

Comparing French and Chinese students' intercultural competence: a focus on interpersonal engagement

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The ability to operate effectively across various cultural contexts is now crucial for managers (Molinsky, 2009) and multinationals companies (MNCs) enter in a fierce competition to attract intercultural competent profiles. To meet this increasing demand and answer the mandate to advance intercultural competencies (AACSB; 2011), business education offers cross-cultural management classes as an integral part of its curricula (Szkudlarek, McNett, Romani, & Lane, 2013; Musil, 2006) and fosters study abroad programs (Jackson, 2015). Not surprisingly the number of international students has increased significantly over the last decades, according to the international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the number of international students worldwide rose from 0.8 million in 1975 to 3.7 million in 2009 (Sood, 2012). However while education abroad students are expected to return home with enhanced intercultural competence, research reveals that many do not fully benefit from their stay in the host environment (Jackson, 2015, Varela & Gatlin-Watts, 2014). A recurring issue is the integration of international students with domestic students (Rienties, Beusaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet & Kommers, 2012). We know that non western students face more adjustment issues than their western counterparts and that social integration is challenging to them (Rienties et al, 2012). Given that Chinese studying abroad are estimated to increase from 544500 in 2016 to 700000-800000 in 5 years (Wangshu, 2017), propelling international students' intercultural competence especially in the dimensions linked to social integration and relation to host country nationals is a crucial endeavour. We know as well that Chinese students learn differently than other international students (Selvarajah, 2006, Burrows, 2016) and that they face more language issues Selvarajah, (2006) as do Chinese expatriates (Zhang & Harzing, 2016). Our aim in this paper is to compare the way Chinese students in France and French students abroad develop the dimension of their intercultural skills linked to social

integration. We want to identify the situations triggering the development of that dimension of intercultural competence and understand whether these situations are different according to the Chinese or French background of the students. For this purpose we use Bennett's (2008, p 97) definition of intercultural competence " A set of cognitive, affective and behavioural skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts". To do so we analyse the results of the measure of an intercultural competency test: the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) test (Mendenhall, Stevens, Bird, Oddou & Osland (2007/2012)) taken by both French students abroad and Chinese students in France before and after their international assignment focusing on the behavioural dimension of interpersonal engagement. We then analyse qualitatively both students' population self-reflexive reports on their experience. We chose to focus our investigations on the dimension interpersonal engagement of Intercultural Effectiveness Scale that relates to the ability to develop positive relationships with host nationals in line with our objective of understanding international students' integration. This is important to get an insight on the development of this domain of intercultural competence since the ability to create and maintain relationships with individuals in cross-cultural/global setting is a key competency domain in global leadership and expatriate adjustment literature (Arthur & Bennet, 1995; Osland, 2008; Thomas & Lazarova, 2006). We know indeed that developing relationship to locals is crucial, host-country nationals can be seen as "socializing agents" enhancing expatriates' adjustment (Toh & DeNisi, 2007). Indeed, social support and information received from locals can help expatriates to decipher the host country ' s social and cultural codes and behaviors and ameliorate much of the adjustment-related stress they experience.

After describing our study abroad and its theoretical underpinning, we will precise the dimensions of the test Intercultural Effectiveness Scale. We will then present our methodology, our results and discuss key findings from the analysis of this study abroad support program.

Study abroad follow-up program and theoretical underpinning

As mentioned before, we measure the evolution of students' intercultural competence during their stay abroad, for this purpose we chose the IES Scale, developed by Mendenhall, Stevens, Bird, Oddou & Osland (2007/2012) based on a synthesis of seminal models from global leadership and expatriate adjustment literature. French students are tested before their departure for one year study abroad. The second stage of our programme consists in asking to the students to complete a personal development plan based on the weakest dimension of their Intercultural Effectiveness Scale test score, task suggested by Mendenhall, Stevens, Bird, Oddou & Osland (2007/2012). On top of their personal development plan, we ask to the students to reflect on their experience, to share critical situations linked to cultural differences and to explain how they went beyond and how they will valorize it for their career. In this perspective, the programme follows the experiential training cycle, the learner gains concrete experience, reflect on this experience, engage in abstract thinking and then actively experiments putting into practice new understandings (Kolb, 1983). When French students are back from their year abroad, they take again the IES test. Chinese students follow nearly the same protocol, however they take the first IES test when they arrive in France and the second around two years after before they leave back for China. Both cohort receive feedback on their test by group of twenty with an Associate-Professor IES certified.

The dimensions assessed by the intercultural effectiveness scale

The three broad facets or dimensions for individuals: the cognitive/perceptual, other/relationship, and self/self-efficacy domains (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, et. al., 2005; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Black et. al., 1991; Thomas, 1998: 247) sustain the conceptualisation of the three main dimensions assessed by the Intercultural effectiveness scale: Continuous Learning, Interpersonal Engagement, and Hardiness (Mendenhall, Stevens, Bird, Oddou & Osland; 2007/2012). These three main dimensions are each assessed by two sub dimensions in the IES scale. The dimension of continuous learning examines how people cognitively approach cultural difference and is assessed in the IES by measuring self-awareness

and exploration. Self-awareness influences one's ability to continuously learn as well as how one learns. Exploration consists in the willingness to understand ideas, values, norms, situation and behaviors that are new and different. The second main dimension "Interpersonal engagement" relates to the ability to develop positive relationships with host nationals. This dimension emerged as an important factor in successful overseas adjustment (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985, Toh & DeNisi, 2007). This factor is assessed in the IES through two scales: world orientation and relationship interest. World orientation measures the degree to which one is interested in and seeks to actively learn about other cultures and the people that live with them. Relationship interest refers to the degree to which people have a desire and willingness to initiate and maintain relationships with people from other cultures.

The last main dimension is hardiness and refers to the degree to which people are predisposed to be open to differences in a cognitive and emotional way and avoid being judgmental. It is made up of two dimensions: Resilience and positive regards. Resilience measures people's ability to effectively manage their emotions and stress (Osland, 2008). Positive regards refers to the ability to view other cultures and people from those cultures in a positive way, to avoid stereotyping and to be non judgmental about new ideas and behaviors. The obverse of this competency is referred to as ethnocentrism (Black, 1990; Schaffer & al, 2006).

The development of the IES inventory items and scales is based on the above concepts, 52 self-report statements were written, all of which were written to allow for subject responses using a 5 points likert format ranging from 1 = "Strongly disagree", 2 = "Disagree", 3 = "Neither agree nor disagree", 4 = "Agree", 5 = "Strongly agree" (Mendenhall, Stevens, Bird, Oddou & Osland; 2007/2012)

Methodology

We measured the development of students' intercultural competence with the IES scale (Mendenhall, Stevens, Bird, Oddou & Osland; 2007/2012). Then since our study is exploratory we use a qualitative approach to grasp the complexity of the process of intercultural competence development linked to country of origin of our students (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We started from descriptive coding to let emerge categories linked to international students' ways of improving their dimension of intercultural effectiveness "interpersonal engagement". To do so we analysed the kind of events the students engaged in during their stay abroad. Practically we analyse students' self-reflexive exercises and field notes taken by two of the authors during the IES test debriefing sessions with a focus on the ones who increased or decreased their IES score on the interpersonal engagement dimension after their year abroad. We review those data first for the French students and then for the Chinese students with the initial orienting framework of understanding whether the development of the dimension of intercultural effectiveness "Interpersonal Engagement" differs or not among both population.

Evaluation of students' improvement

Demographic Characteristics of participants

The French population consisted of 158 participants from Ecole de Management de Strasbourg, Business school from the University of Strasbourg located in the east of France. They took the pre IES test from March to June 2017 before their departure for one year abroad, spent their year abroad in the following countries, UK; Germany; Canada, Quebec, US, Mexico, Argentina, Korea, Japan, Hungaria and came back in their home university in September 2018. The Chinese population then took the post IES test from September to October 2018, the students are all in their twenties with 65% female and 35% male.

The Chinese population consisted of 23 participants, Chinese students spending 2 years at the Ecole de Management de Strasbourg. They took the pre IES test in October 2017 after their arrival in September 2017 and before their return in China in April 2019

We used IES to assess intercultural competence at the beginning (T1) and end (T2) of the development program, we conducted ANOVA (a repeated measure analysis of variance) analysis to evaluate the difference between the and post IES scores and to assess the development results (Feng, 2016; Huck & Mc Lean, 1975)

For French students (See table 1) the group achieved a significant improvement of the overall IES score (Pre: 3,678, Post: 3,898). The main dimension of Interpersonal engagement experienced the highest increase (Pre: 3,749, Post: 4,032)

TABLE 1. ANOVA Analyses for Pre and Post IES Results French students

Dimensions	Before		After		Difference
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Continuous learning	3.952	0,308	4.168	0,305	0,216***
Self-awareness	3.705	0,457	3.942	0,388	0,237***
Exploration	4.199	0,343	4.394	0,322	0,195***
Interpersonal_Engagement	3.749	0,51	4.032	0,476	0,283***
World Orientation	3.309	0,733	3.712	0,694	0,403***
Relationship_Development	4.19	0,514	4.353	0,426	0,163***
Hardiness	3.31	0,446	3.481	0,446	0,171***
Positive Regard	3.25	0,593	3.487	0,558	0,237***
Emotional Resilience	3.37	0,535	3.474	0,563	0,104**
Overall IES Score	3.678	0,317	3.898	0,319	0,22***

p < .05. *p < .001.

For Chinese students the overall IES score surprisingly decreases (Pré: 3,692, Post:3,552) as the dimension interpersonal engagement on which we want to focus (Pre: 3,619, Post: 3,463)

TABLE 2. ANOVA Analyses for Pre and Post IES Results for Chinese students

Dimensions	Before		After		Difference
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Continuous learning	4.289	0.37	3.982	0.373	-0.308***
Self-awareness	4.264	0.36	3.848	0.406	-0.416***
Exploration	4.315	0.413	4.115	0.408	-0.2**
Interpersonal_Engagement	3.619	0.515	3.463	0.398	-0.156
World Orientation	3.656	0.74	3.376	0.533	-0.28**
Relationship_Development	3.583	0.617	3.551	0.552	-0.032
Hardiness	3.167	0.564	3.212	0.447	0.045
Positive Regard	2.954	0.616	3.107	0.419	0.152
Emotional Resilience	3.378	0.595	3.317	0.611	-0.062
Overall IES Score	3.692	0.366	3.552	0.337	-0.14**

p < .05. *p < .001.

Qualitative analysis

Based on these results we focused on students having increased or decreased their individual score on the main dimension interpersonal engagement of a minimum of 0,3 points for both Chinese and French populations and analysed their self-reflexive exercise.

For French students we identified 56 students having progressed in that extent but only 42 completed their report and 8 having regressed among those 4 did not complete their report-

We identified 8 Chinese students having progressed and 9 having regressed in that extend, all the 23 students completed thoroughly their report.

We coded descriptively those reports focusing on the learning situations enabling the students to engage interaction with host nationals:

1. French students

<p>“I was scared but I improved my Spanish and being able to do an oral presentation helped me to develop self-confidence” (S. English B2; Spanish B2; Interpersonal Engagement (IE) ↗, Sevilla)</p> <p>“Improving my Chinese helped me reduced stress and be more confident” (B. English B2, Chinese B1; IE ↗; China)</p> <p>“The unknown does not scare me anymore, I am excited about it now, I can speak English with anybody at anytime” (W. English B2, Spanish C1, IE ↗, Halifax)</p> <p>I had to be accepting of my poor English, level I didn’t dare speaking to others (S. English B2, German B1, IE ↘, Reading)</p>	<p>Gain confidence through language improvement</p>
<p>“I enrolled in country’s culture course, I learned about the culture, about the massacre of aborigines, I questioned the country I was in (O. English B2, Spanish C1, Sydney, IE ↗,)</p> <p>I went to Louvain to stay close to home, I can’t say I had a change of scenery (B. English B1, Spanish B2, IE ↘, Louvain, Belgium)</p>	<p>Motivation for the country, interest for its history</p>
<p>Through group project you learn different approaches on how to do work, being patient and understanding is necessary when working in a multicultural group (B. English B2, Chinese B1; IE ↗, Taiwan)</p>	<p>Group work</p>
<p>“I had a buddy there with whom I had a lot in common, he was the president of the uni impro club, I could assist to their impro session every week, they integrate me from the beginning (W. English B2, Spanish C1; Halifax, IE ↗)</p> <p>“I was French teacher with Japanese students, I discover how to initiate contacts in a foreign country and the social codes” (M. English B1, Spanish C1, Tokyo, IE ↗)</p>	<p>Extra-curricular activities Jobs Personal support</p>
<p>“I spent a lot of free time at the university with other students because I felt really good in the building, students have access to a gym, a comfy library and a great canteen” (M, English B2, German C1, Friedrichshafen, IE ↗)</p>	<p>Premises, feeling well at university</p>

2 Chinese Students

<p>“Language is very important but the most important is to have confidence to communicate with others, when my English and my French improved, I took the initiative to communicate with colleagues » (Q. IE ↗)</p> <p>“French is my advantage, I studied French at the University, I could be confident and qualified to handle things, especially when we work in multicultural group” (F. IE ↗)</p> <p>“I can ask the better Chinese students in French to help me and let them take me in the new group” (S. IE ↘)</p>	<p>Gain confidence through language improvement</p>
<p>“In the classroom most of the questions asked by the teachers are open (...) Children under the exam oriented education are not ready to answer, I tried to find out why I felt inadaptation” (A, IE ↘)</p> <p>“Meet people from different countries, learn about different styles of thinking, if you want to cooperate with them, you should respect them and their ideas” (B, IE ↗)</p> <p>“Education system and methods are completely different than in China” (YC, IE ↗)</p>	<p>Different ways of thinking</p>
<p>“For example when I have some arguments with French classmates, I will let them do anything they want, after professor disagrees with them, I will give my plan B” (Y. IE ↗)</p> <p>“I have found that I have to communicate with my classmates especially in work group, team work is the most important” (YA. IE ↗)</p> <p>“I was not familiar with the form of group project, I was not confident and natural enough” (SH. IE ↘)</p> <p>“ After this group cooperation I felt more confident not only did I improve my education but I also I become more competitive on the job market (D, IE ↘)</p>	<p>Group work</p>
<p>“I had a tandem project with a French woman willing to learn Chinese, we helped each other and learn a lot, at the beginning sometimes we did not understand each other.” (Q. IE ↗)</p> <p>“ I didn’t like to present my feelings and thinking, I was afraid of being rejected or ignored but help and influence of my German classmate, passionate and friend, she always asks for my feeling, discuss with me and show me some methods, ways to solve problems. I gradually tend to present myself and take the initiative” (Q. IE ↗)</p>	<p>Personal support</p>
<p>“I learned from a German classmate to be organized (F. IE ↗)</p> <p>“I learn the efficient learning methods from the Germans and learn their rigorous working style” (X. IE ↗)</p>	<p>German efficiency</p>

Results

Bases on our comparison of Chinese and French students, we observed that both populations gain confidence to connect with host international students when they improved their language skills. Most of the French students who improved their dimension of interpersonal engagement had a minimum level of B1 or B2 in English and a second language (often the one of the host countries for non-English-speaking host countries). These levels from A basic user to C proficient user is based for the “Common European Framework of reference”.

Both French and Chinese students reflect on their international work group project, the experience appears as more challenging for Chinese students than for the French ones. The most difficult aspect is communication. Chinese students who improved reflect deeply on direct and indirect communication style. Chinese students explained during an IES test-debriefing session that they were not used to be assessed on a team basis.

Not surprisingly French students who improved their interpersonal engagement dimension were interested and motivated by their host countries and their cultures, whereas the one who regressed even did not mention their host country in their report, or chose close country like Belgium.

Chinese were struck by complete different ways of thinking and different education systems. French students in China or Taiwan noticed this difference but reflect less on it.

For both population personal support and special acquaintance offer an excellent way to discover the culture and to adapt to difference. Yet the major difference is that Chinese students focus on the academic environment whereas French students consider building these ties through extra-curricular activities or small jobs as well.

Premises and the opportunity to spend time on the campus seems to be of importance for French students.

For both populations, the one who improved are generally the one who genuinely reflect on their international experience. The one who completed superficially their reports (or not at all for some French) had a tendency to decrease on their Interpersonal Engagement dimension.

Discussion

We identified differences in the way French and Chinese students develop their interpersonal engagement dimension of intercultural effectiveness in spite of the limitations of our exploratory study. French students stay abroad in different host countries among those Asian countries but in western countries as well, whereas Chinese students all study in France experiencing a high cultural distance. Another limitation consists on the taking of the test in France for both French and Chinese students, both population not being in the same situation.

However, our main contribution is to show that Chinese students consider the opportunity to develop their intercultural competence only in the sphere of the academic environment whereas French acknowledge the assistance of extracurricular activities and small jobs in this endeavour. Consistent with Varela (2017) we confirm that the development of behavioural aspect of intercultural competence is not an automatic learning outcome of study abroad program but that students need to experience “meaningful interactions” during those sojourns to develop in this regard. The students who develop meaningful relationships (through personal relationship or group work) increased indeed their dimension of intercultural effectiveness “interpersonal engagement” linked to behaviour, however for Chinese students these meaningful interactions occur mainly in the academic environment whereas French students develop them outside of the university as well. We observed the tendency among our Chinese students to build relationships with German classmates to learn from their organization skills

International team work offers the opportunity to both French and Chinese students to experience these meaningful interactions, we highlight the greater difficulty expressed by Chinese students in those group situation and the necessity to help them in this regard especially based on the question

of communication styles difference. (Meyer, 2014). The negative stereotyping faced by Chinese students may explain as well the difficulty perceived during international group work (Bonache, Langinier & Zarraga-Oberty, 2016; Selvarajah, 2006)

A second contribution is that developing language proficiency abroad beyond being a cognitive Learning outcome of the experience (Varela, 2017) is crucial to gain enough confidence to interact with locals (Noels, Pon & Clement, 1996)

Our last contribution is to illustrate the importance of reflexivity to support the development of students' behavioural dimension of intercultural effectiveness (Kassis-Henderson, Cohen and McCulloch, 2018; Feng, 2016, Mendenhall, Arnadottir, Oddou, Burke, 2013). Indeed, for both population the one who improved are generally the ones who genuinely reflect on their international experience.

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