Studying Abroad: Understanding the Complexities Associated with Managing Difficult Interactions Over Seas

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Abstract

Most recently, there has been a significant increase in the number of students who study abroad. While there is an increase in this academic endeavor among American college campuses, there seems to be a lack of research that documents and examines the study abroad experience. Therefore, we conducted an exploratory study that examined difficult intercultural interactions that students were likely to experience during their time abroad, the strategies implemented to manage these interactions, as well as what they learned from the experience. An open-ended survey was distributed to a convenience sample of study participants who described a difficult intercultural interaction while abroad, and their attempt to resolve the situation. Using a qualitative thematic analysis to evaluate the narratives, we identified that the difficult situations students typically encountered involved traveling, language barriers, socializing, work/school, social violation, and cultural assimilation. Typical positive strategies used to manage the situations were seeking outside help, learning the language, cultural immersion, and the use of nonverbal communication. Typical negative strategies that were used were physical defensiveness and avoidance. When asked what they would have done differently, most students said they would have handled the situation in the same way, whereas others wished they would have been more prepared, in control, culturally aware, or would have sought outside help. The analysis and conclusions of this paper discuss how these findings can be used in creating training programs that better prepare future students for their study abroad experiences.

Keywords: study abroad, difficult interactions, intercultural communication
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On many of today’s college campuses students are encouraged to become global citizens. This is accomplished through studying abroad, a highly sought after opportunity for undergraduate and graduate students. Away from their home country, students are often placed in uncomfortable or awkward communication scenarios. This may include problems with language barriers, being culturally unaware, or differences in nonverbal cues. With the increase in study abroad participants, it is important to examine the communicative efforts involved in preventing and/or resolving difficult interactions.

The world is becoming increasingly multicultural, which is why studying abroad is becoming more common among college students. This experience gives students the opportunity to not only grow as individuals but also enhance their employment prospects, in accordance with offering a greater global understanding. In regards to personal growth, students who study abroad will develop a greater appreciation for things such as traveling, art, foreign languages, and architecture, as well as learning to become more self-confident and self-sufficient (Kitsantas, 2004). These can have a positive impact on their career or it can even help them develop interest in a new career direction (Dwyer & Peters, 2004). Through this, they will enhance their cross-cultural skills and have an overall greater global awareness. In our multicultural world, studying abroad is a “vital link to obtaining a global perspective and the skills to live and work in an increasingly global society” (Craig, 1999).

Study abroad is an important aspect of any education because it encourages intercultural meaning and understanding. However, students placed into a new culture are often faced with difficult situations. The word intercultural describes something “of, relating to, involving, or
representing different cultures” (Stoner, A. 2009). Therefore, many difficult intercultural situations occur within, but not limited to, the realm of misunderstanding. This is why while studying and traveling abroad, there must be an understanding that students are outside of their own culture and must respect the culture differences of others. With an examination of those experiences, the gain will be a better understanding of how the actions of accepting, embracing, and dealing with another person’s culture shapes a new way of thinking in those that have had those specific exposures.

Ultimately, this paper examines how cross-cultural exchange impacts study abroad students. More specifically, this study explores difficult intercultural interactions that may affect study abroad participants and the various strategies they use to resolve the situation. As mentioned earlier, research in this field is limited among communication scholars. This is due to the fact that the popularity of studying abroad has increased significantly only within the last decade. By assessing previous difficult intercultural interactions described by past study abroad students, we aim to educate different strategies for appropriate conflict resolution through communication.

On today’s college campuses, studying abroad is a highly sought after opportunity for undergraduate and graduate students. According to the Institute of International Education, study abroad has increased more than 150% among United States colleges and universities. While adults of all ages are participating in these programs, undergraduate juniors and seniors as well as graduate students make up 70% of those participating (2009). Many of these students choose to enroll in long-term programs that last between 5 weeks to a year. However, short-term programs are becoming increasingly popular. These programs can last between one week and five weeks consisting of students from one or more institutions, (Coryell, 2011). It is also
important to look at the research determining who is studying abroad as will discussed in the Literature Review.

As the popularity of studying abroad has increased within the last decade, there has been a growing consensus among students, college administrators, and professors that the international experience can benefit the student in many important ways (Salisbury, et. al., 2009). It encourages intercultural meaning and understanding through various cultural experiences. Research shows that students who study abroad mature quickly, develop professionally, acquire deeper knowledge, and have a better understanding of cultures (Kauffmann, Martin, Weaver & Weaver, 1992). Furthermore, a survey conducted by the National Association of International Educators (2003) found that students became more globally aware of their civic and social responsibilities once they have studied abroad, thus motivating their search for significant post-graduate employment and better life experiences. Attributing to the fact that these students are without their family and friends, many learn to become more independent and integrated within the society (McGrew, 2005).

Moreover, Corda (2007) found that students increased their self-reliance and self-confidence. The research suggests that this is a direct result of studying abroad and its affect on transforming the student’s cross-cultural and global perspectives. This becomes an essential part of developing more holistically (Chickering & Braskamp, 2009). It may also help to solve and shape a positive perspective on foreign interactions and behavior. More specifically, once someone has experienced or was faced with a difficult intercultural interaction, they may be able to use that knowledge to their advantage in the future. Furthermore, they may be able to appropriately identify and resolve a difficult intercultural interaction.
Literature Review

According to Williams (2005) “international travel and research have long been a part of the liberal arts education tradition (p. 356). Hoffa (2007) noted, that most who are enrolled in programs to study abroad are white, female students who are majoring in humanities or social sciences. While Salisbury, Paulsen and Pascarella (2009) argue that students majoring in liberal arts and science are mostly women, the Institute for International Education (2008) also found that women in male-dominated classes already studied abroad or will study abroad. However, these statistics do not exclude men altogether; other factors may be to blame. There are some predictors from Goldstien and Kim (2005) that help determine if a male or female is more likely to study abroad or not. These predictors include: knowing the language or putting the effort into learning a language, finishing a major on time, presumptions about the experience (if it will be good or bad), levels of prejudice and ethnocentrism. While these predictors may forecast who decides to study abroad, other considerations such as gaining a global perspective, may contribute to that decision.

Difficult Intercultural Interactions

While studying abroad may help prepare for difficult intercultural interactions, students are often faced with them while enrolled in a program. A difficult intercultural interaction is conceptually defined as lowering the effectiveness of communication and heightening any uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1983). According to Chen (2002), four aspects are involved when deciphering difficult intercultural interactions: anxiety, uncertainty, communication quality, and communication competence. Knapp, Ellis and Williams (1980) created three generalizations for identifying those who have experienced a difficult interaction with someone from a different country. The first is “personalness”, which is the relationship between the individuals. It
answers the question: How well do they know each other? An interaction may be more or less uncomfortable dependent on whether or not individuals are familiar with each other. Next is synchrony, which determines the “smoothness” of an interaction. If those interacting know each other, they may be familiar with each of their speaking patterns, and are therefore able to adjust their conversation to be more fluid. The final generalization is “difficulty”. Difficulty is determined based on the barriers within the conversation. In other words, there must be missing information within the exchange. One person needs to determine that there are obstacles involved that make the interaction difficult. Overall, those less familiar with the context of the interaction and culture become more likely to succumb to a difficult intercultural interaction. Some may have a preconceived view of the stereotype associated with the foreigner. On the other hand, others may have a positive impression of the foreigner.

While there is substantial research examining study abroad and intercultural communication, it is important to look at what has been examined when placed together. In particular, looking further into the methodologies and results associated with study abroad and difficult intercultural interactions. One of the most important aspects of studying intercultural interactions is the effect it has on one’s communication competence.

**Intercultural Competence**

While studying abroad, it is difficult adjusting to a new culture and a new communication process. It is the students themselves that must become more aware of their surroundings and the part they play in a particular setting in order to gain intercultural competence. Koskinen (2004) states, “intercultural competence is a developmental process of personal maturation, whereby the learner evolves from lower to higher levels of intercultural awareness” (Koskinen, 2004, p.112). Williams (2005) conducted a study that sought to identify the improvement of intercultural
communication skills through the process of studying abroad. He assessed the student’s strengths and weaknesses before and after they studied abroad in comparison to students who did not study abroad. Williams proved his hypothesis correct finding that those studying abroad had an improvement in their intercultural communication skills. Simply the act of exposure to various cultures proved to be an indicator of increased intercultural competence.

It is desirable in all aspects to attain the skills of an effective communicator in order to become a more socially and globally active citizen. Exposure to a new culture and way of thinking promotes a learning atmosphere that not only pushes students outside their educational boundaries but also allows experimentation that might not otherwise come about. Adaptability is essential when trying to attain a greater intercultural competence and without it many feel they cannot fully engage in the culture. Koskinen conducted an experiment between 1995 and 2001 where 553 nursing students were sent for four months abroad to different British universities. The action was meant to increase their intercultural knowledge by exposing them to different professional settings. By the end of the study, the nurses conveyed that they struggled with feelings of ignorance, frustration, anxiety and anger but by the end they were more deeply involved in the host culture (Koskinen, 2004). In a new place there is always a transition period that starts with feelings of uncertainty. Adaptation and integration of the newfound knowledge will then lead to a change in personal habits allowing for a greater sense of immersion in the new culture.

As schools are now focused on instilling a better understanding of different cultures it seems only fitting that they increase intercultural empathy in their students. Intercultural empathy is the “ability to respectfully observe and react to other’s communication process through verbal and nonverbal sensitivity” (William, 2005, p.359). Study abroad students actively
increase their intercultural competence so that they are educated on effective ways to respond in difficult situations. It is important that they react in accordance with the surrounding culture and stay in line with their own beliefs. There must be a balance between cultural dimensions in order to create a new communicative reality that is fair to both parties.

A question that seems difficult to answer is what separates culture from language, and how both influence immersion into a foreign culture and the possibility of potential conflict. Miscommunication is often the precursor to conflict and inadequate language skills be it the misunderstanding of colloquialisms or the complete inability to speak a host country’s language. Cortese, Giuseppina, and Duszak (2005) find that language is a product of culture but that language perpetually influences culture itself. Their research finds that even while members of different cultures are speaking the same language (most often English), idioms and references are lost in translation, often leading to incongruity in what is collectively understood and ultimately leads to conflict. They pose the epistemological question of how information is gained and how the medium of language effects this transition. Ultimately, interpersonal interactions are primarily predicated upon the medium of spoken language and different languages affect their own message. Moreover, they either distort the conveyed message across cultural lines or better explain it among members of the same culture. This issue can lead to miscommunication even among individuals who speak the same language.

**Rationale**

There is a considerable amount of research regarding students’ motivations to study abroad, the types of students that are likely to study abroad, possible reasons for why students may choose not to study abroad, as well as the overall long-term impact that study abroad has on society. However, there were some limitations in past research in regards to studying
intercultural interactions, and the way students handle difficult situations while abroad. While the general perception is that studying abroad will lead to greater intercultural communication competence, currently there is little research to date that examines specific types of intercultural interactions that students can potentially encounter while abroad. As a result, little evidence has been found regarding the various communication strategies that college students learn when they are immersed in another culture for a significant period of time.

Research has described the many ways in which students can grow from participating in study abroad, and how it can enhance cross-cultural and global perspectives. In regards to gaining a greater global understanding, however, research does not discuss the communication strategies that are implemented to achieve this intercultural sensitivity, as well as how this new found sensitivity can affect one’s perceptions of their intercultural communication competence.

It has also been found that there are many emotional challenges that come with intercultural transitions and interactions. As far as strategies to cope with emotional challenges, research states that the students who tend to be better at problem solving are those who have the ability to self-regulate and not be overwhelmed by emotions (Abarbanel, 2009). However, no specific communication strategies were discussed in regards to acquiring emotional resilience or effective problem solving skills.

Another problem that is common among individuals who live in a foreign country is that of language and cultural barriers. Previous research by Cortese, Giuseppina, and Duszak (2005) discusses interpersonal interactions and the types of miscommunication that can occur among different cultures. While this research explains how language and cultural barriers can cause miscommunication, it does not describe any communication methods or strategies that can be used to solve a misunderstanding, and in turn, prevent a potential conflict.
There is, however, some research about the theories associated with facing interactions, and the way that they can impact how conflicts are handled. Research that talks about managing anxiety and any uncertainty when experiencing an intercultural interaction explains that due to self-monitoring, people tend to pre-plan interactions with others in order to avoid ambiguity and uncertainty, thus reducing their anxiety towards the given interaction (Miller, 2007). Despite relating initial interaction and emotion-related anxiety to an intercultural context, this research does not show how a reduced level of anxiety or uncertainty in a difficult intercultural interaction can affect one’s perception of their overall intercultural communication competence. Another theory discussed previously that has led to conclusions regarding possible causes of intercultural conflict is Conflict-Face Negotiation Theory. While this theory does help describe reasons for why conflicts among cultures can potentially occur, it would be more useful if it could relate to how awareness of the difference in ‘face’ can affect one’s intercultural communication competence.

However, previous research implies that since intercultural interactions are on a highly individual basis, one must analyze the specific first hand occurrences of students in order to effectively examine cross-cultural interactions while studying abroad (Byram, 2006). Each intercultural situation, as well as the person experiencing it will be different, and each person will evaluate the experience based on individual past experiences.

In regards to the current study, qualitative data has been examined pertaining to students’ unique, individual intercultural interactions while living in a foreign country. Not only have specific difficult situations been described, the data also includes descriptions of the ways in which students attempted to handle or resolve the situation or problem. Through analysis of the various types of situations and the methodologies implemented by students in their attempt to
overcome these situations, the current study examines which strategies were incorporated, which were not, as well as what students learned from the intercultural situation, or what they would have done differently if given the opportunity. By examining specific difficulties involving intercultural actions among students who study abroad, the current study hopes to further previous research by gaining more knowledge on the potential difficult situations that can occur, as well as the communication strategies that are learned or implemented through various intercultural interactions. This leads us to the following research questions:

RQ1: Among study abroad participants, what do the majority of difficult interactions involve?

RQ2: What are the strategies used to resolve those difficult interactions among study abroad participants?

RQ3: Is there anything different study abroad participants would do, if this interaction presented itself again?

**Methods**

There is currently little research pertaining to the difficult intercultural interactions that one might experience while studying abroad, and also the lack of research regarding the strategies that can be incorporated to handle such situations. Therefore, this is an exploratory study that will generate new ideas regarding this topic. Data was collected regarding the specific difficult situations that students have encountered, the strategies used to overcome these situations, as well as what they would or would not have done differently if given the chance. As stated previously, the current study will further previous research by increasing knowledge about the various problems or difficulties that can potentially occur among intercultural interactions, as well as the strategies that can be used to overcome these problems.
Participants

This study included students who had studied abroad during their college attendance, either during summer, winter, fall, spring, or interterm. We chose to exclude Semester at Sea study abroad students because the nature of that course changes locations sporadically. As a result, Semester at Sea does not allow students to stay long enough to be completely immersed into a country’s culture. Postgraduates were also included in this study simply because our survey only asks to recall situations they had encountered during their stay regardless of when it happened in the past. The participants were asked certain demographic questions pertaining to personal information. Such as age, gender, ethnicity, as well as school year and semester that one studied abroad.

Of our thirty-nine survey participants 23% were male and 77% were female. Their ages ranged from sixteen to forty-nine years old with a mean age of 19.85. Participant’s current age while filling out our survey ranged from twenty to fifty with a mean age of 22.625. Survey participants were predominantly Caucasian at 79.5% with 10.25% answering ‘other’, 7.7% answering Asian American and 2.5% answering Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Fifty-nine percent of survey participants lived in apartments while abroad, 27% lived in dorms and 14% lived in a ‘family home stay’.

Procedures

As mentioned, this study is an exploratory study that aims to generate new ideas regarding the skills acquired from studying abroad. Therefore, a survey was created to collect data that describes the specific difficult situations that students have encountered, the strategies used to overcome these situations, as well as what they would or would not have done differently if given the chance. Once the survey was created, it was given to nonparticipants who have also
studied abroad at some point in order to test its integrity, as well as to see if the questions generated the right types of responses. Also, participants were selected based on convenience sampling; so that whoever happened to have access to the survey had the option of taking it; however, we had limited generalization because we had a convenience sample, rather than a random sample.

Our participants were acquired by posting the link to our survey on our collective Facebook pages. We contacted and emailed our university’s Center for Global Education alumni association. Their office sent out an email asking all students in their contact list to participate. Other study participants were attracted to our survey through the snowball sampling technique. After careful consideration, our group decided it would generate a more meaningful response from survey participants if they answered most of the questions in their own words. Our goal is to determine whether or not there are communication patterns in line with how students manage difficult intercultural interactions while studying abroad, therefore we decided to create an open ended survey. While there are no set scenarios linked with difficult intercultural interactions, it is the students’ job to recount their stories within the survey. Also including how they managed or did not manage to recover from the interaction. Furthermore, we then instructed each participant to describe how he or she would have handled the interaction differently if it were presented today. With this in mind, we found it interesting to ask these students their perception of the country before they had this encounter; this helped decipher whether prejudice played a role.

In addition, the remaining questions were close ended. Some included demographic; asking the students’ age, year in school, how old they were when they studied abroad, etc. Finally, questions nine and fifteen were answered on the Likert scale. These questions allow us to identify the emotions of the participants while studying abroad. In summary, this
information has uncovered patterns among participants and the communication involved. Leading us to a greater understanding of how to manage difficult intercultural interactions while studying abroad.

**Measurements**

The survey was developed and designed by our research group with consultation from our professor, Dr. Fran Dickson. We used our own experiences and the literature on study abroad to prompt questions pertaining to our research objective. The study focuses on students who participated in an academic study abroad program. Respondents either spent a semester or interterm semester abroad within an academic program. We excluded those who participated in a semester at sea or those participating in an international internship. Those who chose to participate in the survey were asked to answer seventeen questions. Some questions included multiple choice questions, a Likert scale, and open-ended short answer questions. It took approximately thirty minutes to administer and complete.

**Data Analysis**

As for data analysis our group coded all of the responses together so as to increase inter rater reliability. First, we read the answers aloud to determine common themes among the responses. A thematic coding system was better fit for our type of questions and answers due to their qualitative nature. We then read the answers aloud again in order to come to an overall agreement pertaining to the thematic classification assigned to every individual response. Our group had 95% agreement for our inter rater reliability. The reason why the percentage is so high is because most of our answers were obvious to place into the categories we determined. For many given answers, participants did not go into depth making them rather simple to code.
Results & Discussion

The study abroad experience focuses on exposing students to a new way of life and thinking. It promotes complete immersion into the host country through adapting to cultural norms and social standards. However, in an unfamiliar place, it can take time to assimilate to the culture and grasp an understanding of appropriate behavior. This transition period is exciting but difficult, in that it is ridden with stressful situations. Difficult interactions are inevitable in a foreign place and they are not restricted by any cultural boundaries. It was our goal to learn about these difficult interactions so that future study abroad students would have more preparation and a better cultural understanding before their travel course.

Research Question 1

We defined difficult intercultural interactions as an experience between or with one or more individuals from another cultural background who have conflicting goals, or disrupt them from achieving their goals. Our survey yielded many interesting answers to which we concluded there were specific trends throughout. These trends were then used as categories to code our data; including travel, language barriers, socializing, work/school, money, social violation, and cultural assimilation.

Types of Intercultural Situations

Travel was a large issue among students due to their unfamiliarity with the practices abroad. We classified this as any difficulty associated with the means of transportation. This included, but was not limited to, airports, buses, or trains, along with the people they had to deal with while trying to figure out the system. One participant revealed that while traveling from Brussels to Italy they missed a flight and ended up sleeping overnight at the airport for a couple days because the employees at the airport were rude and unhelpful. This type of problem with
the airports came up a couple times in our responses, making it our understanding that this was a common occurrence for many study abroad students who were traveling.

Language barriers also caused a lot of conflict with the students as they found it hard to communicate or get around not knowing the host country’s native tongue. This was the most prevalent issue. In a lot of countries the population does not speak English, or they choose not to, to promote cultural preservation. Students were therefore encouraged or forced to learn their host country’s language as a means of survival. Another aspect of language barriers for students came about when traveling out of the host country, therefore having to deal with languages they were far from accustomed to. A participant stated that while at the airport a woman asked for his “bumbag”, which in the United States means fannypack. The word fanny is offensive in New Zealand, which escalated into an argument with airport security. Understanding slang was another participant’s issue. This is an obvious example of getting lost in translation, a common theme in the difficult interactions our survey reported.

Socializing, while mostly a positive experience, yielded some difficult situations when it came to romance or going out. There are different cultural norms when it comes to these social interactions. Americans, for instance, have a much less abrasive way of going about courtship in comparison to the Italians. In the same way, Czechs have a much less abrasive approach than Americans. Going out in another country one must be prepared to deal with certain social interactions with people that may not have the same personal boundaries. Also in the area of romance there is always room for social error when it comes to understanding what is appropriate. One girl reported that she was dating a Greek man who was close to 15 years older than her self, who was extremely persistent on marrying her. Socializing cross culturally is interesting because of the different perspectives people have on the act.
Another theme involved students having to deal with money. Anything to do with currency exchange, product purchasing, or monetary handling, fall under this category. With so many different currency exchanges abroad it can be a challenge when figuring out what is an appropriate cost or charge. One participant tried to barter at a shop in Chinatown and the shopkeeper got angry and made them leave. This is an example of how some actions with money can seem offensive or out of place in certain situations. Managing finances is also a problem because of the lack of understanding when it comes to how much one is spending in accordance to foreign exchange rates. Trying to manage money, one student said that they wished they had planned more trips in advance to save money. It is definitely a learning process when handling new forms of money and one must be careful not to get taken advantage of, like one participant we had. They were forced to overpay in most of the countries for local transportation and goods because they were not locals. Numerous times, they had to argue to pay a reasonable fare that was often still more than what a local would pay. Money is a sensitive subject, so when it becomes an issue it is not only uncomfortable for those involved, but it can be difficult to deal with.

While abroad, it is known that the schools will probably be run differently than American schools, especially when it comes to the type of work. The issues associated with school were mostly defined by the fact that being in a new cultural surrounding can cause a lot of distraction when it comes to school or the prospect of work. Studying in a foreign country is hard, since all you want to do is travel and it is hard to focus on schoolwork, states one participant. Another aspect of this category is that students found it hard to conduct parts of their class because they did not understand or were not used to the standards. Another participant said they had difficulty doing presentations in French in front of their classes for school. The oral component was a huge
part of the education in France and they were not used to public speaking in a foreign language. Many students found that adjusting to different educational agendas can be difficult.

We found social violation as a prevalent cause of disruption with students. This was any interaction that violated personal, moral, or physical boundaries between those involved. One included a student ‘almost getting jumped by a bunch of Manchester City hooligans’. Another included a more personal story a participant chose to share:

I was outside the local café one night with my two friends. A couple guys from out of the country came outside and one of my friends said something in an obvious joking manner. They guy took it seriously and attacked my friend. I pushed the guy away and proceeded to defend myself from him and two of his friends. I didn’t get very hurt. The thing that bothered me is that my friend who he attacked is one of the nicest, goofiest people I’ve met. He was gay and from the Czech Republic. The guy (from the country in Europe who’s emigrants have violent and anti-homosexual tendencies) came after my friend because he was gay. I had never seen something like this and it infuriated and saddened me.

When dealing with someone outside of one’s own culture, a person can have a hard time adjusting, accepting, or tolerating those visiting. It is important that one be prepared for difficult interactions of this kind, as they can lead to dangerous acts.

Cultural assimilation is a main goal while studying abroad but when transitioning into these new norms there are bound to be misunderstandings. We defined this as anything having to deal with the adaptation to, practice of, or understanding of specific cultural customs. One participant reported that their difficult situation happened while visiting Barcelona. She put her foot on what she thought was an ottoman, but then a lady started yelling in Spanish. When she
could not understand the woman she got very angry. Another situation entailed a student being unaware of the proper dining experience in their host country.

I did not know that in certain pubs and bars you had to order [food] at the bar and at other small restaurants. I did not know whether to order at the counter or wait for a waitress.

The whole process of cultural assimilation can be frustrating because of differences but it is an honest amount of time that will procure understanding.

**Strategies Utilized**

By asking participants, “How did you manage the difficult situation?” we acquired responses that described the strategies used by students in their attempt to resolve their difficult interaction. After careful review and analysis of the responses, we were able to categorize their actions as either positive strategies, or negative strategies. The categories we used to code the data collected through the survey that seemed to have a positive impact on the students’ difficult interactions were: seeking outside help, learning the language, cultural immersion, and the use of nonverbal communication. On the other hand, the only two negative strategies that we found were most commonly used among students were physical defensiveness and avoidance. Although commonly used, these strategies are considered negative because they were not effective in resolving the students’ difficult situations.

A positive strategy that students turned to that was most effective in helping them with their difficult interaction was seeking help from an outside source. In other words, they would ask another individual, whether it was a friend, a worker, or even the police, to assist them in dealing with whatever problem they were having. One student mentioned that the first time she went to the bank where she studied, she had difficulties finding the ATM machine because it was located in a secured room, which involved passing through a security tube. When she got stuck
in the tube, the security at the bank thought she might be a suspicious person. When explaining how she got through the questioning, she stated that they managed to find “someone inside that spoke both Italian and English and we got through the questioning that way.” By turning to someone else who worked at the bank and who could assist with the language barrier, this student was finally able to communicate with the security and resolve the situation. Another example is of a student who turned to a friend when dealing with a stranger who wanted to take her home, while the friend tried to resolve the language barrier. In her response, she stated, “My friend did the talking – I just stayed close to him while he stood up for me and tried to understand as much of the conversation as I could.” In this situation, since she couldn’t understand the language, she stepped back and avoided possibly saying or understanding the wrong thing, and allowed someone who did understand to do the communicating.

Attempting to learn the host country’s language was another positive strategy that a significant number of students turned to, since language barriers proved to create many difficulties for students studying abroad. Learning the language of another country does not just pertain to the spoken language, but it involves learning the gestures and possibly the slang words or aspects of regional dialect as well. Among the many responses regarding learning the host country’s language, one student had problems understanding the slang of their host country, so he stated that he “practiced speaking Spanish everyday and just pushed myself to get better.”

Beyond language barriers, many students had difficulties involving cultural differences. Therefore, several students tried to assimilate themselves into the culture in order to manage the problem. Through cultural assimilation, they would try and adapt to whatever was appropriate for that particular culture, and for that specific situation. In one situation mentioned earlier where the student put her feet on an ottoman in Barcelona, the student understood it was wrong in that
culture because the lady started pointing at her feet; therefore, she assimilated to the Spanish culture by taking her feet off of the ottoman. Another student studying in South Africa mentioned that the locals tended to ignore him because he was seen as just an American. In his response, he stated, “I tried to be less American. Tried to assimilate into their culture as much as possible.”

Nonverbal communication is the final strategy we found that was commonly used by students and had a positive result on their difficult situation. In an intercultural situation, this involves the use of gestures or any other type of nonverbal behavior, such as facial expressions or tone of voice, in order to communicate an idea with the use of verbal language. One student mentioned that since they didn’t know the language, “You basically have to play charades with the other person and act things out.” Another student, who was teaching children of another culture where the norm was to remain silent in a school setting, also resorted to nonverbal behavior to encourage the students to relax and participate. “I would smile a lot and speak in a friendly, pleasant tone in order to make them feel more at ease in class.” Language barriers were among the most common difficulties that students encountered, so many turned to nonverbal gestures to try and effectively communicate their ideas.

However, not all of the strategies implemented by students were effective in managing their difficult interaction. There were a few students that used defense in their attempt to resolve the situation, meaning that they used physical actions to either resist, or push away the other person involved in the interaction. In a situation mentioned previously, social violation resulted in a student getting attacked outside a local café. In his attempt to defend himself, the student said, “I didn’t fight them. I just tried to push them away. Luckily the owner of the bar came out after a couple of minutes.” Our data found that students were not likely to intentionally
physically hurt other people in order to resolve a situation, but in such cases, they did have to resort to physical defense. In most cases, this didn’t help effectively resolve the situation; it only stalled for a while until outside help was found.

Finally, avoidance was one of the most commonly used but the least effective strategies that students turned to when faced with a difficult interaction while abroad. Regardless of what the situation involved, many students simply did not know what to say or how to act in that particular situation. Rather than attempting to communicate to resolve the problem, they would instead take no action and walk away from the situation, leaving the problem unsolved. In one example, a student had difficulties entering a nightclub in the south of France, claiming that she and her friends were being treated poorly because they were American. “We were trying to go to a nightclub and removed ourselves from the situation.” Clearly the situation was not resolved, because they just avoided it completely and never managed to enter the nightclub. Rather than simply walking away from a difficult or uncomfortable situation, appropriate communication strategies should be used in order to help increase understanding and in turn, effectively resolve a difficult interaction.

**Reflection Responses**

Our final survey question focused on how survey participants might have handled themselves differently if they had been given the opportunity to face the same conflict again with the knowledge they gained through their experience. For the section on what survey participants might have done differently, we coded the responses falling under one of five categories. These categories were labeled Same, Prepare, Control, Seeking Outside Help and Cultural Awareness. ‘Same’ indicated that participants expressed that they would not have done anything differently in the same situation if given another chance. ‘Prepare’ indicated that they wished
they had prepared more for cultural immersion by understanding the aspects of the culture beforehand. ‘Control’ indicated that participants wished they had stayed calm during their conflict and had a better grasp of their own emotions and initial reaction. ‘Seek outside help’ indicated that participants wished that they had sought outside help by means of the police, peers or acquaintances. ‘Culturally aware’ indicates that participants had hoped that they were more culturally conscious before the conflicting situation, and perhaps that they knew more about the culture and customs of the host country.

Most survey participants stated that they would have conducted themselves in a similar fashion; often they claim that would not have changed their behavior or reaction in any way. However, one of the most prevalent positive trends found in our results were that participants expressed regret in not staying calm or maintaining control of their emotions. Examples of our coded ‘Control’ include remaining calm, being more stern, and leaving a difficult situation. In one circumstance a survey participant studying abroad in Italy was not fluent in Italian and got into a misunderstanding with her tenant. She stated that her difficult situation was “When my key broke in the front door of my apartment my first day in Italy. It was difficult to hunt down my landlord, as my phone was dead and I didn't speak Italian. Luckily, a restaurant owner next door assisted me but it was very difficult understanding what was going on and who was coming to fix my lock”.

Examples of preparedness include the reoccurring desire of participants to have previously learned their host countries language before their departure, having better understood their host country’s transportation services or understanding the nuances of a foreign culture before committing some alleged faux pas. Her difficulties in handling the situation were language based, as well as having to do with her mobile telephone. Her survey response, which
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was coded as falling under the category of ‘control’, was “I would have had my phone charged to begin with, so I could call my landlord. I also would have not tried the lock so hard with my key therefore breaking it. I wasn't aware how old the building and/or key was. I might have handled it a bit more calmly and tried to utilize the small amount of Italian I knew.” Her scenario represents how the lack of lingual knowledge prevents people from exacerbating simple situations. This also can be explained by a desire to prepare beforehand by better learning the host countries language and ensuring her mobile phone was adequately charged. The individual did, in fact, seek outside help by utilizing what little Italian she did know to ask a local restaurant owner for help. In some respects, she could have been more culturally aware by realizing her European apartment building was as old as it was. Cultural awareness of this kind can often be the result of additional travel experiences, but her regret is predominately coded by ‘control’.

The survey’s results were indicative of the vast majority of participants feeling that they fell victim to circumstances they could not have personally bettered. Those who felt they could have fixed their situation by behaving differently primarily felt that some form of preparation or experience may have helped. As this section of our survey’s findings is based on hypothetical scenarios and assumptions, it is difficult to quantify anything other than survey participants’ feelings.

**Implications**

After carefully examining the results of the data collection as they pertain to the respondent’s answers—describing a difficult intercultural interaction, the communicative strategies used to manage the interaction, and if given the opportunity what would the respondents do differently—we note the implications of the practices that worked to resolve a difficult scenario and those that did not. These responses led us to find many different ways of
managing difficult intercultural interactions while studying abroad. As mentioned earlier, the most effective examples came from those who attempted to resolve the interaction. We categorized those who had the resolve using nonverbal cues or asking another for help as positive management resolutions, while those who did not had the resolve and avoided the interaction and the repercussions are labeled as using negative management resolutions. Ultimately, the implications of using negative management solutions did not help the study abroad students. Although, by analyzing both the positive and negative management solutions enabled us to identify ways for future study abroad students to succeed in difficult intercultural interactions.

In lieu of the implications discussed earlier, we find that preparing for possible language barriers to be beneficial. Survey participants acknowledge that learning the language of the country they would be living in would have either helped alleviate the awkwardness of the interaction or may have eliminated the interaction all together. This includes learning the slang and nonverbal cues or gestures associated with that country. Even in English-speaking countries language barriers may have an effect. For example, the “fanny pack” or “bum bag” scenario may have been avoided had the student learned the New Zealand slang.

Secondly, study abroad students should be more culturally acceptive of the host country they live in. Many survey participants chose their study abroad country because they felt as though it would be most similar to the United States, thus making the transition easier for them. However, most realize this was not the case, and in turn became resentful. They attached stigmas to the difficult interaction as a direct result of the culture the other person involved in the interaction lives in. An example is the two friends who attempted to go to a nightclub in France and could not get in. They associated that scenario with the French hating Americans. While
this is not always the case, familiarizing oneself and being open minded about the culture beforehand may help diminish any culture shock upon arrival. Moreover, this will weaken future stigmas associated with the country.

Finally, preparing oneself for their study abroad experience may encompass all possible future difficult intercultural interactions. This includes, understanding the basic laws of the country, the social norms, how to travel, money, transportation, and more. Many respondents to the survey realized upon undergoing their difficult interaction, that having basic preparation for their study abroad experience would have undoubtedly attenuated their resolve of that interface. For example, one participant’s attempt to fly from Brussels to Italy, or another who tried to barter in Chinatown, London. These interactions may have been avoided with the right preparedness. Accordingly, enhancing their overall appreciation for study abroad.

Limitations, Future Research, and Possible Revisions

While no study is perfect, there were some limitations to our research pertaining to the previous literature, the survey, and the respondents. Overall the literature was very limited. Study abroad has only become a popular research topic within the last couple years, therefore examining the topic as it relates to communication is rare to find. This predicament restricted our resources for conducting a more specified research analysis. Therefore, leading us to set the tone for study abroad and communication dilemmas. Furthermore, we encountered shortcoming within the survey itself. Many of the questions required an open-ended response and in turn some participants answers were not a full reply. Some answered with only one sentence, others used “yes” or “no.” In addition, some answers were not comprehensible and did not make sense. The cause may have been from a respondent who did not speak English or from someone who did not take our research seriously. Therefore, we eliminated those surveys whose answers
would only hurt the credibility of the study. Finally, of the difficult interactions that were
described many took place among a variety of different cultures. Coding the responses then
became broad instead of specific. This ultimately results in a broad sense of managing difficult
intercultural interactions while studying abroad.

These limitations help to create a list for future research and help to decipher what we
would have done differently. Regarding the accuracy of responses, we might have seen a better
outcome had the question been administered verbally in face-to-face interviews. Participants
may have taken the survey more seriously thus improving the accuracy of results. In addition,
expanding on the instructions of the survey may have also helped. Asking students to share their
experiences as they relate to communication in detail could have encouraged them to be more
specific. Finally, when looking at the different types of cultures and countries involved, future
research might look at a single country and how difficult interactions were handled, and how that
differs from culture to culture.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, students who study abroad will undoubtedly encounter an interaction that
is awkward or unfortunate at one point in time. Through the examination of difficult
intercultural interactions among study abroad students we have been able to identify the various
strategies used to handle the situation. Some responses led to a resolve while others did
not. This research has enabled us to identify patterns within the communication process that
assisted in the production of sufficient management techniques for future study abroad
participants to use. Furthermore, those study abroad students who educate themselves using our
strategies may ultimately benefit using appropriate conflict resolution through communication.
Thus, preparing students for a more enjoyable study abroad experience.
References


