

Fostering Intercultural Competence in a Pre-Graduate Course at a Public University in Mexico

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Based on the understanding that Intercultural Competence (ICC) is not necessarily achieved by studying abroad, as part of a teacher's level initiative, this paper intends to shed light on the usefulness of the implementation of a series of cultural experiential activities to a group of pre-graduate students, undertaking a B.A. in English Language Teaching at a public university in Mexico, for the development of Intercultural Competence. Data were collected by means of three online focus groups and were analysed thematically into four dimensions: knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness. Findings indicate there had been, to a lesser or greater extent, enhancement in each of these intercultural subcomponents.

Keywords: higher education, intercultural competence, experiential learning, English language teachers, Internationalisation at Home (IaH)

INTRODUCTION

The Internationalisation of Higher Education (HE) can be understood from two frameworks: Internationalisation Abroad (IA), primarily linked to academic mobility (students, researchers, teachers) and Internationalisation at Home (IaH) related to curriculum and instructional configuration (Khare, 2021). In this regard, there is a paucity of research that documents IaH efforts whilst studying abroad experiences are prominently explored in the literature (Baldassar & McKenzie, 2016); based on this understanding, this research aims to redress this gap by focusing on an IaH, at the teacher's level, strategy. Along the need for HE to become more international, it is necessary to increase in students their Intercultural Competence (ICC), mostly defined as "the ability" to "think", "act", "perform" "communicate" and "interact" in a proper and effective way in different intercultural contexts and it is mainly grounded on: cultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Deardorff, 2006; Echcharfy, 2019; Fantini, 2007; López-Rocha, 2021; Mažeikienė & Virgailaitė-Mečkauskaitė, 2007; Sánchez Hernández & Alonso-Marks, 2018; Wickline et al., 2021) with a lesser emphasis on awareness; so that they are individuals not only able to meet the demands of the globalised workforce through effective communication, but they are able to understand and embrace different world perspectives. As a result of globalisation with individuals interconnected with much more ease, hence, experiencing more intercultural encounters; intercultural competence has become of utmost importance. Hismanoglu (2011) states this is a constant imperative for students in foreign language education. Despite the relevance of intercultural education in widening the student's understanding of the world (Echcharfy, 2019), this is not formally taught in HE contexts (Borghetti, 2017). Nonetheless, it has been claimed that an intercultural learning approach (Echcharfy, 2019), through the implementation of courses focused on culture, for example, can contribute to the students' ICC development. This type of

course entails students' active engagement with real or simulated cultural situations. In light of this, the present study set out to ponder the usefulness of a culturally focused course, in which a series of experiential activities were implemented to enhance the intercultural competence of a group of undergraduate students registered in a face-to-face elective course as part of their major as English teachers in Mexico. The rationale was that a series of experiential learning activities may help to develop domestic students' intercultural competence.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE (ICC) IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As the world rapidly evolves, it is necessary to accordingly transform the educational paradigm from a knowledge-based curriculum to a competence-based one (Mažeikienė & Virgailaitė-Mečkauskaitė, 2007). Under this rationale, HE institutions should focus not only on knowledge transmission but on the creation of conditions for the development of intercultural competence (ICC) that would enable the learner not only to face the challenges of the global economy and to communicate effectively in multicultural contexts (Khare, 2021; López-Rocha, 2021; Mažeikienė & Virgailaitė-Mečkauskaitė, 2007; Wickline et al., 2021); but also, to widen the learner's perception of the world for one that is more tolerant and broad-minded (Echcharfy, 2019). Hence, the ultimate goal of promoting intercultural competencies as part of internationalisation efforts should enable the learner to become a "responsible" global citizen in a changing world (Baldassar & McKenzie, 2016; López-Rocha, 2021).

Study abroad might be conceived as the optimal strategy for the development of ICC. However, this high-impact practice has financial and personal implications for students, the reason for which it is not attainable to all (Baldassar & McKenzie, 2016; Khare, 2021; Wickline et al., 2021). Second, research has not been determinative in stating whether studying abroad per se increases ICC or not (Wickline et al., 2021). For example, a study by Behrnd and Porzel (2012) in which they compared the intercultural competence of students with and without experience abroad demonstrated that at first glance, no significant influence of studying abroad could be found. Similarly, mixed methods research by Sánchez-Hernández and Alonso-Marks (2018) focused on the experience of 8 US undergraduate international students in Mexico; concluded there was not an important improvement of cross-cultural sensitivity (understood as a predecessor of ICC) during the participants' study abroad. In this line of arguments, Baldassar and McKenzie (2016) argue that it is an assumption that by "just being there" (on an international student program), participants will "automatically" become interculturally competent. Supporting this, López-Rocha (2021) states study abroad does not necessarily equate with enhancing ICC in international students since learners could be exposed to a different culture and learn about it, but that does not imply they have developed competent intercultural skills and are able to apply them in different cultural settings. Accordingly, Wickline et al. (2021) concluded that studying abroad does not directly have a stronger impact on the development of ICC in comparison to on-campus courses, which are centred on culture. The authors acknowledge study abroad is a viable tool, but not the only way to increase ICC. Thus, mobility programmes might facilitate the learning of intercultural competencies; however, ICC is not the direct result of it (Deardorff, 2006) nor a given for granted process (López-Rocha, 2021).

Arguing that studying abroad is available only to a small sector of the HE students' population, internationalisation at home (IaH), understanding it as international on-campus initiatives, has been recognized as a more "equitable and accessible" resource (Baldassar & McKenzie, 2016, p.92). Despite the potential effectiveness that internationalisation-at-home activities might have for the development of intercultural competence (Soria & Troisi, 2014) and the key role that HE institutions play in it (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017), programs gear towards tackling this need, although increasingly growing (López-Rocha, 2021), are scarcely offered at the pre-graduate level (Baldassar & McKenzie, 2016). Aiming to redress this lack of institutional engagement, it has been claimed that educators with the appropriate teaching methodology can actually enhance their learners' intercultural competencies (Echcharfy, 2019). Consequently, it is asserted that ICC can be achieved not only through experience but also through guided education (Baldassar & McKenzie, 2016; Borghetti, 2017).

In line with the former, intercultural scholars in Deardorff's (2006) study expressed that "knowledge by itself" was not enough to achieve intercultural competence. Backing this up, Echcharfy (2019) asserts culture courses should not be orientated only towards learning about the target culture; instead, students should be exposed to hands-on experience through their engagement with cross-cultural incidents that may prompt their reflection and mediate their actions. Thus, the incorporation of cultural and global content as well as exposing learners to real or simulated intercultural situations, are desired to enhance the students' intercultural competence. In this sense, experiential learning has been suggested as a helpful pedagogical approach to promote ICC without going abroad (Echcharfy, 2019; Wickline et al., 2021).

Experiential learning is understood as a "holistic" and "dynamic" theory of learning that presupposes experience can be transformed into learning and knowledge (Kolb, 2015). As such, experiential learning focuses on doing rather than on the reception of knowledge, and four stages: experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting are necessary to achieve this transformation (Kolb, 2015). Because of the learners' active engagement, this approach to learning is frequently contrasted with traditional teaching techniques such as lecturing and classroom-based activities. Having said this, according to Kolb (2015), experiential learning theory's predecessor, "educating is not something one does to students through the implementation of a set of techniques. Rather, it is something educators do with learners in the context of meaningful relationships and shared experiences" (p.300). Based on this, the implementation of smaller-scale experiential learning activities, which involve not only intercultural knowledge but also the use of authentic resources that allow learners to engage with different viewpoints, and relate these to their own (Cubero, 2022), has resulted in higher intercultural competence among its undertakers (Wickline et al., 2021).

Experiential learning activities then provide an opportunity to experience a tangible intercultural environment where students may enhance their knowledge, awareness, skills, and attitudes without having to be abroad (Echcharfy, 2019; Wickline et al., 2021). Thus, to develop students' intercultural competence, literature (Echcharfy, 2019; Wickline et al., 2021) suggests a wide array of experiential learning activities, namely: cultural simulations, critical incidents, shared cultural experiences, presentations, games, portfolios, role plays, team-building exercises, documentary watching followed by discussions, among others. These tasks aim to expose the participants to different perspectives that might trigger discussions and interactions about dissimilar ideas and opinions and in turn, foster their critical and reflective thinking skills.

Related to the elements necessary to achieve intercultural competence, researchers in the field (Deardorff, 2006; Echcharfy, 2019; López-Rocha, 2021) have identified knowledge, skills, and attitudes as the main components while considering awareness as a peripheral dimension. However, for some other academics (Crozet et al., 2021; Cubero, 2022; Fantini, 2007; Mažeikienė & Virgailaitė-Mečkauskaitė, 2007; Wickline et al., 2021), awareness is also a key component since it provides with an understanding of one's own and other's social and cultural identity and background (Crozet et al., 2021; Wickline et al., 2021).

According to Deardorff (2006), the process of developing ICC can start in any of the three dimensions (knowledge, skills, and attitude); however, attitude is a crucial point of departure. Accordingly, the attitudes highlighted as fundamental to intercultural competence are openness, respect, curiosity, discovery, empathy, and understanding (Deardorff, 2006; Wickline et al., 2021). Based on the understanding that awareness is also a crucial component involved in the development of ICC, this study embraces the four subcomponents (namely, knowledge, attitudes, skills and awareness) for its data collection and analysis. In alignment with this, Fantini (2007) as part of the research project of the Federation of the Experiment in International Living (FEIL), developed a questionnaire to assess multiple items within each sub-component of ICC, and it has been taken as the basis for the data analysis section of this study.

METHODOLOGY

Context

Undergraduate students in a Public University in Mexico undertaking an Intercultural Communication elective course participated in weekly classes on theory and practice in which a series of 8 experiential

activities were implemented over a semester's course (17 classes) during the Spring calendar 2022. The tasks were allocated every other week since some activities required prior preparation. In this regard, I developed and implemented the following experiential activities: a reaction paper, a cultural identity essay, an unknown country presentation, a classic documentary film, a cross-cultural incident, a cultural sensitivity activity, a modern documentary film, and a survival simulation.

The selection of activities contemplated an array of different dynamics to address diverse learning styles and maximize the type of results I could get. So, individual, in pairs, in groups, face-to-face as well as online group and individual, synchronic and asynchronic activities, scientific texts as well as documentaries, were contemplated.

From the outset, students were presented with the class program and explained the course was of a very practical nature and a series of activities will be undertaken throughout the course aiming to enhance their intercultural competence. After the series of experiential activities were implemented and before the data collection stage, to ensure good ethical practice, students were given a participant information sheet and a consent form (Cohen et al., 2011) explaining, among other aspects, that their participation was voluntary and would not impact their grades (Wickline et al., 2021). Should they wish to partake in the research, their participation entailed taking part on a virtual focus group. The 12 students who had taken the course consented to participate.

Participants

Employing a non-probability, purposive sampling strategy (Cohen et al., 2011), 12 undergraduate students in a Public University in Mexico accepted to participate and share their insights about the series of experiential activities implemented in the course. Their ages ranged from 18 to 21 years old except for one student, who was 28 years old. They were eight females, three males and one preferred not to say. They had traditional characteristics such as being young and not working full time. They were all domestic students in different stages of their B.A. progress.

Nonetheless, most of them were halfway through their B.A. since they were in their 4th semester at the time data were collected. Three students were in their 2nd semester and two more in their 6th semester. Most of them claimed their level of English was enough to communicate effectively, and one acknowledged being a native speaker, and two more to have a native-like proficiency level. Most of them had not travelled abroad whilst four had been to the USA. As a precondition of research ethics, pseudonyms were assigned, taking into account the participants' cultural context (Guenther, 2009).

Data Collection

Given that quantifying the development of intercultural competence was not the aim of this research nor to measure students' perceptions (Baldassar & McKenzie, 2016); but rather to reveal the usefulness of a series of experiential activities for the development of intercultural competencies, a qualitative approach that gathered the participants' views, was chosen. Accordingly, to delve further into the participants' perception (Bryman, 2016), three focus groups, in the class original teaching language, English, took place right after the course had finished, via Google Meet. The first two focus groups comprised four students while the third focus group had only three students since despite having consented to participate, a student did not show up. Considerations were taken to have, to the extent possible, gender variety within each focus group (Cohen et al., 2011). Nonetheless, this was not possible in one of the focus groups since the only male participant was absent. As part of the focus groups dynamic, students were asked about the most important thing they had learnt from the course, any observed personal changes, and the application of insights learnt in their daily life (Wickline et al., 2021).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Since I was in search of themes that would allow me to explain what participants were trying to convey in relation to the usefulness of the experiential activities implemented, data from the focus groups were analysed thematically (Bloomberg & Volper, 2018). In this sense, informed by the literature (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2007), a coding framework under the four domains: knowledge, attitude, skills, and

awareness was used to categorize the participants' responses. Allocating a code under a specific category required iteratively reviewing the data with several coding attempts (Boyatzis, 1998).

FINDINGS

Knowledge

Within the knowledge category, through the implementation of a series of experiential activities, there were several statements substantiating that students had learned more about themselves:

(...) at the beginning I thought that I was doing things in a certain way, but then when I started doing the activities, I had to confront myself with other cultures I was like ...no! This is not how I think; maybe I think differently and I did not notice that, so I think it helped me to learn about me (...) I think values are the thing that I learnt the most about me (Miriam)

I could see what things are valuable to me, but also what topics are like a taboo to me...when I saw they were pretty normal in other cultures, but I felt like uncomfortable. I knew those topics were a taboo for me (Violeta)

I was more conscious or aware about personality traits that I have (Rocio).

The second set of comments, related to expanding the participants' perspective about their own country and other countries, were both positive and negative:

On the one hand, it was acknowledged that before taking the course:

I didn't know anything about my culture. For example, I remember initially when you gave us this questionnaire about some aspects about our own culture (...) economics, politics, race, health, and to be honest I left like...50% maybe 60% out of that exercise blank until I did ...some research (...) now I'm confident to say that with the course I started to be more aware about certain things about my own culture and well, to appreciate those little things (Omar).

It was equally asserted; learning was not limited to own culture:

I could learn about other cultures and about my culture, and myself (Laura)

On the other, there was a view claiming:

I cannot think that my own understanding of my culture has changed. Actually, I don't think so. I have the same idea of my country, of my culture (Rocio).

Although not openly enunciated as techniques, being curious and giving a chance to explain possible misunderstandings in interactions featured as strategies assisting the participants' learning of other cultures:

asking other people: is it okay if I do this? Or does it bother you? Or how would you like me to do it? To try to find a middle ground between all the people involved in that interaction (David).

Trying not to judge and trying to understand better other people without saying: “ohh, they did this”. Just giving opportunities to people, so they can explain why they do what they do (Marina).

Attitude

Concerning the attitudes category, there were several examples of how the development of the experiential activities had impacted or not the participants’ mindsets. For instance, looking for more opportunities to interact with members of other cultures “or also with Mexicans” did not seem to be directly attributed to what had been implemented in the class, but rather to own personality, which appeared to have taken the front seat in whether students sought for more opportunities or not:

I’ve always been friendly with people, so if there is a chance to make a new friend, it’s a new opportunity to know from them. In the area that I live is not very common to see (...) foreign people, but when I move to the [city] centre, there is like the opportunity to talk to another one from another country, I take the chance that I am having (Lizbeth).

Contrastingly, it was expressed:

I am not prone to know more people, I meet people when they are my classmates or friends of friends, but as I said, I am not looking for more people from other cultures, but I wouldn’t mind meeting them (David).

Nevertheless, as a result of the course, my eagerness to learn about other cultures was acknowledged:

I am more open to new things because before I was like “hmmm I really don’t like this”, but now I appreciate those new things that I am coming to meet and also, I am more curious about other cultures (Marina).

An “open-minded” attitude, thinking not only “from own perspective” and understanding that “cultures might have their reasons why they do something,” featured as evidence of appreciation of differences in the behaviours and values of people:

Maybe trying to understand that my culture has one behavior, but we are different cultures, so not to judge because of that (Miriam).

This openness to accept differences was recognised to be enhanced through the course. Thus, meeting new people, in general, was asserted as “very serious” and “even more serious” when this entailed meeting people from another culture; accordingly:

I think thanks to this course, it helped myself improve in viewing or having an open mind of getting to know other persons from other cultures and making it a bit easy, experimenting with... getting to know cultures (...) (Patricia).

When there was an apparent lack of opportunities to interact with members of other cultures, this open attitude to accept differences found its applicability in the students’ daily life:

Yeah, mostly with other friends, I try to be less judgemental about what values they were taught (David).

Related to accepting how other cultures function differently, being mindful about own’s behaviour was asserted:

lately I've been coexisting with Korean people and I think that thanks to this class I've been trying to know the things I shouldn't do when I'm with them that are very normal in my culture and in my person, but I try to understand why I shouldn't do it because of their own culture (Violeta).

Even when accepting other culture's practices entailed a conflict with own beliefs, there seemed to be an improvement in respecting the way other cultures' function:

I had a little bit of a problem with one of the (...) presentations (...) about (...) genital mutilation. I had the biggest problem with that because I thought I am totally against that (...) Because it is their culture, I am not part of it, so I don't have a word and after my research still think it is not correct, but with all the knowledge I gained with the course I think I'm improving at respecting even if I think it is the worst thing in the world (Lilia).

There were different angles from the attitude domain approached by the participants, which were routed towards the enhancement of the ICC; however, there was one, which did not appear in their narrative, and that was related to having an interest in traveling.

Skills

Regarding the third component, skills, there were accounts from the participants supporting, in some cases, the development of abilities for intercultural communication. The first occurrence was increased confidence related to the interaction with people from other cultures. Feeling more prepared and less nervous was seen as a result of the course:

I've always wanted to get to know other people from other cultures, but I do think that I would do it successfully now. If I had the opportunity before having this course it would have been much more difficult (Lilia).

I do not think I've improved that much, but now at least I don't feel that nervous, I feel more confident to talk to someone outside of my culture, not be scared that I'd say something wrong (Violeta).

Being able to approach people from a different culture more easily had two sides to it. On the one hand, coming from a student who had expressed to have a friendly attitude, she did consider the course as an aid to approach foreign people with ease:

I travelled to Vallarta on Tuesday and I met a man from the United States and his Spanish was not at a good level. He only understood very few things and I started talking to him in English (...) I think with the course my mind changed and started to be more curious about it cause I was wondering to know from him, what do you do? Where are you from? (Lizbeth)

On the other hand, a student, who had previously claimed a more introverted personality, acknowledged the activities hadn't had "a big impact" on him because he hadn't had "much interaction with people...not even from other Mexican cultures". Nevertheless, he recognised:

at least (...) I could empathise better with people that are not that what I expect people to be...like from the Metropolitan city... maybe from foreign students (David).

In addition to the previous assertion and the element of personality, there seemed to be an inability to approach people from a different culture due to a lack of opportunities to interact with them:

I personally do not have the opportunity to meet with people from other cultures. I think that I am opening that to my eyes, right now, in this precise moment to people within my culture
(Patricia).

There were no statements about using culture-specific information to improve the participants' style and personal interaction. However, there was one about applying the cultural information gained in the participants' prospective professional endeavour:

we have developed something that would help us in the near future as teachers, just to take into consideration more cultural aspects (...) ...maybe a skill to follow up (...) of how we can take into consideration [these elements] when teaching a class (Patricia).

Nonetheless, an active role as a mediator, one who can help to resolve cross-cultural conflicts and misunderstandings when they arise, featured:

(...) I'm more prone to defend people when someone is acting rudely to other people from other cultures, (...) to put it a stop, it's like I could try to understand: why is this person annoyed, but also why is this person trying to attack? Why is this person thinking like that? Why does he/she feel the right to talk to other people? What values were they taught? What can I do to help, maybe? (David)

Demonstrating flexibility when interacting with people from other cultures entailed different levels of involvement, either directly or indirectly:

when we are interacting with a person from another culture or reading about other cultures (...) I can be more aware that there could be, I can face many differences between my culture and theirs, so maybe that leads me to be less judgemental and to be more respectful with their lives (Karina).

And within own personal context:

Maybe in general just respecting other people's way of thinking even with the members of my family, my friends because even though we are part of the same culture. We all have different perspectives and beliefs. (Laura)

One skill, which was not directly identified in Fantini's (2007) questionnaire was the ability to suspend judgment. It emerged on the students' comments:

I used to criticise in some way inside my head and not talking with other people because I knew it was not the right thing or in my head, I used to think...why do they do that? Are they crazy or what? Now, I can stop my thoughts and start thinking and trying to understand what are the reasons for that behaviour (Laura).

Awareness

Statements supporting the last component, awareness, were also revealed. Being aware of own beliefs and limitations was the category with the most reiterative backing-up claims from the participants in each of the three focus groups. Lilia summarised her realisation as follows:

with all the activities mostly the ones, where I was exposed to different cultures, they helped me realise, it wasn't that easy for me to respect, to accept other ideas, their ways of

living. I thought I was more (...) empathetic or more open minded and I realised I am not that much. I am not as much as I'd like myself to be and I'm trying to change that (Lilia).

Similarly, Miriam states:

I wouldn't say that I was a good intercultural communicator, but I realised I wasn't. Cause in my mind, I was making like judgements like even without noticing (Miriam).

Supporting the claim of not being as "open minded" as thought and as a result of one of the experiential activities implemented Violeta recognised:

I wasn't making observations; I was just making like ...oh what do they do that? (...) I realised I have to work on that, but I did change from the start of the semester to the end of it (Violeta).

Aware of his own beliefs and limitations, David claims:

We barely know our life, how can we try to know about other people's life and choices, and opinions when we are every single day learning about ourselves?

There were some indications of the students' awareness about their own level of intercultural development. When referring to a watched documentary, Omar commented he was starting to be more understanding of different perspectives:

That's perhaps an initial stage that I accepted how the culture is without saying any criticism like if they should do it like this; because my opinion would be based on this culture that I'm experiencing, which is Mexican. (Omar)

Likewise, Miriam revealed she was aware of her intercultural progress depicted in internal struggles between what she had learnt and what she believed:

I try to be more aware of my insights (...) about other cultures, but I think still there are some situations in cultures that are really really different from our own culture that I still in my head have some kind of judgement, so maybe I could say that I am aware of, I am trying to be aware of, I am trying not to be so judgy about what other people do (Miriam).

The extent of intercultural growth entailed self-awareness about own roots and culture; this was pointed out as a difficult process:

I realised there are a lot of things (...) that I don't feel connected to, but that doesn't mean I am not part of it. So, it's become harder for me to understand "what's Mexican culture?" (Lilia)

Associated to the dangers of generalising individual behaviours as representative of a whole culture, there was some awareness achieved:

I learnt how to identify (...) myself to be as anyone could be a little different; that we do not fit in all the stereotypes, and we differ from one ideology to another, and the behaviour. (...) So, we can identify what parts of ourselves, as Mexicans, and what parts of ourselves makes us different from other Mexicans (David).

On the contrary, there was an epitome, which showed the concept of generalising had not been fully grasped:

something that I realised is that we as Mexicans generalise. So, I am Mexican, so every Mexican do the same as me or we share the same beliefs, the same culture (...) but we are always like ...with this course I thought that we generalise everything and that is not good because many people do not behave in the same way as all Mexicans (Lizbeth).

DISCUSSION

From the findings, we can see there were supporting claims to different extents of each of the different components, namely: knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness for the enhancement of intercultural competence. Before expanding the participants' knowledge about other cultures and even about own culture, learning about themselves took precedence. Through different examples, the students demonstrated having expanded their intercultural knowledge about themselves. Similarly, it became evident the participants, although perhaps not consciously, had learned techniques to assist their learning of other cultures portrayed by curiosity and enquiring about people's different behavior. This could be seen when the students claimed to ask for an explanation when in a misunderstanding. Thus, it may show participants had started moving beyond the idea of oddness and begun considering the reasons behind different cultural patterns (Schopmeyer & Bradley, 1993).

The attitudes of openness and curiosity have been recognised as foundational elements for the achievement of intercultural competence (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002) since they could lead to easier management of skills (Byram, 2020). In accordance with this, being open-minded and having an open attitude featured as a recurring theme in the students' narratives. Despite this willingness to embrace openness, shock and disturbance emerged when engrained values and beliefs felt threatened (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002). Such seemed to be the case when a student, albeit her intention to be open and tolerant, found it difficult to accept genital mutilation as a common practice in some countries. Accordingly, respect arose as a first step toward acceptance of different worldviews. This acceptance equally entailed situations with members of the same culture and personal context.

Different angles of the attitude dimension were addressed yet no accounts that revealed an interest in traveling were made. This may reinforce the assertion that international exchange is not a possibility for everyone (Baldassar & McKenzie, 2016; Khare, 2021; Wickline et al., 2021). Thus, the importance of launching courses that focus on culture to help students expand their worldview.

Supporting Byram's (2020, p.45) claim that states "the relationship of the attitudes dimension with other dimensions is one of interdependence,"; an interrelation between attitudes and skills when talking about interaction with others was observed. On the one hand, as an attitudinal characteristic, willingness to interact with people from different or even the same culture varied, and it appeared to be reliant on the student's personality. Similarly, in terms of skills, participants who found the experiential activities useful to actually approach and interact with (foreign) people more easily were those who declared an outgoing personality, whereas students with shier characteristics did not feel the activities had impacted their interaction with others. An important remark is that in the students' environment, there did not seem a lot of instances to interact with members of other cultures; nevertheless, they appeared to be applying what they learnt on own context and even through indirect contact with other cultures, for example by reading. Where the participants were able to interact with unfamiliar cultures, an increased sense of confidence in their interaction appeared. Another demonstration of the participants' intercultural communication skills' enhancement was playing the role as a mediator when the conflict between people rose (Byram, 2020).

Awareness seemed to be the component with the strongest impact on the participants' development of ICC. As such, the implemented experiential activities appeared to have expanded the students' awareness of their own culture, values, beliefs, assumptions and limitations (Hismanoglu, 2011). Reflecting on and bringing to the surface own cultural meanings and behaviours is an essential step towards engaging and accepting otherness. In this sense, Schopmeyer & Fisher (1993, p.148) in their exploration of ethnocentrism

and cultural relativity in sociology courses, claimed that to be free from deeply-rooted ideologies, biases, and assumptions, stepping back from own society and assessing it from the lens of an “outsider” was needed. It is only then when “students begin to question their acceptance of their definition of normalcy” (Schopmeyer & Fisher, 1993, p.150), as it happened in this study, that the participants become aware of their limitations and extent of judgement. Through the students’ exemplification, there was evidence that some awareness of stereotypes, prejudices and generalizations had been achieved, yet an account that demonstrated an uncritical judgment of own society and an actual generalisation of it, took place. This may show the realisation of entrenched ideologies is not a given-for-granted process.

CONCLUSION

In the hope of healthy relations across the globe, the development of ICC is a desired practice for all students regardless of their study discipline; notwithstanding, in the case of language teachers, it is particularly important since they are regarded as “cultural managers” (Suryani et al., 2020) who equally need to be “accommodative to learners from different backgrounds” (Zammit, 2021, p.1). In this regard, the integration of cultural content through experiential activities, as an internationalisation at home initiative, offers an alternative to intercultural encounters in contexts, where going on a study abroad program is not always a possibility and contact with unfamiliar cultures is not a given-for-granted process. The latter is to some extent hard to believe in ethnically diverse countries like Mexico; however, based on some of the participants’ narratives, there were not a lot of opportunities for intercultural communication. Nevertheless, students were applying what they learnt in own social context. Thus, although not with people from other countries and in different languages, the participants appeared to have developed the ability to manage their interactions more effectively with people from the same background. This goes in hand with the notion that an intercultural competent person is one who is aware, knows, and accepts cultural aspects of both: own culture and others’ cultures (Zammit, 2021).

Bearing into account the notion that intercultural competence accounts for an appreciation of differences in diverse cultural backgrounds (Hismanoglu, 2011), the participants had begun unearthing their understanding of the other. In this sense, awareness that their perceptions and interpretations of social reality were shaped by their own life experiences as an individual and as members of a group (Schopmeyer & Fisher, 1993), was one of this study’s gains. As such, the participants appeared to be on a stage, where they were dismantling previous beliefs and reconstructing them accordingly (Byram, 2020). Supporting this, the students became aware they were not as open and empathetic as thought yet they were willing to change that; demonstrating an interrelation between the awareness and the attitude domains.

Regarding the consideration of the attitude component as cornerstone for the development of the others (Byram, 2020; Deardorff, 2006), it is out of this study’s focus to determine what takes place first. Nonetheless, an increase on the students’ intercultural domains: awareness and attitudes became evident; particularly on becoming aware of own beliefs and limitations, and the need to be open-minded to embrace diversity. An improvement on the knowledge domain, especially about oneself, was also observed. Finally, concerning the skills component, perhaps this was the most difficult to develop given the participants’ limited multicultural context. However, ICC enhancement was shown in gained confidence and flexibility when interacting with others. Hence, based on the understanding that an attitude of willingness is needed to scrutinise your own worldview and that of others, this study argues attitude indeed takes a pivotal role for the development of the other ICC domains.

Striving for more tolerant and open-minded societies while in pursuit of the internationalisation of Higher Education, the implementation of an experiential sequence of activities focused on culture, embedded in an intercultural communication course, can assist the development of ICC; in situations where studying abroad and first-hand multicultural contact are not always available resources.

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