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Promoting Intercultural Competence in Diverse U.S. Classrooms Through Ethnographic Interviews

Ekaterina Arshavskaya
Utah State University

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Promoting intercultural competence in diverse U.S. classrooms through ethnographic interviews

To meet the demands of contemporary society, students need to develop the ability to interact effectively with people from different cultures. To advance this goal, a project involving ethnographic interviews was introduced to an intercultural communication course. Participating students’ attitudes toward other cultures were measured on a Likert scale at the beginning and end of the project. The findings show that through the interviews, the students developed greater awareness of their own cultures and of themselves within their culture and deepened their knowledge of other cultures. Yet, the majority of the students did not show greater interest in learning a foreign language at the end of the project. Further, even though the students did learn about other cultures, their responses to becoming more open to other cultures were inconclusive. The article discusses possible reasons for these outcomes and outlines future research directions.

Keywords: intercultural competence; international students; U.S. university classrooms; ethnography; undergraduate education

Introduction

With 1.13 million international students participating in higher education in the US (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2015), both U.S. faculty and students face the challenge of developing intercultural competence, including in relation to understanding the cultural realities of international students and faculty members and their families. Given this context,
intercultural competence has constituted a recent focus in both the K-12 and higher education literature. One way to promote intercultural competence is through intercultural experiential learning. In terms of promoting intercultural competence on the part of faculty, research focuses on preparing pre-service teachers for diverse classrooms through intercultural teaching practicums (e.g., Black & Bernades, 2014; Smolicic, 2009). In order to foster intercultural competence on the part of students, ideas related to students’ engagement in ethnographic interviews (i.e., interviews of members of a different culture to discuss their lifestyles, values, etc.) have become popular in both foreign and second language university classrooms (e.g., Bateman, 2002; O’Dowd, 2006; Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996). Generally, these studies report that ethnographic interviews help students develop greater intercultural competence.

The purpose of the present study is to promote and investigate the development of intercultural competence in both second language and native English-speaking students through engagement in ethnographic interviews. This research makes a unique contribution to the field, as unlike existing research focused on the attitudes of U.S. college students towards other cultures and languages, it sheds light on the perspectives of international second language students residing in the U.S., as these unfold in their reports and focus-group discussions. The implications of these perspectives for educators working with this group of students are also discussed. In addition, a control group and an experimental group are used to evaluate the impact of ethnographic interviews on students’ intercultural competence.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section summarizes the literature followed by a section dedicated to the design of the study. Then, the results are presented and discussed. The final section offers a conclusion and reflects on the study’s limitations and future research directions.
Literature review

This paper is based on prominent language educators’ (e.g., Kramsch, 1997; Schulz, 2007) call to introduce a cultural component to language classes. Although many students recognize the importance of speaking a foreign language in the contemporary globally integrated landscape, they may not always be successful in intercultural encounters due to a lack of intercultural competence (Christie, 2007; Schenker, 2002). In this paper, intercultural competence is understood as the ability to interact successfully with members of other cultures in a foreign language (Byram, 1997). This study also uses Byram’s (1997) model of intercultural competence, which involves openness to and curiosity about other cultures and an interest in studying foreign languages. Additionally, international students in the U.S. often find themselves isolated from the local community, which limits their opportunities to practice English (Smith, 1993). Therefore, ethnographic interviews conducted in English are a partial way of addressing these shortcomings in the student experience, as they enable international students to practice English and develop social relations with English-speaking peers and enable the latter to develop intercultural competence.

In the context of foreign-language education, a number of research studies focus on introducing a unit on intercultural competence into the language education curriculum with the goal of promoting openness toward other cultures and increasing students’ interest in studying languages in general. To achieve these goals, Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996) introduced ethnographic interviews to U.S. college students in an elementary-level Spanish course. The students interviewed a Spanish-speaking person by applying ethnographic interview skills demonstrated in class. As a result, the students reported greater understanding of their own culture and the culture of the Spanish-speaking interviewees. In a replication study, U.S. college students taking their second year of Spanish as a foreign language were required to interview a native
speaker of Spanish (Bateman, 2002). The results show that the students developed a more positive attitude towards the language and its speakers; yet, their desire to learn Spanish remained largely unchanged.

Another way to introduce a cultural component to language instruction is to assign cultural research projects. Li and Liu (2017) showed that through research projects, U.S. learners of Chinese became more motivated to study Chinese, more positive toward other cultures, and more aware of differences and similarities between U.S. and Chinese cultures. Another strand of research investigates the impact of study abroad programs on students’ intercultural competence. According to these studies, institutions need to provide training to students before study abroad programs and offer ongoing support while they are abroad in order to maximize their opportunities for learning about other cultures (Scally, 2015; Schartner, 2016; Townsin, 2015). Such training can promote students’ interest in intercultural encounters, raise their awareness of linguistic and cultural differences, and support their engagement in academic endeavors while abroad (Townsin, 2015). Other research studies explore the use of folk literature and films to enhance students’ intercultural competence (Devis Arbona & Chireac, 2015; Xue & Pan, 2012). These studies report that foreign-language literature and films promote curiosity about other cultures, expose students to authentic language, and serve as a springboard for in-class discussions about variations in cultural values.

In the English as a foreign language (EFL) context, an emerging body of research focuses on students’ intercultural competence. For example, Lázár (2015) introduced an intercultural collaboration project involving EFL students in four European countries. While some students experienced instances of miscommunication, most students reported developing greater intercultural competence towards the end of the project. Also, O’Dowd (2006) involved EFL
learners in Germany in an intercultural online collaboration project with their American counterparts. O’Dowd (2006) used both synchronous (video conferencing) and asynchronous (email) tools and found that both tools facilitated students’ ability to conduct ethnographic interviews. Likewise, Thomé-Williams (2016) engaged U.S. students of Portuguese in online interactions with native speakers of Portuguese in Brazil via Skype and Facebook. Some of the U.S. students did not approve of using Facebook for instructional purposes. However, most reported enjoying the project and showed greater linguistic and intercultural competence through it.

Another strand of research grapples with ideas related to assessing the extent of the intercultural competence achieved by students. For instance, Jacobson, Sleicher, and Maureen (1999) showed how using portfolios facilitated English as a second language (ESL) students’ reflections on their cross-cultural encounters while in the U.S. This study also outlines criteria to evaluate the extent of intercultural competence through this assignment. Elola and Oskoz (2008) applied Byram’s (2000) assessment guidelines to evaluating the intercultural competence of both study abroad and at home foreign language students as demonstrated in their blogs. Finally, Lee (2011) found that although students were mostly successful in generating their own content related to cross-cultural issues in study abroad blogs, they often failed to think critically about readings on cross-cultural topics posted by the course instructor.

The existing research discussing students’ intercultural competence is abundant and multifaceted. However, the purpose of the present study is to contribute to the literature by shedding light on the perspectives of international undergraduate students residing in the US. Further, unlike existing research, a control group and an experimental group are used to assess the impact of ethnographic interviews on students’ intercultural competence.
Study design

Participants and settings

The study involved two groups of first-year undergraduate college students: an experimental group comprising 26 international and 16 U.S. students, and a control group comprising 24 international and 15 U.S. students. The data were collected over three semesters. International students in both the experimental and control groups were placed in advanced-level ESL courses in an intensive English program, which was the context of the study. Before the semester, all the international students took a placement exam. At the time of the data collection, all the students (U.S. and international) were enrolled in an intercultural communication course at a U.S. public university. International students were required to take the intercultural communication course based on their placement exam results. The intercultural communication course combines language and content instruction for international advanced-level language learners, while U.S. students were enrolled in this course as an elective. At the start of the semester, all the students also completed a background questionnaire (Appendix A). The U.S. students were predominantly from the same U.S. southwestern state and lived here most of their lives. Two-thirds of this population consisted of male students in their twenties. Over 90% of these students did not travel outside the U.S. In addition, two-thirds of U.S. students had none or very limited knowledge of a foreign language, predominantly Spanish. Students in the control and experimental groups were taught by the same instructor with identical materials.

The international students in the experimental group hailed from a number of countries, including Taiwan, Japan, Qatar, South Korea, Somali, Algeria, China, and Iraq. In the control group, the international students were from China, Thailand, Mexico, Taiwan, Japan, South
Korea, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The majority of international students in both groups were from China.

The students in the experimental group were introduced to ideas related to ethnographic interviews and were asked to interview a classmate or another person from a different culture using the ethnographic interview skills discussed in class (Appendix B) and focusing on a topic of interest (e.g., lifestyle, values, beliefs, etc., in a different country). Generally, the students were encouraged to individually interview one of their classmates from a different culture. Before the project, the students were asked their preference in regard to the country of origin of the interviewee. If their preference was not available (e.g., there was only one Japanese speaker in the class), the students sought interviewees outside the class. The students were asked to meet with the interviewee at least two or more times. Towards the end of the project, the students presented their findings in oral presentations and written reports. The written reports were collected and analyzed using conventional qualitative methods. The students in the control group were not assigned ethnographic interviews.

The assignment involving ethnographic interviews (Appendix C) developed for the experimental group was grounded in Robinson’s (1988) theory of intercultural learning, which privileges one-on-one interactions between members of different cultures. Also, the theory posits that during cross-cultural encounters, focusing on similarities first reduces or even eliminates the potential for distancing, which may occur due to cultural differences. Accordingly, the students were required to focus on both cross-cultural similarities and differences. Further, students were asked to state the similarities that emerged between themselves and the person interviewed.

The ethnographic interview project required students to (1) report what they learned about a different culture using at least three course concepts (e.g., culture, identity, and
language), (2) discuss cross-cultural similarities and/or differences of which they became aware, and (3) narrate any personal insights gained, i.e., what they learned about themselves.

In order to evaluate the impact of the ethnographic interviews on the students’ intercultural competence, their attitudes towards studying other languages and cultures were measured via Likert-scale items (Appendix D) at the beginning and towards the end of the project. The Likert-scale items were designed to evaluate the extent of intercultural competence students developed through doing the project. For example, they were asked about how likely they thought knowledge of a foreign language would allow them to make new friends or whether a foreign language requirement was a good educational policy. International students were required to consider Likert-scale items regarding English, while U.S. students were asked to rate the same statements, but with regard to a foreign language they may know. Likert-scales items were adapted from Bateman (2002) and Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996). The range of the Likert-scale items was 1 from 5. The minimum point on the scale amounted to 1 (i.e., strongly disagree), while the maximum point equaled 5 (i.e., strongly agree).

Through focus groups, several students in the experimental group were also surveyed at the end of the project regarding their views of ethnographic interviews overall (Appendix E). Focus group questionnaire was adapted from Bateman (2002) and O’Dowd (2006).

**Research question**

The central research question explored was ‘How does conducting an ethnographic interview with a member of a different culture impact participants’ intercultural competence?’

**Data analysis**

The data analysis was performed in two steps: a qualitative analysis of the students’ written reports
and focus group data and an analysis using conventional statistical methods of quantitative data.

The mixed-method approach was based on Bateman (2002) and Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996). The objective of the qualitative analysis of students’ reports and focus group data was to investigate how the ethnographic interview project impacted development of intercultural competence of students in the experimental group, while the goal of the quantitative data analysis was to determine whether the introduction of the ethnographic interview project made a significant difference in students’ attitudes towards a culture and a language other than their own.

First, qualitative data from the students’ written reports were analysed using conventional qualitative methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher (also, the author of this article and the instructor) read the reports multiple times to identify the most salient themes prevalent in the dataset. The initial themes were revised using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967): i.e., texts representing the same theme were re-read and reconsidered in terms of the main theme description. In accordance with the grounded theory method (Charmaz, 1990), the analysis was informed by previous research discussing international students’ experiences (e.g., Jacobson, Sleicher, & Maureen, 1999). However, as in most investigations, the method chosen has limitations (Bryant & Charmaz, 2006). In particular, the researcher was the sole coder of the qualitative data. Yet, as a former international student in the U.S., she had experiences similar to those of the international students in the study and therefore, could offer an insider’s perspective and empathy toward the participating international students.

Triangulation (Nunan, 1992) was achieved through the students’ evaluations of the impact of ethnographic interviews on their intercultural competence in focus group settings. The students in the experimental group were asked via email to participate in focus group discussions. Several students replied. A moderator facilitated the focus groups, which were
conducted in a university classroom. The focus group session lasted approximately 1 hour. The researcher attended the session, but did not participate. At the end of the session, which was audio-recorded for transcription purposes, the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire (Appendix E).

Second, based on the quantitative data, statistical tools (i.e., chi-squared tests) were used to compare the attitudes of the students in the control group towards studying foreign languages and other cultures with those of the students in the experimental group (Jamieson, 2004). Following guidelines outlined in educational research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000), a non-parametric test (i.e., a chi-squared test) was used to evaluate the significance of the findings. For this purpose, frequencies, standard deviation ($SD$), and means ($M$) were calculated for Likert-scale items prior to and after the project in the experimental group and at the start and end of the semester in the control group.

**Results**

**Qualitative findings**

In accord with conventional qualitative methods, several salient themes were identified in the students’ reports. Most of the participants focused on (1) learning more about themselves and their own culture, (2) committing to explore other cultures, (3) discussing cultural similarities rather than differences, and (4) acknowledging the limiting nature of stereotyping. A series of excerpts, which illustrate the students’ responses, is given next.

*Learning more about themselves and their own culture*

In terms of self-reflection, some international students reflected on the need to become more active class participants. This realization is particularly important for international students who
plan to continue studying at a U.S. university. The bold text in each dataset demonstrates its most important aspects for the analysis:

Excerpt 1.

What I learned about myself is that I shouldn’t be shy and silent in class, but be more active to share my opinion in class and should participate in many kinds of activities to exercise my practical ability…. U.S. students start this early, even in kindergarten…. And what I learned about cross-cultural differences and similarities is that we should respect other cultures and any culture has its advantages and disadvantages, so we should adopt our good points and avoid our shortcomings. (An international student’s written report)

Another international student stressed the need to interact more with U.S. faculty, which differs from the educational experience in some students’ home cultures:

Excerpt 2.

All in all, I think I should adjust my learning attitude to the American way. Because by interacting with teachers, you can know how much your understanding on the subject is, and then you may improve it. (An international student’s written report)

Similarly, U.S. students commented that they had gained more understanding of their own as well as other educational cultures. This insight led to a better understanding of their own educational preferences, a finding that will be helpful in future academic endeavors:

Excerpt 3.
After evaluating the differences between the U.S. educational system and the Chinese educational system, I was able to see advantages and disadvantages to both systems. I was able to learn more about myself in the sense of what education styles work best for me. I believe that having a more relaxed learning atmosphere provides me with a more positive attitude towards school, which in turn helps my overall college success. Having some freedom to choose my classes also helps me better understand myself and my strengths and weaknesses. I’ve gained a greater appreciation for the education I have already received and have yet to receive. (A U.S. student’s written report)

Another U.S. student focused on some personal insights gained through the project that would have a positive impact on his future more generally:

Excerpt 4.

I honestly am grateful for this opportunity to talk with and learn about someone from a different country and completely different culture and am sure that I will be able to apply many of my findings into my life to become a successful person. (A U.S. student’s written report)

Likewise, international students reported learning about a different approach to life through the project:

Excerpt 5.

After communicating with American students this time, their words gave me a lot of courage and considerations. Many things cannot be planned in life … so the important thing is to not worry too much about future and just live in the moment and do your best now. (An international student’s written report)
Committing to explore other cultures

After the project, many U.S. and international students expressed a desire to explore other cultures:

Excerpt 6.

*I hope I can have more chances to learn more about the different cultures from different countries.* I have to say this interview is like a wonderful trip! (An international student’s written report)

Another student not only reported increased interest in other cultures, but also explicated reasons for this interest:

Excerpt 7.

*According to this interview, I think I should go out for travel and read more books…. Because it allows me to understand the differences between cultures more directly and can reduce the stereotypes and culture shock about different culture. It can broaden my horizons.* When I talk with people who have the different life environment, if I know a lot of things, the communication between us will be more smooth. That can also help us to be friends. *In the other word, I am willing to make friends with brilliant and wise people.* (An international student’s written report)

Similarly, U.S. students reported becoming more interested in other cultures:

Excerpt 8.

*I am so grateful that I had this opportunity to interview and learn about life in China. I love the Chinese culture and hope to visit someday…. I believe that this assignment alone has changed my life considerably; my desire to travel, learn, and experience other cultures has grown and I have realized I want this to be a part of me for the*
Furthermore, some students thought the project meant they were better prepared to travel abroad:

Excerpt 9.

In this interview, I get some new things about Muslim in Somalia. They shock me. If I have no this interview and I go to Muslim region for travel, I think some habits will shock me at that time…. After this interview, I know these habits before I go there, thus it will decrease my culture shock in the future. (An international student’s written report)

Other students mentioned making a friend from a different culture through the project:

Excerpt 10.

It is well worth all the effort in the end to have such a new and diverse friend. (A U.S. student’s written report)

Some students even compared the assignment to travelling abroad:

Excerpt 11.

I learned a lot from this assignment, I really feel that I am one of them and I feel like I lived there, actually this is the first time I learn that much about a country. (An international student’s written report)

Some other students expressed appreciation for the personal aspect of the assignment:

Excerpt 12.

If I did not do this interview, I would never know about the inside ideas of Americans. I received tons of information about the education in America from social media…. Although there were some truly good analyses among them, there is nothing can compare to a personal experience. Only by this way you can deeply know the core of the culture,
or you would just see the surface of the culture. (An international student’s written report)

Discussing cultural similarities rather than differences

Many students focused on cultural similarities rather than differences:

Excerpt 13.

She and I do look different and act different but **when I looked deeper I found out that she and I are really not so different.** She and I are expected to have kids and get married but we also want jobs and to see the world. We do fit into our gender roles but we also aren’t bitter about it like some people I know. We both want our culture to grow and change for the better. (A U.S. student’s written report)

Another U.S. student highlighted similarities between himself and the person he had interviewed, but in more general terms:

Excerpt 14.

**I find that we are one in the same** if you dig deep enough through that onion model. The outside edges might seem completely different such as the iceberg model suggests that what we see on the surface can’t be taken at face value…. Yes, we will have our differences. But let us always remember that what unites us far outweighs whatever divides us. (A U.S. student’s written report)

An international student noted that due to some similarities in values, she found it easy to relate to the interviewee:

Excerpt 15.

This has been a great opportunity for me to discuss with an individual their culture, what they value, and how they perceive the world around them. It has given me an opportunity to think about what I value. Not only that, but how the cultures that surround me have
influenced me. I’ve also learned that even though Tibetan and United States cultures are different in that the U.S. is more individualistic and a low power distance, but that we are similar in being more direct…. My partner and I found that what we value is very similar, not only because of our cultures, but because of religious beliefs. It has been interesting to find those similarities and be able to relate on those levels. (An international student’s written report)

Limiting nature of stereotyping

One of the other salient themes in both the U.S. and the international students’ data concerned their becoming aware of the limitations of stereotypes and the need to refrain from relying on stereotypes:

Excerpt 16.

I was able to learn so much about [the student’s name] and her culture. It was really interesting to be able to hear how China is very different from the way it is portrayed in media, and pretty awesome to realize that even though they are on the other side of the world, they are very similar to us here, in the U.S. (A U.S. student’s written report)

Another U.S. student also focused on the stereotypes of the Chinese culture, particularly those relating to parenting styles:

Excerpt 17.

The differences and similarities of these cross-cultural meetings were that I noticed that like us American students and as a people we are all different. This is very true of the Chinese as well as shown that unlike what stereotyping might suggest, [the student’s name] parents weren’t and aren’t overbearing/control freaks. This leads to that
even though cultures might be very far apart, but in the things that matter I find
that we are one in the same. (A U.S. student’s written report)

Similarly, international students argued against stereotyping people or cultures and for
the need to ‘step back and look at the person for who they are, not who we think they are.’

Excerpt 18.

I come from the north part of China. I know that there are many differences in our life,
food is the only one part of that. With the development of the whole society, we
definitely have to communicate with others who come from a different city, a different
country with a different culture. At that time, we could not use our stereotypes to
think of our friends because they come from the different culture….What we need to
do is to respect their culture. At the same time, we need to find some similarity between
us. (An international student’s written report)

Another international student focused on the limiting nature of stereotyping as a major
personal discovery:

Excerpt 19.

I think that my main discovery was that I cannot stereotype any culture. Everyone is
different and individual. However, many may be similar in one culture because they are
in that culture and surrounded by similar things. For instance, in China there is a strong
high power distance, so they learn to respect teachers, leaders, and bosses much more and
value silence. (An international student’s written report)

In addition, various themes emerged from the focus group relating to the impact of
ethnographic interviews on students’ intercultural competence (e.g., ‘fixing’ some stereotypes).
The focus group also discussed the advantages of conducting actual interviews over searching for information online. Lastly, the focus group tended to like ethnographic interviews, as these enabled international students to practice English, whereas the U.S. students were exposed to other cultures. Both U.S. and international students noted that during the interviews, they were not always sure how ‘far they could go’ without offending the interviewees.

Quantitative findings

The findings presented in this section failed to reach statistical significance, which is probably due to the limited population sample (also see Limitations below). Yet, it is worthwhile to note some apparent upward and downward trends and discuss their possible interpretations.

Many students (both U.S. and international) in the experimental group had a positive response to the ethnographic interviews and recommended their use with prospective students: 95% of the U.S. students and 75% of the international students recommended their use with future students.

Most of the U.S. students and most of the international students in the experimental group responded positively toward ethnographic interviews. Yet, overall, ethnographic interviews do not appear to have had a positive impact on the international students’ attitudes toward learning a new language or a new culture (Table 1). Fewer (than prior to the project) international students agreed that English can help them make more English-speaking friends, that they enjoy living in an English-speaking country, or that English helps them understand people from other cultures. The students’ attitudes remained the same (as before the project) in relation to the following statements: that English is a useful educational policy. Compared with at the beginning of the
project, at the end of the project, more international students agreed that English could help them find a better job and broaden their perspectives and ideas.

[Table 1 near here]

In contrast, the U.S. students in the experimental group developed slightly more positive responses towards other languages and cultures than they had at the beginning of the project (Table 2). Specifically, after the project, more U.S. students than international students thought a foreign language could help them make more international friends, find a better job, and understand people from other cultures. In a similar vein, more U.S. students than international students thought a foreign language requirement would be a useful educational policy. Fewer U.S. students agreed that they would enjoy living in a foreign country and that a foreign language would help them broaden their perspectives and ideas.

[Table 2 near here]

In the control group (Table 3), the international students’ attitudes towards English and a new culture were inconclusive. After the project, more of the international students agreed that English could help them make more English-speaking friends than thought the opposite, whereas fewer international students agreed that English could help them broaden their perspectives and ideas, that English can help them understand people from other cultures, or that they enjoyed living in an English-speaking country. The statements relating to English being useful for finding a job or is a useful educational policy were rated the same (as at the start of the project).

[Table 3 near here]

Similarly, for the U.S. students in the control group (Table 4), attitudes towards a foreign language or culture varied. More students thought that they would enjoy living in a foreign
country, that a foreign language could help them understand people from other cultures, and that a foreign language requirement is a useful policy than thought the opposite, and fewer students thought a foreign language could help them broaden their perspectives and ideas than thought the opposite. The statements relating to a foreign language being useful in finding a job or making more friends were rated the same.

None of the quantitative findings proved to be statistically significant (p > 0.05), which may have been due to the limited sample size (Tables 5 and 6).

Discussion

This study has multiple implications, particularly in the context of intercultural competence and foreign and second language education. First, the results confirm an earlier research finding (e.g., Bateman, 2002; Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996) according to which ethnographic interviews can be effective in mediating learners’ development of intercultural competence. In this study, both international and U.S. students externalized some new understandings of a number of aspects of intercultural communication (e.g., the limitations of stereotyping). Also, they reported greater understanding of some aspects of their own cultures (e.g., educational systems) as well as of themselves in relation to their own culture. Further, U.S. and international students alike expressed a desire to travel and explore other cultures and countries.
Previous research (e.g., Bateman, 2002; Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996) suggests that students can develop greater openness to and greater interest in foreign cultures through ethnographic interviews. However, although many students expressed a desire to travel and explore other cultures, this study’s quantitative results only partially support this claim. Some of the students’ attitudes towards other cultures and languages remained unchanged, whereas others became either more positive or more negative. There may be several reasons for this. First, the ethnographic interview was only one of the factors contributing to students’ development of intercultural competence. Other factors (e.g., students’ experiences in the local community and at the university) could also account for these findings. Second, the fairly limited sample of the student population in both the control and the experimental groups is not sufficient for the findings to be generalized or for far-reaching conclusions to be drawn. The field could benefit from examining the impact of ethnographic interviews on students’ development of intercultural competence using larger samples as a basis for generalizing the findings.

Next, the study findings show that the U.S. students, similar to previous research (e.g., Bateman, 2002), developed slightly more positive attitudes towards other cultures at the end of the project. This could be because most U.S. students (in this study) had no or very limited experience living abroad or studying a foreign language, whereas the international students were living abroad and studying in an intensive English program. This limited experience of living abroad or studying a foreign language on the U.S. students’ part meant that they had limited awareness of the challenges faced by people living abroad and/or learning a different language. Previous research (Kinginger, 2004) likewise reports on ways in which students became disillusioned in study-abroad contexts.
By comparing the attitudes towards other cultures and languages of two distinct groups of
students (i.e., international and U.S. undergraduate college students), this study adds a new
perspective to our understanding of intercultural competence and the ways it can be promoted in
educational settings.

Finally, given the mostly positive responses expressed by the students toward
ethnographic interviews in an intercultural communication course, it would be worthwhile to use
this tool more extensively. Intercultural competence is a necessary component of language
instruction (Kramsch, 1997), and the ethnographic interview is an effective way to address this
need. Further, the study findings showed that the U.S. students found the assignment more
beneficial and enjoyable than the international students did. Accordingly, researchers could
consider the difficulties experienced by international students in completing the assignment and
suggest modifications to facilitate their development of intercultural competence.

Limitations

Yet, as most investigations, the paper has limitations. First, as mentioned earlier, the student
population size was relatively limited and the data was collected over several semesters, at the
same university. An investigation encompassing larger samples of both populations (i.e., the U.S.
and international students) would shed further light on the cross-cultural experiences of both
groups of students. Second, some variables (e.g., U.S. students’ cultural heritage) were not
investigated or considered at great extent, which could have impacted the study findings. While
the background questionnaire (Appendix A) allowed to delineate certain similarities in the U.S.
and international student body (e.g., travel-abroad experience or lack of thereof), more in-depth
research could provide additional insights. Lastly, students in the control group were asked to
state their preference in regard to whom to interview, which may have influenced the attitude values after doing the interviews.

Conclusion

The study findings show that the use of ethnographic interviews (1) increased students’ awareness of their own culture and of themselves in relation to it and (2) enhanced students’ knowledge of other cultures. However, unlike previous research, ethnographic interviews did not seem to have a significant positive impact on the students’ interest in other cultures. In fact, there was no positive impact in this regard on the majority of international students, while U.S. students were able to develop slightly more positive attitudes toward other cultures and languages. The article discussed reasons for the outcomes and provides recommendations for further research in this direction.
References


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## Tables

### Table 1. Attitude Questions: International Students in the Experimental Group

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<tr>
<th>Survey statement</th>
<th>$M$ (before the project)</th>
<th>$M$ (after the project)</th>
<th>$SD$ (before the project)</th>
<th>$SD$ (after the project)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning English will help me make more English-speaking friends.</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. English will help me find a better job.</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I enjoy living in an English-speaking country.</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. English helps me broaden my perspective and ideas.</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. English helps me understand people from other cultures.</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. An English requirement is a useful policy.</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Attitude Questions: U.S. Students in the Experimental Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey statement</th>
<th>M (before the project)</th>
<th>M (after the project)</th>
<th>SD (before the project)</th>
<th>SD (after the project)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning a foreign language will help me make more international friends.</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A foreign language will help me find a better job.</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I would enjoy living in a different country.</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. A foreign language helps me broaden my perspective and ideas.</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. A foreign language helps me understand people from other cultures.</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. A foreign language requirement is a useful policy.</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey statement</td>
<td>( M ) (start of semester)</td>
<td>( M ) (end of semester)</td>
<td>( SD ) (start of semester)</td>
<td>( SD ) (end of semester)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning English will help me make more English-speaking friends.</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. English will help me find a better job.</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I enjoy living in an English-speaking country.</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. English helps me broaden my perspective and ideas.</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. English helps me understand people from other cultures.</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. An English requirement is a useful policy.</td>
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<td>4.0</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey statement</td>
<td>$M$ (start of semester)</td>
<td>$M$ (end of semester)</td>
<td>$SD$ (start of semester)</td>
<td>$SD$ (end of semester)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning a foreign language will help me make more international friends.</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A foreign language will help me find a better job.</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.62</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. I would enjoy living in a foreign country.</td>
<td>3.3</td>
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<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. A foreign language helps me broaden my perspective and ideas.</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
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<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. A foreign language helps me understand people from other cultures.</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. A foreign language requirement is a useful policy.</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5. Statistical Analysis: International Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey statement</th>
<th>$X^2$</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning English will help me make more international friends.</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. English will help me find a better job.</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I enjoy living in an English-speaking country.</td>
<td>9.06</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. English helps me broaden my perspectives and ideas.</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. English helps me understand people from other cultures.</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. An English requirement is a useful policy.</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6. Statistical Analysis: U.S. Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey statement</th>
<th>$X^2$</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning a foreign language will help me make more international friends.</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A foreign language will help me find a better job.</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I would enjoy living in a foreign country.</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. A foreign language helps me broaden my perspectives and ideas.</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. A foreign language helps me understand people from other cultures.</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. A foreign language requirement is a useful policy.</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix A

Background questionnaire

1. Full Name

2. Gender

3. Native Language

4. Country of origin
   U.S. students only: If you were born outside the U.S., at what age did you arrive in the U.S.?

5. U.S. students only: In which U.S. state have you lived the longest, up to now?

6. U.S. students only: Can you speak other languages than English? If yes, specify the language and your proficiency.

7. U.S. students only: Have you travelled outside the U.S.? If yes, where and for how long?
Appendix B

Ethnographic interview skills

- Ethnography is direct observation and reporting of customary behavior of a culture (Jandt, 2013)

- How we collect data about a culture: with a limited number of key informants (10–12), artifacts, open-ended interviews, observations, including participants’ observations, films/videos/photos

- What skills are necessary to conduct an ethnographic interview and why: commitment of time, depth of discussion and observations, creative/active listening, and self-awareness (Robinson, 1988)

- Who famous ethnographers are: Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), anthropologist, studies of Pacific Islanders; personal diaries’ controversy

- What ethnographic studies have become well-known and why: Street Corner Society by W.F. Whyte, Asylums by E. Goffman, and others
Appendix C

Ethnographic interviews

In your final report, please include:

- Interviewee background information (e.g., origin, gender, age, major, etc.)
- Statement of purpose (i.e., explain the goal of the interview, personal interest)
- Data collection methods (e.g., how many times you met, where, how you recorded your data)
- Questionnaire (i.e., the questions you asked the interviewee)
- Summary of findings (i.e., what you learned from the interview)
- Interpretation of data (i.e., use at least 3 concepts, e.g., cultural values, from the course to explain what you found)
- Reflection (i.e., tell me what you learned about yourself, about cross-cultural differences and similarities, from the project overall)

Grading rubric:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>Excellent (4)</th>
<th>Good (3)</th>
<th>Fair (2)</th>
<th>Poor (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language/style</td>
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<td>Format</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final score</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>/16</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D

Likert-scale items

*Match the statements (a–f) below with the number (1–5) that best reflects your feelings about a particular statement.*

1 *Strongly disagree* … 2 *Disagree* … 3 *Neutral* … 4 *Agree* … 5 *Strongly agree*

a) Learning English will help me make more English-speaking friends.

b) Learning English will help me find a better job.

c) I enjoy living in an English-speaking country.

d) Learning English will help me broaden my perspective and learn new ideas.

e) Learning English will help me understand people from other cultures.

f) An English language requirement is a useful educational policy.
Focus group questionnaire

In your group discussion, please provide some general comments on your overall experience with the project:

- Generally speaking, what would you say you have learned from this intercultural experience (i.e., ethnographic interviews)?
- How did you find the task of interviewing a person from a different culture?
- Did you find the ethnographic interview skills we learned in the course useful in the assignment you carried out? How about the theoretical concepts covered in the course? Why (not)?
- Continue the statement: I and the person I interviewed are similar in ...
- Would you recommend ethnographic interviews for prospective students? Why (not)?