critical interpretation, active negotiation of meaning, and creative presentation of cultural findings. These allowed for a fruitful environment for the development of intercultural skills and helped learners interact with

the activities in varied ways. This approach also dynamized the learning process and served as a powerful strategy to explore deeper layers of intercultural knowledge. In addition, as previously discussed, students' personalities and learning styles can directly impact the enactment of intercultural activities. By focusing on mixed activities, I aimed at providing students with different opportunities to engage in the process in a more democratic manner. In this section I will go into details about how these activities took place in class, as well as underlying practices that guided my instruction.

As described above my general perception is that there was a shift in participants' attitudes between the pre-survey and post-survey responses. I noticed direct links between these changes and the activities and themes addressed in class. For example, the interact statement about attitudes toward foods and meals showed the biggest change in response from participants. As shown in Appendix F, in one of the activities we talked about eating habits in the U.S. and how they can be connected to different factors pertaining to social groups, such as economic status, level education, equal access to food supplies, etc. In the activity we started by brainstorming examples of healthy and unhealthy food. Then we watched a video about eating in the U.S., where students had to answer the question "Why is eating healthy so expensive in America?" We discussed the idea of cultural stereotypes (positive and negative), how they can be associated with eating habits by U.S. Americans and compared habits across cultures. In another activity (Appendix E), I addressed cultural differences related to tipping in the U.S. I started by activating learners' prior knowledge about tipping, and their opinion about it. We watched a video discussing two perspectives on tipping, and cases in which customers should/should not tip. We talked about social expectations when eating out, including trying new foods, expressing dislike/dissatisfaction, and (not) tipping. Finally, I divided the class into two

groups: one in favor of tipping and one against it. Students had to debate whether tipping should be required or not, formulating compelling arguments to defend a specific point of view, even if that was not their own personal view. This helped them exercise ethnorelative views of cultural understanding, considering interpretive and interpersonal communication.

These proved to be successful activities in improving my students' intercultural competence. One probable reason for that is the fact that all participants very likely tried new dishes and beverages ever since they moved to the United States, which made this topic meaningful and relevant. This enhanced their chances to experience cultural differences regarding foods and pushed them to think of ways to manage them. When tackling the activities, I also addressed this theme more than once, and it seems to have generated a bigger impact in student response. I understand that, although their practices outside of the classroom played a significant role in students' cultural awareness, the in-class activities provided them with support to better conduct their explorations, which was reflected in a change of attitudes.

Similarly, the interact statement about appropriate dressing and interaction at informal events demonstrated the second biggest change. When reviewing my notes, I observed that we investigated concepts of formality and informality through different topics, such as greetings, small talk, events, among others. In one of their presentations (Appendix B), a student presented about dos and don'ts of events, including behavior in formal and informal situations. In these presentations, students would research about specific topics (interpretive), present it in class (presentational), and the whole would discuss and share opinions about it (interpersonal). I noticed that my students enjoyed having the freedom to pick their own topic, even if they were constrained by a specific theme. This seemed to have made them become more enthusiastic about their presentations.

Another activity had to do with greetings around the world (Appendix D). In the pre-task, students started by sharing how they greet and noticing cultural differences. Then, we watched a video and learned about different ways that people greet. We wrapped up with a discussion that connected the video to their own culture and explored appropriate/inappropriate greetings. The activity about small talk (Appendix C) also addressed formality and informality. Students started by reflecting on how to start small talk, then watched a video about it, and briefly discussed appropriate and inappropriate topics in Western cultures, comparing them to their cultures. As an after-class task, students interviewed people around campus to investigate more about specific topics and how appropriate they were, considering formal and informal contexts. My goal was to activate both interpretive and interpersonal modes. They had to consider how to approach strangers, what kind of language to use, which gestures to avoid, among other aspects.

As a result, I understand that their changes in attitude for this statement can be partly attributed to the experiences participants gained outside of the classroom. It is likely that most of them engaged in informal events where they had to decide what to wear and how to interact with people in these situations. However, it is important to note that the idea of formality and informality was debated multiple times in many of the activities we did together. Therefore, the continued recycling of these concepts likely influenced the effectiveness of the observed outcomes. This reinforces the relevance of creating connections between different topics and exploring themes in a deeper manner across activities. That way, learners not simply acquire cultural knowledge about a specific topic, they learn to critically evaluate cultural events, and adjust their behavior appropriately.

The activities targeting the statements about the role of sports in school, university, and daily life and about school/learning environments also demonstrated similar effectiveness. As

seen in Appendix H, in one of the activities I addressed the role of sports in student athletes in U.S. colleges/universities. First, they did some quick research online to learn more about student athletes in the U.S. We watched a movie trailer, based on a true story, which exposed the multi-million-dollar industry behind college football, and how a group of underpaid college students fought against this system. This action, focused on the interpretive mode of communication, instigated them to think about uncommonly explored points of view. We also discussed the trailer as a group, and students shared their opinions, concerns, and reflections about it. This specific activity sparked the curiosity of a number of students about student athletes. Emmanuel was particularly interested in this topic and asked me further questions about it at the end of class.

Another one of the activities targeted U.S. classroom culture. In this activity students activated prior knowledge about the topic by discussing dos and don'ts in U.S. classrooms. They watched and discussed a video about common cultural practices in classes, including syllabus rules, group work, office hours, etc. Then, we compared and contrasted the video with their experience at WVU, as well as how it is done in their home cultures, which helped them reflect and share thoughts. Participants' contributions were remarkably interesting for class discussion because they learned about many practices that were new to them, and perceived differences that seemed interesting to them.

Although I noticed these two statements represented a smaller change in participant attitude compared to the statements previously discussed, they still allowed for specific interpretations. One speculation that occurred to me was how different themes impacted learners' differently. In the particular case of college sports, I hypothesized whether participants' gender may have played a role in the number of participants who changed attitudes. Considering that, in

many cultures, men tend to be more encouraged to develop interest in sports compared to women, some would be more willing to explore this theme than others. This is a shortcoming that should be explored in future research to investigate whether or not gender plays a decisive role in this matter. In the case of classroom culture, it is important to note that IEP students are non-credit students, and, although the program aims to introduce them to U.S. academic university environments, it does not reflect the exact same structure and demands of a credit course. In my experience, activities targeting themes that were of greater interest for students seemed to have impacted their receptiveness and consequently their exploration of related cultural practices. Another factor to be considered is that I only addressed this topic in one of the proposed activities, which limited the discussions around it. Thus, it is important that, while lesson planning, teachers consider authentic contexts and materials as well as extensive exposure of students to their topics of interest.

As a final remark, it is important to highlight some general aspects that played a significant role in the implementation of these activities. As discussed in the previous paragraphs, mixing activity types, recycling concepts, and creating meaningful connections to real-life contexts appear to have a stronger impact in my students' intercultural development. For the same reason, I kept a record of my students' progress, revisited the notes on a regular basis, and reflected on how to implement changes that would improve student absorption. For example, in the summer term presentations I gave students guiding questions that were not so specific to the kind of discussion I was hoping to have in class. My notes helped me perceive that gap, and in the fall term I adapted the questions to be more descriptive, which made students put together more informative presentations and resulted in more fruitful exchanges in class. The notes also helped me personalize my classes to students and make them more meaningful, which I realized

to be an essential part of developing intercultural competence. By connecting the classroom

content to authentic, real-life experiences, students are more likely to see the relevance of the

proposed activities and adopt new perspectives toward culture.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

The main goal of this study was to investigate intercultural competence in the context of an ESL classroom, paying close attention to challenges and successes of developing intercultural competence in my students. It is evident that being able to navigate multicultural settings in the current globalized world is essential for language learners. When it comes to ESL learners, such abilities are particularly important, considering that students are immersed in the language and culture as they learn them. In the context of ESL classes in U.S. colleges and universities, students not only need to learn how to deal with U.S. culture but commonly encounter cultural diversity inside the classroom. English language programs attract a number of international students that come from different parts of the world and bring with them diverse cultural backgrounds. Although intercultural competence skills are vital for this student population, literature shows that little research addresses ESL learners. Given the relevance of the theme for ESL education and the research gap identified, it seemed of utmost importance that we carried out this project and shed some light on the importance of this topic to the field.

Byram (1997) defends "deep learning" as an effective form of assessing intercultural competence, pointing out it involves "the ability to reflect on one's own thinking and response to experience" (p. 90) to be an important part of it. This quote reflects the impact of this study in my experiences with interculturality, both professionally and personally. Although this research aimed to focus on my students' intercultural learning, it deeply impacted my own intercultural competence. As I reviewed the literature, I learned about different definitions and common elements of intercultural competence and obtained a better grasp of what intercultural competence is. Even though reflecting about culture has been a part of my praxis for years, taking on a leading role in the classroom made me become, in a way, a role model for my

students. As highlighted by Deardorff (2004), intercultural competence involves a cyclical process of constant self-reflection and improvement. Deepening my understanding about intercultural competence generated new attitudes that pushed me to refine my intercultural competence skills and revisit my own practices and behaviors.

Additionally, when looking at the models for assessing intercultural competence, I became more acquainted with the stages that learners must go through to become more interculturally sensitive and achieve higher levels of intercultural competence. I also gained new insights on the role of teachers in the process of developing learners' intercultural skills, which helped me broaden my perspective on how to best assist my own students. As I tried to support and encourage my students in their critical investigations of culture, I was pushed constantly to reflect on my own teaching, explore practices that engage in critical reflections on culture, and guide my students in their development of intercultural competence.

Such observations can be applied to other ESL educators, both domestic and international. More and more world language teachers are being drawn into the ESL classroom to fill staffing gaps, which might cause them to feel ill-equipped to deal with (inter)cultural issues. Considering the importance of intercultural competence for ESL learners, it is pivotal that these teachers deepen their understanding of intercultural competence to better assist learners. One way to do that is by sharing experiences that highlight what worked for them and what could be improved in their process.

In spite of the insightful findings derived from this study, it is important to highlight some shortcomings that were perceived as we carried out the project. Firstly, although the study provided enriching and insightful information about the importance of intercultural competence in the ESL classroom, we understand the limitations imposed by the number of individuals

participating in this study. As mentioned in the Methodology chapter, due to external factors (such as COVID-19 pandemic, student visa issues, reduced scholarships, etc.), we acknowledge the limited scope we were constrained to and that a bigger number of participants would likely provide us with more enriching data. In that manner, we encourage researchers with access to larger student populations to continue investigating issues related to intercultural competence in ESL settings.

Furthermore, observing the different stages and processes involved in the development of intercultural competence, we understand that a longitudinal study would be an effective way to come to more substantial conclusions about the efficacy of the activities employed. Because this study observed two groups of ESL students in only two semesters, our data was restricted to a specific stage of their intercultural development. Consequently, this resulted in a less comprehensive understanding of the impact of the activities implemented in class and the long-lasting outcomes of the approach proposed here. Therefore, in a future iteration of the study, a longitudinal study would be a valid way to accompany students for a longer period of time and find out more about the long-term effects of effective intercultural teaching practices.

This study examined the level of cultural knowledge and intercultural competence that students presented when entering the classroom, considering time spent in the U.S. (both prior and during their experience at the IEP) and the main media sources used to learn about it. The results revealed trends about participants and relevant findings for ESL teaching. It also provided insightful findings on the efficacy of intercultural activities, highlighting the importance of approaching culture through a more critical lens and designing activities that will allow students to explore deeper layers of the target culture. Byram (2002) explains that intercultural

competence involves the "ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality" (p. 11).

The demands of the current globalized and interconnected world have shown that the development of intercultural competence is a matter of pressing concern for the field of language learning. In that regard, the activities designed during the development of this study come in handy when it comes to aiding language teachers in the planning of more intercultural lessons and the inclusion of elements that support the investigation of critical cultural learning. For instance, the activities found in the Appendices section are examples of materials that teachers of all languages can adapt and use in their classrooms.

To conclude, the development of intercultural competence is an everlasting process, and no one can ever master it. Just like language, culture is constantly evolving and taking new forms, shapes, and expressions, which demands individuals to keep a consistent maintenance of their skills to navigate intercultural interactions. In that sense, educators play an important role in supporting learners in the exploration of cultural products, practices, and perspectives, as they carry the important mission of facilitating intercultural learning for students. Therefore, language teachers should not strive for perfection, but the continued improvement of their own intercultural competence and teaching practices that empower learners to see beyond the surface levels of cultural learning.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Part 1: Participant Background
1. What gender do you identify with?
- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Gender variant/non-conforming
- Prefer not to say
- A gender identity not listed here (please specify)

2. What is your racial or ethnic identification? (Mark all that apply)
- Black/African American
- Middle Eastern
- Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- Native American or Alaskan Native
- Asian/Asian American or Pacific Islander
- White
- Other (please specify)

3. How much time have you spent in the United States prior to starting at the IEP?
- Less than a semester
- Between one and two semesters
- Between two and three semesters
- Four or more semesters
- A great deal

4. How many semesters have you completed in the IEP so far?
- Less than a semester
- Between one and two semesters
- Between two and three semesters
- Four or more semesters

5. What main type(s) of media do you use to inform yourself about the United States?
- Internet
- Radio
- Television
- Music
- Movies
- Print Media (newspaper, magazines, books, etc.)
- Social Media
- Video Games
- Other: _____
6. How comfortable do you feel navigating US culture?

- Extremely comfortable
- Somewhat comfortable
- Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
- Somewhat uncomfortable
- Extremely uncomfortable
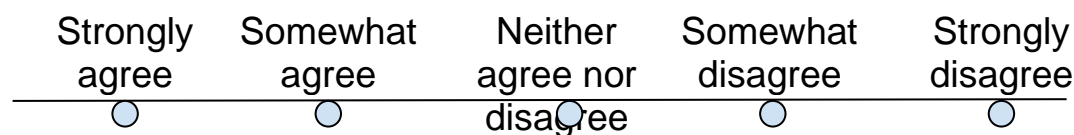
Part 2: Investigate and Interact Questions - Daily Life

1. 🔍 In my own and other cultures I can compare how families are structured within living arrangements, including multigenerational structures.
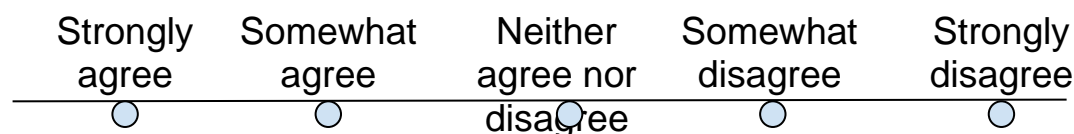
Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○
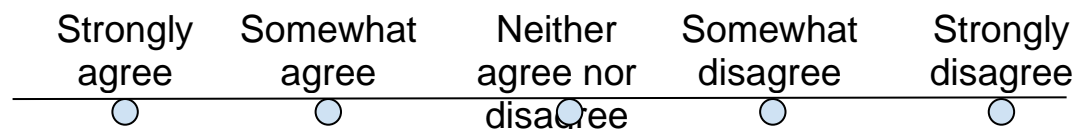
2. 👥 I can use learned behaviors when visiting someone's home or business and notice when I make cultural mistakes.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

3. 🔍 In my own and other cultures I can compare traditions and beliefs that drive interactions within an informal setting.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

4. 👥 I can dress and interact appropriately at an informal party, barbecue, or other gathering.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

5. 🔍 In my own and other cultures I can compare traditions and beliefs that drive interactions in a variety of formal situations.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○
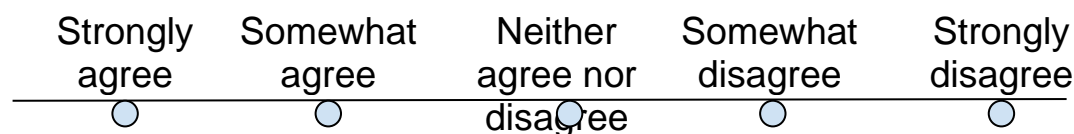
6. 👥 I can dress and interact appropriately in a formal situation, such as weddings, public presentations or ceremonies, etc.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

7. 🔍 In my own and other cultures I can compare how people express time and think about it in similar and different ways.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

8. 👥 I can consider socially appropriate times and punctuality when attending official events, classes, or inviting someone to go out informally.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

9. 🔍 In my own and other cultures I can compare attitudes toward food and mealtimes in daily life based on factors such as geography, economy, or attitudes toward health.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

10. 👥 I can demonstrate culturally appropriate behaviors as I discuss and try unfamiliar food and drink.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

Part 3: Investigate and Interact Questions - Academic and University Life

11. 🔍 In my own and other cultures I can compare school/learning environments and curricula to determine what is valued.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

12. 👥 I can meet with an advisor in the target culture to select courses that match my preferences and academic goals.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

13. 🔍 In my own and other cultures I can compare teacher/student roles in the classroom and the interactions between them (who speaks when, asking and answering questions, etc.).

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

14. 👥 I can ask and answer questions at appropriate times during class and contribute to discussions with my teachers and classmates in appropriate ways.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

15. 🔍 In my own and other cultures I can identify and compare how and when people use media to communicate.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

16. 👥 I can use technology to communicate with peers in the target culture paying attention to appropriate times and contexts.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

17. 🔍 In my own and other cultures I can compare the role of sports in school, university, and daily life and identify the link between sports, spectatorship, and a feeling of belonging.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

18. 👥 I can follow the rules and etiquette when playing a sport with peers and engage in appropriate rituals surrounding spectatorship at sporting events in the target culture.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

19. 🔍 In my own and other cultures I can compare the role of academic honesty and regulations regarding plagiarism in coursework.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

20. 👥 I can follow the rules regarding academic honesty and plagiarism while completing course assignments, projects, and papers.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

21. 🔍 In my own and other cultures I can compare and contrast how people label nationalities, race, and gender and why they do so.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

22. 👥 I can work with members of my class and other classes in the target culture to survey and discuss everyone's views toward issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Open-ended Q1:
Have you ever had a situation in which you struggled to engage successfully in an intercultural exchange? What happened and how did you adjust your behaviors?

Open-ended Q2:
What classroom topics and strategies could help you to understand intercultural exchanges and interact in culturally appropriate ways?

Appendix B

Activity: Investigating Cultural Products, Practices, and Perspectives	**Activity Type:**
Duration: 1 week (whole project)	Presentations
Summary: Students prepared presentations about topics related to cultural products, practices, and perspectives. The proposed themes included: ● Cultural holidays (preference was given to holidays that allowed for the exploration of deep cultural issues) ● Historical monuments (statues, memorials, graveyards, other cultural/historical artifacts) ● (In)appropriate small talk topics/language ➢ Pre-task: Students were given task instructions that accompanied guiding questions for critical reflection during research. They were asked to think of 2-3 questions for the class. ➢ While: During every presentation, students were expected to take notes and be prepared to discuss the questions presented. ➢ Post-task: Students contributed to a critical discussion of the questions and shared their thoughts. The teacher participated in the discussion and elicited reflections about the target culture and students' own culture.	

Appendix C

Activity: Appropriate Small Talk Topics **Duration:** 1 week (whole project)	**Activity Type:** Video + Discussion/Field Research/Presentation

Summary: Students examine the concept of small talk and appropriateness of different topics in daily life conversation.
- Pre-task: Ask students "How do you usually start interaction with strangers in short-time conversations?" and have them share their answers out loud with the group.
- Have students watch the video and test themselves on the (in)appropriateness of small talk topics in some cultures. Then have them answer the following questions:
    - According to the video, how can we describe "small talk?"
    - What are some appropriate topics for small talk discussed in the video?
    - What are some topics you shouldn't bring up?
    - Are any of the inappropriate topics considered OK in your culture? What are some examples of them? Why do you think these topics are perceived differently by people?

Post-task: Field Research

Students will conduct field research on campus to find out more about the appropriateness of small topics in given settings.
- Present the following settings for students/groups to pick from. Explain that they may also come up with their own.
    - At a barbecue party at your friend's house
    - In the elevator with a newly hired coworker
    - At the beauty salon/barbershop
    - At the orientation session of your university program with new students
    - At the bus stop with an elderly lady
    - On a field trip with members of your place of worship
    - At a conference with researchers in your field of study
- Tell students they will interview people around campus to investigate which topics would be appropriate and inappropriate as conversation starters in the selected situation.
- Explain that they should talk to different people around campus, collect as many opinions as possible, and take notes to keep their data recorded.
- Explain they will prepare a short presentation on their results, highlighting their main findings and giving their opinion on what called their attention the most. They should attempt to answer the following questions:
    - What small talk topics are appropriate or inappropriate in the situation you chose?
    - What variables may affect how acceptable they are? Why?
    - What is similar/different from your own culture? Why do you think it is

different?

NOTE: After each presentation, the teacher should pose critical questions about the findings and elicit ideas that encourage students to think critically about the similarities and differences in the target culture, relating it to their own.

Appendix D

Activity: Greetings Around the World	Activity Type:
Duration: 15-20 minutes	Video + Discussion

Summary: Students discussed greetings in different cultures, including verbal and non-verbal language.:

- Pre-task: For 1 minute, students talk to the person to their side about how they greet people in their respective culture. Do they greet similarly?
- Video: Now have them watch the linked video and use note-taking strategies to list as many greetings as they can. For higher levels, ask them to attach them to countries and describe them.
- List the words they identified and go over them, exploring differences and similarities. Work on pronunciation, if need be.
- **Follow-up discussion:**

   What greetings do you usually use in your culture?

   Are any of these greetings offensive to you? Why?

   Which of those seem more formal, informal, or neutral? Provide examples.

After-class Exercise:

For the next couple of days, ask students to observe and write down at least three different ways Americans usually greet. They should create a post on the eCampus Discussion Board and report about what they noticed. Have them use the following questions as a guide:

- What kinds of greetings (verbal and non-verbal) did they use?
- Which ones seemed formal, informal, or neutral?
- In which contexts did they use formal/informal greetings?

Appendix E

Activity: Tipping Culture in US Restaurants **Duration:** 25 minutes	**Activity Type:** Video + Discussion

Summary: Students will investigate the cultural practice of tipping at restaurants.
- <u>Pre-task</u>: Briefly discuss the following questions:
  - What do you know about tipping in the United States?
  - What struggles do you think a server in the US might face?
  - Do you always tip? When do you think it is fair to leave extra money?
- Play the linked video and have students take notes and answer the following questions:
  - According to the video, why do customers feel pressured to always tip?
  - Why do restaurant servers and food delivery drivers usually rely on tipping?
  - What are the percentages recommended for tipping? How do they change?
  - What are examples of situations where it is okay not to tip?
- <u>Discussion</u>:
  - Divide the class into two groups: pro-tipping and anti-tipping.
  - Explain that students will need to defend the point of view assigned to them.
  - Have them brainstorm ideas that help them support the group's point of view. Explain that, even if they do not personally agree with it, they should try to look at it through the perspective of someone who does. Additionally, tell them to connect it to the way it is done in their own culture, whenever possible.
  - After they are done, start a class debate where both groups discuss the topic and provide compelling arguments for why their point of view is valid.
  - At the end of the discussion, have students share what aspects came to their attention after they tried to consider this topic through both points of view.

Appendix F

| **Activity:** Eating Habits in the US | **Activity Type:** |
| **Duration:** 20 minutes | Video + Discussion |

Summary: Students discuss eating habits in American culture and their own.

- <u>Pre-task</u>: Brainstorm examples of healthy and unhealthy foods.
- Ask them which ones are more/less expensive to buy here in the US.
- Have them watch the video and take notes to answer the question "Why is eating healthy so expensive in America?" Briefly discuss the video and their answers.
- Present students with a definition for the word "stereotype." Explain there can be positive and negative cultural stereotypes about nations, social groups, and people.
- Discussion the following questions:
  - Do you think people (in your country) hold any stereotypes related to eating habits about Americans? What are some of them?
  - What are your perceptions about eating healthy ever since you moved here? What are some aspects that might impact the way people eat in the US?
  - In your opinion, what are some cultural practices that encourage people to continue eating unhealthily? What do you think could be done to improve this scenario?
  - How do you compare the way people eat here to your culture? Have your habits changed ever since you arrived here? How?

Appendix G

Activity: How Different Cultures View Time **Duration:** 25 minutes	**Activity Type:** Reading + Discussion

Summary: Students will discuss the different ways that time is perceived, including concepts like being "on time" and "late."
- Pre-task: On the board, write the saying "If you are five minutes early, you are already ten minutes late" and ask students what they think it says about general practices regarding time in American culture.
- Reading: Have students read the text in the linked reading document (p. 3-4). Propose the following comprehension questions:
    - What cultural difference did the American professor face in his classes in Brazil?
    - What aspects of punctuality did the professor discuss with the students?
    - Why is it complicated to explain such cultural differences?
    - What conclusion did the professor get to in the end?
      Discussion:
- Have students get in pairs and follow up with a group discussion.
- Ask them to use the following guiding questions and take notes of each other's answers:
    - How do people in your culture view being late/early?
    - What attitudes should one have when dealing with a situation similar to the one described in the reading? How flexible should one be?
    - Have you ever experienced a similar situation here in the US? What happened? How did you respond?
    - Why do you think it is rude to be late in some cultures? What about the other way around?

Appendix H

Activity: Sports Culture in US Colleges **Duration:** 20 minutes	**Activity Type:** Video + Discussion

Summary: Students will discuss the role of sports in the college experience in the US, considering the critical implications of it in students' academic and personal lives.

- <u>Pre-task</u>: Have students share what they know about **student athletes**. Do you know any student athletes? What do they do? Why do you think people become student athletes?
    <u>Research</u>:
- Divide students into small groups and have them use their personal devices (phones, tablets, laptops, etc.) to research about student athletes in US universities, including their role, responsibilities/duties, and benefits of this status.
- Explain they should take notes as they gather information in order to share their findings with the class afterwards. Promote a brief discussion about potential positive and negative aspects of it. Is there any prestige involved? How do you believe being a student athlete impacts performance in class?
- Play the linked video and ask students to take notes in order to answer the questions that follow:
    - What is the main critic perceived in the movie trailer?
    - Why does the character LeMarcus James try to boycott the NCAA?
    - Why is it a big deal that he is speaking up about the issue?
    - Consider your experience at WVU and your perception of sports related events happening around campus. How important do you think sports are to the college experience in the US?
    - How are sports viewed in your culture? Do they play a big role in academic life?
    - Why do you think it does in American culture?

Appendix I

Activity: U.S. Classroom Customs	**Activity Type:**
Duration: 20 minutes	Video + Discussion

Summary: Students discuss some common customs and practices in US classrooms and compare it to their culture.
- <u>Pre-task</u>: Have the class think and discuss the question "What are some dos and don'ts of classroom behavior in the United States?"
- Play the linked video and have students use note-taking strategies to answer the questions that follow:
    - How is the syllabus described in the video?
    - How should you generally address your professor?
    - Under which circumstances is it okay to use your laptop in class?
    - Why is group work viewed as something positive in US classroom culture?
    - What should you use your professor's office hours for?
    <u>Discussion</u>:
- Have students form small groups and discuss the following questions:
    - What are some things in the video that you have experienced here at WVU?
    - What are some other common cultural practices in US classrooms you would add to the list?
    - What are some examples of classroom customs in your culture that diverge from the American ones?
    - Who do you think should be more flexible; the instructor receiving many international learners or the students moving into a new cultural environment? Why?

Appendix J

Activity: How Cultures Change Over Time **Duration:** 25 minutes	**Activity Type:** Reading + Discussion

Summary: Students discuss and reflect about ways that cultural practices and perspectives change over time.

- Pre-task: Have students think and share reflections about the questions "What are some beliefs and practices that have changed from your grandparents' generation to your parents' generation, to your generation?"
- Reading: Tell students they will read an interview with Eugenia Hartley, an elderly lady that talks about how culture has changed compared to the past. Ask them to answer the following questions:
  - Which are the main customs that Ms. Harley points out to have changed in the interview?
  - How have mealtime behaviors changed according to the reading?
  - How different were curfew rules for women and men, back in the days?
  - How did adolescents use to address adults in the past? What about now?
    Discussion:
- Brainstorm other cultural customs that have changed over time.
- Have students discuss the following questions in pairs:
  - Why do you think culture changes over time?
  - What should one do to adapt to new cultural behaviors and beliefs?
  - How should one adapt to old cultural behaviors and beliefs?
  - Have you ever struggled to interact with someone from a different generation? What did you do?
  - How do you think the other person felt about that interaction? Why?