

Exploring
Intercultural Communicative Competence:
A Multinational Perspective

A Two-Phased Research Project Involving Eight Countries:
Phase I. Exploring & Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence
Phase II. Assessing Intercultural Sojourns: Outcomes & Impact

A Combined Report

Conducted by the
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(CERCLL),
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Executive Summary

The Initial Project

The Federation of The Experiment in International Living's first international research project, a one and a half year study, was designed to explore and assess the impact of intercultural experiences provided through service projects. This Initial Project involved two sending and one receiving Member Organizations (MOs): Great Britain, Switzerland, and Ecuador, respectively. This study was made possible with a grant obtained from the Center for Social Development of the Global Service Institute at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, USA.

Designed and directed by Dr. Alvino E. Fantini, Educational Consultant to the Federation EIL, the Project took place in several stages between July 2005 and December 2006: The first stage began with an extensive survey of the intercultural literature as the basis for developing a comprehensive construct of "intercultural communicative competence" and for developing an instrument for its assessment. After translating this instrument into German and Spanish, and adapting it to British English, the tool was then used with several groups – alumni, volunteers, and host mentors. The study was conducted through use of this survey questionnaire followed by personal interviews conducted with the assistance of Research Assistants in each of the three cooperating countries. The result was the production of a large amount of data that were then analyzed to learn more about the impact of intercultural experiences on the lives and work of both sojourners and hosts.

Assertions and Findings

Although most people engaged in intercultural exchanges can anticipate certain results, this systematic study yielded rich quantitative data (expressed in figures, graphs, and statistics) and qualitative data (anecdotes, comments, and quotes) that were important and insightful. Data analysis focused on ten assertions, all of which were strongly supported by the evidence:

- that intercultural communicative competence involves a complex of abilities
- that learning the host language affects intercultural development in positive ways
- that intercultural experiences are life-altering
- that participant choices made during their sojourn produce certain intercultural consequences
- that all parties in intercultural contact are affected
- that service programs offer unique opportunities for sojourners and hosts, beyond traditional exchanges
- that people are changed in positive ways as a result of this experience
- that returnees lean toward specific life choices, life partners, life styles, values, and jobs, as a result of their experience
- that returnees often engage in activities that further impact on others in positive ways, and
- that their activities support and further the organizational mission.

Although most everyone engaged in intercultural activities believes these assertions intuitively and perhaps experientially, the statistics and comments obtained provide substantial evidence in strong support of all of these assertions. For example, specific attributes were cited as extremely important to the success of an intercultural sojourn. Participants gained dramatic insights about the significance of being able to communicate in the host tongue, both to remove barriers as well as to enable participation. As one alumna wrote, "Language was the key to everything, to communicating and understanding the local

culture, and to my overall success.” And another echoed: “Language was vital and very important to my success.”

Alumni also made numerous comments about how their lives were changed as a result of their sojourn, as well as the new directions their lives had taken upon return. However, what is really interesting is that host mentors were also significantly affected through their contact with foreigners, reinforcing the notion that both sojourners and hosts benefit from their interaction. As participants return home and engage in socially oriented activities, it becomes clear that they in turn also have significant impact upon others (the multiplier effect). And, finally, documentation of all of these findings provides important evidence that The Experiment indeed furthers its vision and mission through its participant members.

The Follow-on Project

After a hiatus of nine years, a Follow-on Project got underway with funding support from CERCLL (the Center for Educational Resources on Culture, Language, and Literacy), located at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona, in the U.S. A proposal submitted by Dr. Alvino E. Fantini, also a member of the CERCLL Board, was approved to enable a second research effort. The Follow-on Project began January 2015 involving three additional MOs with funds to support Research Assistants in each – Brazil, Germany, and Japan. In addition, an invitation extended to other Federation countries with interest and the ability to support their own Research Assistant to work under the direction of the project’s director, attracted two additional MOs. Happily, Ireland and the USA joined for a total of five countries (in addition to the three countries involved in the Initial Project).

Whereas the Initial Project provided the design and process for conducting this expanded research effort, the Follow-on Project generated additional information from still other language-culture groups and in countries about which little literature exists. Now we were able to learn from the experiences of eight countries on four continents utilizing five languages plus three varieties of English, generating responses from over 2,300 alumni, mentors, and host family members. Moreover, few cross-cultural studies exist that identify aspects particular to specific cultural or nationality groups while also extrapolating those which might be universal to all.

The Follow-on Project again assessed program outcomes and their impact on both alumni and hosts, some five, ten, and twenty years later (we limited our study to a 20-year time span although most participating MOs have alumni records that date back 60 and more years). What differed now, however, was our interest in identifying specific program components that most contributed to the desired outcomes (e.g., orientation, homestay, the role of the group leader, the role of the target language, intercultural interventions, etc.) That is, this project carefully investigated: what program aspects can and should be measured, how best to measure them, which had the most impact on participants, and how, in the end, they further Federation EIL’s mission. Whereas all components assume varying degrees of importance, what is quite clear is that a sojourn with a host family is indeed at the very core of the experience, allowing participants to develop a sense of belonging, to enter the culture as a member, to provide a sense of security, and to develop relationships that often last beyond the program itself, indeed a lifetime. The second component that stands out for most is the need and benefits of developing host language proficiency which helps not only to enhance communication but provides greater access to the local culture and allows participants to see the world through a new lens, an expanded worldview.

Our expectation is that our research findings will help refine program goals, improve program design, enrich orientation processes, focus interventions, and maximize desired results. The study also

identified criteria for predicting intercultural success, participation selection, marketing, and improved assessment, all areas that can result in administrative and educational benefits. Finally, the project was designed to also contribute insights to the fields of language education, intercultural communication, and related disciplines, and serve kindred programs pursuing intercultural endeavors around the world – in student exchange, study abroad, service, business, and government.

These assumptions were all explored and discussed extensively in this expanded Follow-on Project. Our hope is that this effort will add to the **diversity of languages and cultures** under discussion in the literature, be **geographically widespread**, and cover a **timeframe** that spans many years. The results of this Project once again publicly shared and widely disseminated through websites, publications, conferences, and workshops in a manner similar to the dissemination plan carried out after the Initial Project.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

The scope of these two research projects is quite amazing – although they involved only eight countries, they were possible thanks to the existence of the worldwide structure of the Federation EIL, a non-profit international, intercultural educational organization that has existed for over 85 years with an even greater number of member countries. This structure presents a unique opportunity to conduct research of the type in question. Secondly, the fact that various entities aligned to provide funding, support the research, and make alumni files available, is also quite a feat. The institutions and entities involved brought together a cross-section of educational institutions, government funding, private funding, and exchange organizations that included the following: the Center for Social Development (CSD) at Washington University; the Center for Educational Research in Culture, Language, and Literacy (CERCLL) at the University of Arizona; the Federation EIL and eight Member Organizations; the SIT Graduate Institute at World Learning; and Consultants and Psychometricians at the University of Aveiro in Aveiro, Portugal.

From the onset, the plan envisioned was an ongoing study, hopefully to be followed by further research efforts pending additional funding, plus expanded research efforts that might eventually involve all Member Organizations worldwide. It is clear that many benefits can accrue to collaborating MOs quite aside from the results obtained. For example, this project had several effects on participating MOs: a) first of all, it engaged Member Organizations in a learning process that will further their efforts in several areas, b) it improves understanding of and furthers Federation EIL goals and modus operandi, c) it has the potential to improve delivery of volunteer service projects and exchange programs, and d) it may enhance development of the intercultural competencies of future participants and possibly of mentors and host families as well. In addition, the findings clearly also have marketing implications, program design and implementation implications, and ultimately educational and training benefits, if the results are carefully considered and taken into account.

Finally, the research findings also contribute important knowledge to the field of intercultural education regarding international and intercultural programs, especially as concerned with the identification, development, assessment, and impact of intercultural communicative competencies on the lives of all those involved. As an “acknowledged leader in international, intercultural exchange,” it is indeed fitting for the Experiment Federation to undertake projects of this sort – for itself and on behalf of others. For this reason, the final phase of both projects involves ongoing dissemination of the results through publications in professional journals, workshops, and presentations at relevant professional conferences in the US and abroad.

[NOTE: Both studies are incorporated into a work titled “Intercultural Communicative Competence in Educational Exchange: A Multinational Perspective,” published by Routledge Publishers, NY, 2018.]