

# Intercultural Learning Factors of French Students Abroad: A Focus on Interpersonal Engagement in Context

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**Abstract.** We seek to understand how business students develop the behavioural component of their intercultural competence in link with their host context during their academic sojourn abroad. We apply a mixed method that uses the results of the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) test (Mendenhall, Stevens, Bird, Oddou & Osland (2012)) on 111 French business school students, tested before and after a year abroad on an international assignment. We then carry out a qualitative analysis of the 32 self-reflective reports of the students who improved or regressed significantly, and also analysed teachers' field notes during test debriefing sessions. By differentiating learning and contextual factors drawing on Eraut's (2004) informal learning framework, we clarify the way specific learning factors based on students home educational background enhance self-confidence and commitment, which supports the development of the behavioural dimension of their intercultural competence based on the contextual factors of the study abroad host country.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, behavioural skills, study abroad, French students, language.

## 1. Introduction

The ability to operate effectively across various cultural contexts is now crucial for managers (Ferst & Zimmerman 2020; Mello 2022) and there is strong competition between multinational companies (MNCs) to attract interculturally competent profiles. To meet this increasing demand, business education offers cross-cultural management courses as an integral part of curricula (Szkudlarek, McNett, Romani, & Lane 2013) and the development of study abroad programs (Jackson 2015).

International higher education has experienced a significant increase in the number of international students on a world-wide basis over the past two decades, growing from 2 million in 2000 to over 5.6 million in 2018 (OECD 2020). Although there is evidence that the number of international students declined in 2020/2021 due to COVID and that uncertainties raised by the pandemic still

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restrain student international mobility, recent research suggests that students remain eager to study abroad (Mason 2021).

Study-abroad students are expected to return home with enhanced intercultural competence, yet research reveals that many do not fully benefit from their stay in the host environment (Jackson 2015; Varela & Gatlin-Watts 2014, Mu, Berka, Erickson & Pérez-Ibanez 2022). To investigate this phenomenon, we use Bennett's (2008, p 97) definition of intercultural competence as "A set of cognitive, affective and behavioural skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts". Previous studies highlight that the cognitive dimension of intercultural competence generally develops more easily than the behavioural and affective dimensions, especially during short-term study programs abroad (Goldstein 2022). A recurring issue is the lack of integration of international students with domestic students (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet & Kommers 2012). It is crucial to develop the intercultural competence of international students, especially in terms of the behavioural dimension necessary for social integration and relationships with host country nationals: we know that international students who develop networks with domestic students improve their adjustment and their academic performance (Mak, Bodycoot & Ramburuth 2015). In this perspective, we require a more nuanced understanding of how international students develop their intercultural competence during their stay abroad (Mu *et al.* 2022). Our aim in this paper is to understand how French students studying abroad develop the behavioural dimension of their intercultural competence in terms of social integration. We seek to identify the various situations that trigger the development of this behavioural dimension of intercultural competence in link with their host context. To do so, we use a mixed method approach. While quantitative assessment tools offer information about the presence or absence of intercultural growth, qualitative approaches enable us to understand how students give meaning to their intercultural experiences and to the impact of specific experiences on their intercultural learning (Mu *et al.* 2022; Paras *et al.* 2019). We analyse the results of an intercultural competence test, namely the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) test (Mendenhall, Stevens, Bird, Oddou & Osland 2012). The results used were those of 111 French business school students who were tested before and after a year abroad on an international assignment. The analysis focused on the behavioural dimension of interpersonal engagement. We then carried out a qualitative analysis of the students' self-reflective reports about their experience. We chose to focus our investigations on the dimension that is specific to interpersonal engagement within the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale, which measures the ability to develop positive relationships with host nationals and is thus central to our objective of understanding how French students develop the behavioural dimension of their intercultural competence for social integration. This knowledge is important to gain insight into the development of the behavioural domain of intercultural competence, which is

regarded as a crucial requirement for multicultural competence (Johnson, Lenartozicz & Apud 2006). We know that the ability to create and maintain relationships with individuals in cross-cultural/global settings is a key competency domain in global leadership and expatriate adjustment literature (Arthur & Bennett 1995; Thomas & Lazarova 2006). Developing relationships with locals is crucial, as host-country nationals can be seen as “socializing agents” who enhance the adjustment of expatriates (Toh & DeNisi 2007). Indeed, social support and information received from locals can help expatriates to decipher the host country’s social, cultural and behavioral codes and alleviate much of the adjustment-related stress they experience. However, the development of international students’ connectedness in their host country is multifaceted and calls for an understanding of the host country’s context and the personal characteristics and background of visiting students (Hasnain & Hayek, 2022, Goldstein 2022).

We start by reviewing the relevant literature relating to the development of intercultural competence. We then explain our methodology, starting with a description of the study abroad process and its theoretical underpinning. This section is followed by the presentation of our results and a discussion of the key findings from the analysis of this study abroad support program.

## **2. Developing the Behavioural Component of Intercultural Competency Through Meaningful Interactions in an Emotionally Supportive Environment**

Study abroad programs successfully enhance the cognitive component of intercultural competence (Varela 2017; Varela & Gatlin Watt 2014). Although students do develop cognitive skills such as awareness of cultural difference and second-language acquisition through their sojourn abroad, this experience does not always suffice to develop the behavioural component of their intercultural competence (Varela 2017, Varela & Gatlin Watt 2014, Mu *et al.* 2022). International students can only do so through experiencing meaningful interactions with locals in the host country, thus enabling them to behave efficiently in the host environment. This inclination is not natural among international students. Indeed, foreign students tend to cluster defensively and consciously avoid integration with locals (Townsend & Cairns 2003). They tend to remain together, speak their native language, and might even engage in unsociable behaviors as a way to avert the uneasiness of multicultural contacts (Bennett 2009). To remedy this tendency, the intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew 1998) teaches us that the frequency and quality of interaction between members who identify themselves as belonging to different groups may lead to an individualization of the person, who is then no longer perceived as an outgroup member. In this perspective, frequent and qualitative contacts between

international and domestic students may eliminate intergroup categorization and negative perceptions between the two populations. Academic work groups in multicultural teams appear to be a good and recurrent opportunity for meaningful interactions between international and domestic students (Turner 2009; Mello 2022). Communication is one of the key skills permitting interpersonal engagement, i.e. the behavioural dimension of intercultural competence (Mendenhall, Stevens, Bird, Oddou & Osland 2012), and continues to be critical to intercultural competence (Arthur & Bennett 1997). Attempts to advance the field of intercultural communication (Szkudkarek, Osland, Nardon & Zander 2020) and intercultural competence (Michailova, Holden & Paul 2020) argue for “a relational component (of the competence) in that individuals’ behaviors influence others and are in turn influenced by them” (Michailova, Holden and Paul 2020, p 523). Thus, intercultural competence is dynamic and constructed in interaction, rather than depending solely on the individual. In this perspective, the context of the intercultural encounter has a greater importance in the development of both intercultural competence and intercultural communication competence, and these developments are supported by a positive affective climate (Szkudkarek, Osland, Nardon & Zander 2020). Focusing on the context of intercultural competence learning, it is important to note that the behavioural component of intercultural competence develops more through activities outside the classroom (e.g. internships, staying with a host family, etc.) than during academic assignments (Varela 2017). Through these activities, international students must use these everyday encounters to reconsider their behaviours to fulfil a social role. This mindful effort lies at the core of learning (Varela 2017). We link this learning perspective with the literature on informal learning (Eraut 2004), which acknowledges that much cultural knowledge is acquired informally through social activities (Eraut 2004). The model of informal learning at work from Eraut (2004) differentiates two types of factors affecting learning in the workplace: learning factors and context factors. Eraut identifies the following relationship between learning factors, such that when learners take on challenges related to work, they value, feel supported in and receive related feedback on their work, they develop confidence and commitment, that are paramount to the learning experience. Focusing on contextual factors, expectations of each person’s role, performance and progress are central to the learners’ progress. According to Eraut, this clarification is related to the learner’s allocation and structuring of work as well as encounters and relationships with people at work. This framework shows that learning success is highly dependent on the quality of the relationship between the learner and the informal teacher, and most importantly on the confidence of the informal learner. In this perspective the interaction between learners and the context where learning occurs is a dynamic that needs to be understood to account for the learning process. Hence the importance of approaching the development of intercultural competence as a relational concept between learners and context and investigating the specific