

Developing Intercultural Understanding for Study Abroad: Students' and Teachers' Perspectives on pre-departure Intercultural Learning

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Abstract

This study reports on students' and teachers' perspectives on a programme designed to develop Erasmus students' intercultural understanding prior to going abroad. We aimed to understand how students and their teachers perceived pre-departure materials in promoting their awareness of key concepts related to interculturality (e.g., essentialism, stereotyping, otherising) during an intercultural education course for mobile students (the IEREST project, 2014). Twenty pre-departure Erasmus undergraduate students from an Italian university, four teachers and one observer participated in the study. Seven hours of audio/video-recordings of classroom discussions and teachers' retrospective narratives were analysed thematically. Although students initially subverted the goals of one of the tasks, they demonstrated foundations of intercultural thinking; followed by movement from self-interest to intercultural awareness of the other; and finally, developing intercultural awareness, supported through opportunities to express emotions/feelings and discussion and application of key concepts of interculturality. Teachers'/observer's perspectives confirmed the quality and flexibility of the materials in developing students' intercultural awareness. The findings suggest that pre-departure materials can help students to recognise variety and complexity in self and other in intercultural encounters. But students' primary needs for practical information should first be satisfied; interactive spaces for expressing emotion and feelings are important for understanding self and other; and scaffolding activities help students to understand intercultural concepts.

Key words

Study abroad, intercultural encounters, experiential learning, intercultural communication, internationalisation, essentialising

Introduction

Study abroad is increasingly perceived—by employers, universities, and students themselves—as an important component of a university student’s graduate competencies. Employers expect their incoming graduates to have “global” competencies which include an understanding of people from other linguistic, cultural, religious, geographic backgrounds. Universities often include intercultural competencies in their list of graduates’ attributes, and therefore, encourage students to undertake a study abroad programme. The European Erasmus mobility exchange programme, which permits students to continue their undergraduate degree study in a university in another country, also has the potential to develop in students these global competencies. Yet, Cicchelli (2013, 206) questions how mobile students’ Erasmus journey, “full of the flourishing of new personal capacities, of an unveiling of self, and of a socialisation to difference”—what he terms “cosmopolitan promises”—can be achieved. More importantly, the intercultural awareness and development that students might expect to gain from a study abroad—no matter with whom—is unlikely to occur of its own accord. Mobile students require preparation, or more importantly, intercultural education to maximise the benefits of study abroad (Jackson 2008; Byram and Feng 2006; Byram and Dervin 2008).

Here we report on a study which aims to evaluate teachers’ and students’ perspectives on pre-departure training materials designed to develop mobile students’ intercultural understanding. The study investigates how a small group of Erasmus students in Italy and the United Kingdom, who are about to undertake a period of study abroad, developed intercultural learning—about themselves and others—through concepts such as “stereotyping”, “otherising”, and “essentialism”. The study fits within a larger study and mobility programme development, IEREST (*Intercultural Educational Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers*), which is designing materials to promote Erasmus students’ intercultural learning in three stages: pre-departure, while abroad, and once returned. Specifically, the study draws on the piloting of IEREST pre-departure materials (Beaven and Borghetti 2014; The IEREST project 2014).

The theoretical standpoints of intercultural learning

One way of promoting intercultural learning of self and others is through intercultural encounters. The experiential learning activity which we investigate in this study invites students to reflect on their learning vis-à-vis intercultural encounters—real (from students’ own experiences of meeting people from other horizons), mediated (through videos, narratives), and improvised (through students’ constructions of role plays and improvisations). In this paper, we define an intercultural encounter as interaction (verbal and nonverbal) between two or more people in situations (not necessarily countries) where they may perceive each other to have different backgrounds (cultural, linguistic, geographical, etc.) and where these differences are salient and affect the nature of the interaction (which might include empathy, sameness, and shared understandings, despite apparent surface differences). Intercultural encounters are important sites for intercultural learning and awareness development (Holmes and O’Neill 2010; 2012). As Edgerton (1996, 166) argued, “one cannot ‘see’ or hear the familiar until it is made strange”. Thus, an intercultural encounter offers a “place where individuals can shift their focus away from an external evaluation of the Other to an inward contemplation of their own intercultural competence” (Holmes and O’Neill 2012, 707).

The second theoretical standpoint concerns how mobile students understand identity—their own and others. Kramsch (2009) notes that the intercultural encounter is the place where individuals

view the Other in the mirror of themselves. This intersubjective critical reflection and analysis invites individuals to question solid, stereotypical and essentialist understandings they may have of (themselves and) others that deny individuals' multifaceted and fluid identities (Dervin 2012; Bauman 2004). For example, identity is not confined to nationhood, ethnicity or language(s) spoken; instead, developing understandings of otherness requires people to engage in much broader identifications, for example, concerning gender, age, social class, language, power positions, geographical location, history and memory, religion, family, etc. These intersubjective co-constructions work hand-in-hand to create impressions of one another, and also of situations (Beaven and Borghetti 2014; The IEREST project 2014). It is in intercultural encounters that identities are contested, negotiated and (re)constructed, and according to Collier (2005), avowed and ascribed.

A final standpoint concerns the concept of culture. To encourage students to move away from essentialised or stereotypical notions of the other, it is important to define culture as socially constructed. As individuals engage in meaningful practices (of communication) which engage people of multiple identities, culture becomes shaped and reshaped; solid, monolithic and static notions of a group, a society, give way to historical, local, national, regional, diasporic and global processes that work back and forth, and dynamically, in human society to create complex understandings of culture more generally (Shi-Xu 2001), and the culture of small groups of people (Holliday 1999), in particular.

The research question

The study abroad experience poses multiple challenges for mobile students. They are likely to meet and need to understand sameness and difference in intercultural encounters, negotiate the multifaceted nature of others' identity, and explore how culture (their own and others) is socially constructed in interactions. Therefore, pre-departure intercultural learning should attempt to challenge mobile students' thinking about interculturality. Further, mobile students and their teachers may respond in different ways to this learning. There may be a mismatch between the aims of a study abroad programme and its materials, and those of the students. It is this complexity that we, as researchers, seek to understand. Thus, our study sought to address the following question:

R.Q.: How do teachers and their students perceive the IEREST teaching materials in developing students' intercultural understandings of otherness?

This knowledge is important in developing appropriate materials and pedagogies that introduce Erasmus and other mobile students to interculturality in preparation for study abroad and for engagement with others in intercultural encounters in order to work towards cosmopolitan promises (Cichelli 2013) and IEREST's goals. Next we introduce the activity that we drew on to explore this research question, and its place within the IEREST project.

The intercultural learning activity and IEREST pedagogy

The teaching activity "Meeting people abroad", from which we have collected the data for this study, encourages students to examine their own and others identities and communication in intercultural encounters. From a pedagogical perspective, when preparing and delivering the materials in this activity, teachers are invited to draw on the theoretical understanding of intercultural encounters described above. The IEREST pedagogy invites teachers to guide students through learning tasks underpinned by Kolb's (1984) phases of experiential learning, analysis, and critical reflection; students begin to develop an awareness of self and other, that is, they being to

recognise the subjectivity and instability of their own and others' worldviews. Through co-constructed learning, students can begin to understand potential differences as well as similarities, to dispel myths, (re)frame expectations, and set realistic goals concerning study abroad. The activity is composed of four tasks, which aim to help students critically respond to situations where they may experience: a felt or imposed need to i) meet exclusively 'local' people, ii) avoid or stay with other students/people from their own country, and/or iii) avoid or stay with exchange student communities. They also encourage students to critically reflect on stereotypical and essentialist understandings of the other.

The activity began with a task on concrete experience where students discussed going abroad experiences. Here the teacher introduced the theoretical concepts of "otherising", "stereotyping" and "essentialism". In the next task, students reflected on an experience of meeting other people abroad through watching and analysing a video interview conducted by an Erasmus student with her host university students; then they prepared to interview an Erasmus/international student from the university (or country) of their proposed study abroad, with the specific aim of challenging stereotypes and essentialist interpretations of an Erasmus destination country, in other words putting into practice what they learned from the previous analysis. Finally, they analysed the interviews they had made, focusing on how the interviewer and the interviewee had constructed their own and the other's cultural identity and what was indicative of a (non-)essentialist viewpoint on both sides. After the analysis, students were required to self-evaluate the task accomplishments and the outcomes vis-à-vis their own intercultural learning.

Methodology of the study

To address our research question we drew on the piloting of the first phase of IEREST: the pre-departure phase. In particular, we sought the perspectives of teachers and students as they experienced the tasks in the activity "Meeting people abroad". Here we briefly introduce the methodology of the study (sample, data collection and analysis procedures), ethical and language issues, and limitations.

The sample

Student perspectives derive from a sample of 20 pre-departure students (12 females and 8 males) from the same Italian university as the teachers. They were in the second year of an undergraduate programme of study (e.g., Art, Medicine, Sciences, Languages, etc) and were planning to take an Erasmus study abroad. Some had had short experiences of a stay abroad, but not study abroad. None had received previous formal intercultural learning.

Teachers' perspectives derive from a sample of four teachers (three from an Italian university and one from a UK university) who taught the pre-departure programme, and one observer (from the same UK university). The four teachers had a background in intercultural education and previous experience of working and teaching in intercultural contexts including language teaching. Three of them worked as language teachers and one as a researcher and teaching assistant. Further, an observer's perspective was included. As an administrator for study abroad programmes, the observer had experience of working with Erasmus and international students. Although not a teacher, she provided a distinctive perspective "from the point of view of a lay person" (cited in her observer's feedback form) by observing and giving feedback on the teaching sessions.

Data collection and analysis

In our analysis we draw on the data collected for the IEREST project piloting—students’ in-class discussions, teachers’ narratives, and observers’ feedback. The students’ perspectives derive from student interactions in group and plenary discussions in the classroom during the activity “Meeting people abroad”. These discussions were video/audio recorded in two classes, each of about 3 hours 30 minutes.

Teachers’ perspectives are analysed through their retrospective narratives of their experiences of teaching the materials, and their understandings of how students received the materials. These data were collected from online questionnaires and feedback forms from about 16 hours of teaching per teacher. These post-reflection reports considered: 1) the structure of the materials, e.g., theoretical approach, content, quantity of the work required of students, 2) usability and innovativeness, 3) students’ responses to the materials, and 4) teachers’ overall evaluation of how the materials and classroom experience were useful to students in helping them to achieve IEREST’s goals.

The observer’s feedback comes from her narrative of about seven hours of classroom observation. The observer was asked to comment on how materials and class experiences were useful to the students, again in achieving IEREST’s goals.

These three perspectives allowed us to examine the same classroom event, both while it was happening and retrospectively, thus providing a deep insight into students’ and teachers’ reception of the materials.

The data were recorded, transcribed and coded following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) principles of thematic analysis. The second and third authors coded students’ and teachers’ perspectives separately and then compared their codes using mind maps in order to identify consistent themes and sub-themes. The resultant thematic map was then checked against the overall data set prior to creating a final list of concise and non-repetitive themes. Finally, data were written up to address our research question.

Ethics

The overall IEREST project received ethical approval from the IEREST lead university’s ethics committee and their guidelines underpin the ethics of our study. Teachers and students were informed of the purpose of the classroom sessions and piloting, and gave their consent (via a consent form). All participants were informed of the ethical principles of anonymity, the right to withdraw, and participants’ rights to refuse to participate in or answer questions about the study. Student participation was voluntary, and students agreed that the data captured in the classroom could be used for research purposes like this study.

A further aspect of the study concerns the languages used. The teaching in the Italian university was mostly in Italian, the first language of the participants, although some of the theoretical concepts were presented in English. Therefore we include the Italian transcriptions and their English translations. Transcripts were analysed in Italian by the second and third authors.

The scope of the study

Our research question, focused on teachers’ and students’ perspectives on IEREST materials as tools for developing their intercultural understanding and awareness, responds to our interest in students’ experiences of these materials in promoting intercultural learning, and the teachers’ and observer’s perceptions of the classroom learning and dynamics. While the IEREST materials were

piloted in four of the partner universities, we limit our analysis to the two piloting sites in which we were directly involved.

The authors' subjective engagements in the IEREST project, and their prior insights and knowledge of its aims indicate a positive bias towards the success of the project. The second and third authors taught the "Meeting people abroad" activity. However, the student participants had not had any experience of IEREST's materials or other intercultural training/education programmes related to study abroad. Thus, their responses are spontaneous and open-ended.

Next we present the emergent findings on students' and teachers' perspectives on the IEREST materials and their implications for preparing mobile students for study abroad.

Students' intercultural learning in the IEREST classroom

The first part of the activity was dedicated to preparing a non-essentialist interview guide. However, our findings show that the students' interests and needs for practical information and support emerged; nonetheless, these needs formed the foundation of a process of developing intercultural awareness. Our findings are presented and discussed in terms of students' experiences of the activities (students' classroom interactional data, presented in the original Italian and translated into English by the second and third authors), and teachers' perspectives on these experiences (teacher narratives), supported by the observer's observations. ("S" refers to the student, "T" the teacher, and "O" the observer.)

The foundations of intercultural awareness

In preparing the interview, students subverted the task in order to meet their basic needs regarding their future study abroad experience. Instead of practising interviewing using non-essentialist questioning strategies, students asked questions that focused on their own interests and needs for practical information to support their future Erasmus experience. Although the teacher gave clear instructions on what themes to explore in the interview, e.g., the interviewee's country and university in order to focus students' attention on how people construct their cultural/national identity, to her surprise, students changed the focus. With a display of group agency (Ellemers 2012), they asked questions about their interviewee's Erasmus experience, e.g., 1) food, timing, accommodation, attending classes, exams, climate; 2) comparisons between Italy and the incoming student's home country; 3) confronting host stereotypes, e.g., concerning Italian politics and bureaucracy; and 4) managing emotions and feelings.

It would seem, then, that asking the international student practical information on her/his Erasmus experience was more urgent for students than the themes proposed by the teacher:

T1: quindi / più o meno però / assomiglia al taglio che danno loro // cioè nel senso che voi chie- parlate chiedete / gli chiedete proprio della sua vita QUI / [quindi non]

S1: [SI SI SI] perché a noi interessa qui

T1: [sorride]

S1: perché nessuno di noi va in belgio tranne lei quindi / non è che ci interessa il belgio / ci interessa la borsa sua [la classe ride]

T1: so / more or less / the slant is similar to theirs // that is you are going to ask / to ask him just about his life HERE / [so you don't]

S1: [YES YES YES] because we are interested in HERE

T1: [smiles]

S1: because none of us is going to Belgium except her so / we are not interested in Belgium [*students and teacher laugh*].

Thus, in response to the task “preparing a non-essentialist interview”, students adopted a culture-specific approach, introduced stereotypes about the host culture, revealing their interests and needs for practical information (eg. the size of the Erasmus grant, as in the example above) and emotional support (eg. how to face homesickness, as in the example below). Their response indicates the need to deal with these issues prior to departure. It represents a first level of intercultural needs required by students to manage daily routines in the host country (Beaven et al. 2013, 12).

In this regard, teachers perceived this phenomenon as a partial mismatch between the students’ expectations and the IEREST module objectives. In their narratives they state that, in some instances, students were expecting more practical suggestions on how to manage their Erasmus experience and some were also interested in culture- and country-specific information to familiarise themselves with their country of destination. As one of the teachers described:

T: Overall I think that they were expecting more practical suggestions on how to manage their experience abroad. Also, students were interested in their country of destination and what their experiences will be like, possibly getting more culture-specific examples. ERASMUS is a very individual experience and students wanted to reflect and discuss what it would be like for them, looking somehow for reassurance and support.

So, according to teachers’ perspectives, students appeared to look for a safety rope which included “dos” and “don’ts” which would serve to reassure and equip them for their experience abroad. For these reasons, teachers stated that it was important to clarify the aims and objectives of the tasks. Once the focus of the course was made clear, students’ responses appeared to teachers to be more positive:

T: Students were receptive and very interested, even if they expected something very different, “more practical, more technical” in their own words.

T: As one student said: “We are going to leap into the unknown and it would be nice to have some rope to protect us.” So I am not sure whether they expected to work on interculturality as we conceived it, but I think that at the end of this cycle of classes they understood that IEREST materials can be a good “safety rope”.

Indeed, from the very first class, the IEREST activity appeared to satisfy the students’ needs of sharing motivations and emotions with other pre-departure students. During group work, a recurrent theme, either in the off-task episodes or in the task itself, was students’ need to express feelings which, for example, led to the formulation of the interviewer’s questions on homesickness:

S2: Hai avuto nostalgia della spagna o se invece c’è un posto che ti ha fatto sentire a casa / anche qui a [nome di città]

S2: Did you miss Spain or feel homesick, or did you find a place which felt like home / here too in [name of city].:

Students’ anxieties about problematic aspects of the Erasmus experience, such as linguistic difficulties or keeping up with the new academic environment, were repeatedly mentioned and led to questions to the interviewee like:

S3: Hai riscontrato un diverso modo di insegnamento rispetto alla tua università / l'italiano potrà aiutarti in campo lavorativo / come dovrebbe cambiare l'organizzazione di queste di [nome di università] per gli Erasmus / come e se dovrebbe cambiare / perché magari per lui [lo studente intervistato] è giusta così /

S3: Did you find a different way of teaching in comparison with your university? / Will Italian help you professionally? / How should [name of university's] organisation change for Erasmus students? / Should it change and how? / Because maybe for him [the interviewee] it is good the way it is!

Moving from self-interest to intercultural awareness

Although initially the development of a successful non-essentialist intercultural communication was partly left aside by the students, with the progression of the activity they began to enjoy and appreciate engaging with incoming students. This experience motivated them to analyse those intercultural interactions, possibly triggering their intercultural awareness. During the group preparation of the analysis, students began to work on and with concepts such as “essentialism” and “stereotyping”. For example, a student reminded her group of what she remembered about essentialism by defining it:

S4: Non so / io l'ho visto [l'essentialismo] più legato a una nazione a una nazionalità // mentre il non essentialismo è più... [0.5 pausa] una vision più complessa... [0.3 pausa] che può cambiare

S4: I don't know / I understood it [essentialism] more in relation to a nation a nationality // while non-essentialism is more ... a more complex vision ... that can change.

In the following excerpts, students applied the concepts to the analysis of the interviewee's discourse or to their own questions:

S5: In ogni domanda lei è stata molto essenzialista // lei ha dato molti stereotipi

S5: In every question she was very essentialist. / She gave a lot of stereotypes.

S6: È strano e bello vedere come si smontano gli stereotipi / io sono francese ma non mangio le lumache

S6: It is strange and great to see how stereotypes are dismantled. / I am French but I don't eat snails.

S6: Dal punto di vista della multiculturalità / questa ragazza l'ho trovata molto poco generalizzante / non essenzialista // ha sempre detto / nella mia esperienza personale

S6: From a multicultural point of view / I found this girl generalised very little / non-essentialist. // She always said / “in my experience ...”.

In this excerpt the student-student interaction shows a clear analysis accompanied by an easy handling of the concepts:

S6: siamo stati attenti agli aspetti culturali / cercato di trovare le cose in comune / abbiamo scavato nello stereotipo / domande provocatorie / stronze / per tirare fuori stereotipi / lei invece non si è fatta stereotipizzare / ha scansato con eleganza gli argomenti

S5: mentre quella che abbiamo intervistato noi generalizzava qualunque cosa

S6: We paid attention to the cultural aspects / tried to find things in common / we dug into stereotypes / provocative questions / mean ones /to make her bring out stereotypes / but she didn't let us stereotype her / she eloquently dodged the topics.

S5: Whereas the one we interviewed kept generalizing about everything.

So the students' change in perceptions is reflected in the linguistic changes in their discourse, described by teachers in their narratives as an important sign of (intercultural) awareness development:

T: I could notice linguistic changes in them. I could observe for example how their vocabulary was enriched by the new terms such as "essentialism", "essentialise", and linguistic changes are always a sign of a change in perceptions.

Developing intercultural awareness

In the final part of the activity, the students were asked to evaluate their work. They reported success and enjoyment in accomplishing the tasks, first, due to an appreciation of the fieldwork which enhanced their motivation to participate actively.

Teachers' narratives confirmed this positive evaluation, and they were encouraged by students' responses to this task. Both teachers and observer gave a positive evaluation of the overall IEREST teaching materials; the content and format of Module 1 were considered original and of quality, providing a good blend of theory and interactive tasks:

T: The materials are really good and original with a range of different tasks, a good level of flexibility,

And another teacher noted:

T: The contents have a degree of flexibility that allow teachers to adapt them to different [student] needs and teaching styles.

A third teacher remarked that the materials enabled interaction which, in turn, enhanced students' understandings of intercultural encounters:

T: Students were interested and engaged in tasks especially when tasks allowed them to interact with each other.

The second reason for success in accomplishing the tasks was the opportunity given to students to freely express emotions and feelings. The appreciation of field work and of free emotional expression are illustrated in the following excerpt where the student displays her engagement with the task, and where she appraises the appropriateness of expressing emotions in the interview context:

S7: io non... pensavo che... le intervistate fossero così corrette che in maniera che... / il fatto che lei ci ha detto che ha pianto / per me / io / se sarebbe successo a me / non avrei mai detto che ho [pianto]

T1: [non l'avresti] mai detto

S7: col video e [xxx]

T1: [video] e poi lo mettiamo

S7: [ma no xxx]

T1: [sul sito]

S7: è incredibile / il fatto che / quattro persone che non conosci / che ti fanno un video e te racconti cose così personali ... però mi è piaciuto molto

S7: I didn't ... think that ... the interviewees were so fair so that ... / the fact that she told us she had cried / to me / I / if it had happened to me / I wouldn't have said that I had [cried].

T1: [You would] never have said that!

S7: on the video ...

T1: [video] then we will put it [on the website]

S7: it's unbelievable / the fact that / four people you don't know / video-record you and you tell such personal things ... but I liked it so much.

While the student felt surprised by her interviewee's outward display of vulnerability in relation to homesickness, she also acknowledged the interviewee's bravery in showing such emotions, which, in the student's view, demonstrated her interviewee's courage in revealing her inner feelings. This exchange with the teacher indicates that the students are beginning to acquire an awareness of what was expected of them and some achievement of the learning outcomes of the task, in particular, adopting a non-essentialist attitude.

Finally, the following exchange between the teacher and a group of students suggests that the self-awareness process leading to an understanding of intercultural encounters seems well advanced as students came to realise the meaning of the term "essentialist" and the problem of asking essentialist questions in their interviews:

S4: che cosa è indicativo di un modo essenzialista? / che cosa non abbiamo chiesto di quello che ci interessa adesso [*i concetti discussi*]?

S8: per me erano essenzialiste le nostre domande

S5: anche per me e anche il suo [*il discorso dell'intervistata*]

S4: perché le nostre domande erano essenzialiste? / perché abbiamo chiesto del paese della lingua di tutto / facendo un po' di divisioni / nel senso / noi voi / noi tutti / noi europei / quindi marcando le differenze.

S4: What is indicative of an essentialist way [*of asking questions*]? / what didn't we ask about but we are now interested in [*referring to the concepts discussed*]?

S8: in my opinion / our questions were essentialist

S5: I agree and hers too [*referring to the interviewee's discourse*]

S4: Why were our questions essentialist? / because we asked about the country the language and everything / making divisions a little bit / that is / us you / we all / we European / thus marking differences.

Because the materials encouraged experiential learning (Kolb 1984) and reflection on and evaluation of direct experiences and interactions (Holmes & O'Neill 2012), according to the teachers, students could question their own assumptions and reflect on concepts they might not have been aware of previously. For example, the observer noted:

O: I found the introduction of the concept of "identity and perception" very helpful to encourage students to question their assumptions.

Teachers described how, at the end of the module, students showed their vocabulary enrichment by using previously unfamiliar concepts with greater awareness and confidence; moreover,

T: for most students this was the first time they'd done anything like this. Further, teachers felt that students began to reconsider their own worldview.

On the other hand, the analysis also revealed how a minority of students acknowledged some difficulties they had in accomplishing the task. This point was confirmed by the teachers' narratives, which reported how the theoretical concepts that underpinned the materials seemed complex, and therefore, difficult to deal with in relation to the activities. As described earlier, students were

expected to apply concepts such as stereotyping, ethnocentrism and essentialism to examples of intercultural encounters as well as to their own experiences. As these concepts were often new to the students, a strong emergent theme among teachers' feedback revealed their perceived need to gradually expose students to these concepts:

T: We should have worked more on these concepts, offering them tasks that would expose them gradually to this vision of culture and identity.

Teachers felt that this gradual exposure would have helped students to internalise the theory and therefore better understand how it informed the meaning of the tasks.

Students reported that they were first challenged by the newness of the tasks, particularly where they were required to reflect on and analyse aspects of their own and others' identity and worldview. According to some, this task asked them to face sensitive topics which required prior preparation.

Second, while the teacher had provided some coaching or scaffolding, and while the students had been given preparatory materials for the task, they had not necessarily clearly understood what was required. The following demonstrates these processes at work:

S1: comunque / cioè la lezione [la preparazione teorica] è veramente servita tanto / [ecco]
 T1: [per te] / per t-
 S8: anche secondo me / tuttavia / mi sono trovata un po' in difficoltà perché::: il fatto::: la così tanta attenzione sulla differenza tra essenzialismo e non essenzialismo / non mi era stata così chiara prima di fare l'intervista / adesso non so se questo fosse stato voluto o no / cioè ci siamo trovati ad analizzare sotto un aspetto essenzialista che abbiamo fatto un po'::: a braccio / sì avevamo le linee guida però::: appunto non avevamo [xxx] come dicevamo prima il messaggio:::/ da::: analizzare // quindi / non so se la cosa fosse stata intenzionale / però abbiamo analizzato sotto un altro punto di vista un aspetto che / non avevamo presente / mentre stavamo facendo l'intervista

S1: Anyway / the class [the theoretical preparation] was really very useful / [that's it]

T1: [in your opinion] / in your op-

S8: in my opinion too / nevertheless / I found it was difficult because ... the fact that ... there was so much attention on the difference between essentialism and non-essentialism / this was not so clear to me before making the interview / now I can't say if this was done intentionally or not / that is we found that we were analyzing using an essentialist aspect which we did a little bit ... off-the-cuff / yes we had the guidelines but... as we said before understood the message...to... analyze /so / I can't say if this was done intentionally / but we analysed from another point of view an aspect that / we didn't have in mind / while we were doing the interview.'

This meta-reflection of the theoretical aspects underpinning the task shows how the student is consciously using the cognitive instruments she acquired during the tasks. This is, possibly, intercultural awareness at work.

Conclusions

Our analysis of students' and teachers' perspectives as they engaged with the IEREST materials showed that the materials in this pre-departure programme helped students to develop, in various

ways, understandings of interculturality and intercultural encounters. The findings indicate that intercultural learning is possible in a pre-departure programme aimed at Erasmus students.

As illustrated in the teacher-student interactions at the outset of the activity, students showed a low degree of intercultural awareness: their interests and needs were practically oriented and their approach to the “other” was culture-specific. As future European students, they might be, as Derwin (2009) argued, under the influence of academic and European institutions whose differentialist approach is clearly reflected in these students’ discourses. However, the proposed tasks encourage students to practically engage and reflect on their own developing intercultural awareness, and the students’ experiences and reflections illustrate these processes in action, and as they were conceptualised by IEREST.

As the analysis shows, students left behind a differentialist approach, and gradually grasped and applied critically concepts like essentialism, the meaning of which was co-constructed in their group interactions. Through the tasks students became aware of the meaning of non-essentialist engagement, and how to use non-essentialist strategies in their intercultural communication. This self-awareness is considered a necessary phase in developing the ability to have successful intercultural communication with others (Byram 1997; Deardorff 2006). As part of this cognitive process, students also demonstrated some self-reflexivity towards intercultural concepts which helped them to analyse the task. For example, a student expressed dissatisfaction in her own ability to accomplish the task by stating that she needed more theoretical coaching and scaffolding. Here she seems to be demonstrating that accessible theoretical knowledge is a necessary complement to self-reflexivity.

A further factor that led students towards an understanding of intercultural encounters was the role of the affective dimension, that is, the importance students attributed to the expression of feelings and emotions. Students attributed the success of the tasks to the opportunity they gave to communicate emotions and feelings and to reflect on these (both their own and those of their interviewees). As Holmes and O’Neill (2012) show, reflection on emotions can be highly rewarding for students, even if it requires facework and empathetic effort.

Teachers considered the materials to be of good quality and flexible, allowing for adaptation to different teaching contexts and needs. They also perceived that the materials could support the development of intercultural awareness, evidenced eventually in students’ willingness to be challenged, reflect, and shift their perspectives. However, although the students considered the materials useful, they entered the course with different expectations; some wanted culture-specific information and emotional support to prepare for their encounter with the “unknown cultural other”—the kind of “quick tips” culture-specific knowledge that is typically offered by international offices in universities. Teachers’ narratives thus affirm the importance of sufficiently informing students of the objectives of the tasks, and the links between theory and practice—the hallmarks of the materials. This outcome is also important in preparing students for study abroad more generally.

The study outcomes have important implications for preparing students for study abroad. The tasks students undertook encouraged them to “recognize and analyse the variety and complexity within themselves as well as in individuals in other groups”, and to consider “how their worldview influences their perceptions of themselves and their interactions with others”, two important IEREST-project goals (Beaven and Borghetti 2014; The IEREST project 2014). They were introduced to

concepts which were not familiar to them, but nonetheless, the findings demonstrate that they progressively acquired intercultural awareness.

Three key pedagogical directions emerge from these conclusions. First, students' primary needs for practical information on study abroad should be previously satisfied. International offices may play a key role here. Satisfying these expectations and needs may then facilitate students' openness to the intercultural dimensions of the pre-departure materials. Second, the process of exchanging information, feelings and emotions, and the accompanying self-reflection was important in developing understandings of self and other identities (Holmes and O'Neill 2012). Pre-departure programmes should therefore allow for interactive spaces for this expression, and give opportunities for self-reflection and time for post-task discussion and debriefing. Finally, students indicated that they needed more coaching and scaffolding activities; the teachers described the challenge of presenting and explaining clearly and without simplification theoretical concepts on interculturality. Kinginger (2014) notes that students, especially undergraduates, might be overwhelmed by the complexity of some of these intercultural concepts. This situation indicates the need for a slow and measured teaching and learning pace when dealing with these concepts in the classroom.

The study derives from the beliefs and experiences reported by the teachers in their retrospective narratives, from the voices of students recorded in group and plenary classroom discussions and interactions, and the study is undertaken by three researchers involved in the IERST project. While the findings are inevitably partial and subjective, they shed light on the challenges of designing and delivering pre-departure intercultural learning for mobile students, and more importantly, the development students underwent as they engaged.

Future research is needed to explore the impact of the pre-departure intercultural learning experience on Erasmus and other mobile students' early intercultural communication experiences once abroad, and the alignment of these experiences and intercultural learning with the IEREST goals. Further studies should address how mobile students' intercultural learning developed through a pre-departure programme might support, first, the acquisition of intercultural/global competences universities are calling for in their graduates, second, the development of the "cosmopolitan promises" (Cicchelli, 2013), and more generally, mobile students' intercultural learning through intercultural encounters.

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