



Università
Ca' Foscari
Venezia

Master's Degree
in Language Sciences
(LM-39)

Final Thesis

"Destinazione Venezia": a project supporting outgoing
mobile students

Developing intercultural communicative competence for study abroad

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Graziano Serragiotto

Assistant supervisor

Ch. Prof. Giuseppe Maugeri

Graduand

Beatrice Triches

Matriculation number

871939

Academic Year

2018/ 2019

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ABSTRACT

This work aims to investigate the effects of an intercultural training in view of a mobility program. In particular, the project “*Destinazione Venezia*” is presented, consisting of a training proposal intended to prepare students for their study abroad and a follow-up research on the effectiveness of the course.

The main research questions developed are - whether an intercultural training is beneficial towards the preparation of outgoing students and if this type of support is effective in enhancing the students’ intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

The thesis initially reviews the concept of intercultural communicative competence and its main components, to then describe the phenomenon of academic mobility, with particular focus on its characteristics in the United States.

The analysis sheds light on the relationship between ICC and study abroad, while also arguing for the implementation of support in mobility programs.

First, we will describe the preparatory training realized at Colgate University, in the United States and intended for exchange students at Ca’ Foscari University. Second, we will present the research aiming to evaluate the effectiveness of the course in preparing the students for the mobility.

The study provides significant evidence that students benefit from enrolling in a pre-study abroad course focusing on ICC. Participants who have attended the course arrived more prepared for the experience and have shown important progress in their competence.

INTRODUCTION

In an ever-developing world with an increasing number of people moving across the globe, from traveling to working and studying abroad, our connections with unfamiliar peoples and places have increased massively. One of the greatest results of globalization is indeed the number of exchanges and flows of people that the world experiences every day. In this new era, crossing borders has become natural and at times even essential; “tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers and other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of and between nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree” (Appadurai, 1990). We are indeed seeing a reshaping of the world, where humans have come to be more and more interconnected in any possible way.

This reshaping, far from being a mere movement of people, has triggered several changes in views, mentalities and ways of experiencing the world. Human beings are, now more than ever, facing the new challenge of confronting diversity and otherness. When coping with what we consider being different or unfamiliar, we seem to react in countless different ways: from rejection to curiosity, from tolerance to inclusiveness.

It is indeed the innumerable differences in our perception of the world and our awareness of it that make this confrontation so complex and multifaceted: personal and cultural factors come into play simultaneously, thus creating a whole different view for each of us, different lenses in a way, shaping our views.

How, then, can we confront these differences? How can we communicate with others when all these factors are involved?

In the last decades, studies on intercultural communication have tried to answer these needs of dealing with diversity. They have aimed to find the means enabling us to face these challenges: it has become clear that relating effectively to people affiliated to other cultures requires awareness and competence on the part of interlocutors. Scholars have therefore focused on developing models defining intercultural communicative competence, in such a way to encompass the numerous elements that are implied in the concept. In particular, the main purpose has been that of determining the role and interplay of specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes that can lead to a successful interaction.

Research seems to suggest that intercultural communication is not spontaneous or natural, meaning that awareness and competence are to some extent needed to become a “good” intercultural speaker.

Moreover, in light of the changes that globalization has brought about, education has undergone a reshaping too, evolving into a much more international and intercultural process.

The internationalization of education has become a key factor and focus for almost any educational and governmental institution: we can see its effects in the measures directed both at attracting international students, faculty and research and also promoting mobility abroad. This latter phenomenon has become of paramount importance in education, moving as much as 5.3 million international mobile students all over the world in 2017 (<http://data.uis.unesco.org/>). The consequences are tremendous, and they are not restricted to higher education: mobility has indeed transformed the job market, economy, traveling but also our way of experiencing the world.

In these circumstances, interculturality has become inevitably not only the logical outcome of exchanges but also the underlying principle and ultimate aim of education. That said, how can we ignore the importance of giving the right means to communicate interculturality?

One of the most important objectives of a modern society is therefore educating people to interculturality, in other words preparing students to be communicators in situations of cultural diversity.

This thesis aims to define the role of intercultural communicative competence in higher education and, more specifically, in the context of mobility abroad. The conviction is that intercultural communicative competence is a fundamental feature of education and particularly of study abroad projects where intercultural exchanges are the founding principles and primary objective of any program.

After having reviewed the literature on culture pedagogy, intercultural communicative competence and study abroad, we will present the project called "*Destinazione Venezia*". This is divided into two parts: the first is dedicated to the proposal of a course in preparation of a study abroad experience in Italy and the second is concerned with a study on the effectiveness of this course in preparing outgoing students. We will therefore first describe the course that we have designed and carried out and then show the results of the follow-up study related to it. Thereby, the research questions will be developed - whether an intercultural training is beneficial towards the preparation of outgoing students and if this type of support is effective in enhancing the students' intercultural communicative competence.

This work is divided into four chapters: in the first two a review of the literature is provided on the topics of intercultural communicative competence and study abroad, in the third the preparatory course is presented in detail and in the fourth the research is explained and the results are discussed.

More specifically, in the first chapter we will define intercultural communicative competence and its deep roots in the communicative approach. In order to do so, we will review the existing literature and show how there has been an important shift throughout the history of foreign language teaching: language, culture and communication have always been addressed in various ways and to a different extent. The diverse approaches have reflected historical events and beliefs of given periods in time and have followed both the developments of research in second language teaching and in many other connected fields of study. The review will result in introducing intercultural communicative competence, where the dimension of culture, interculturality and communication come into play. We will thus propose the most current definitions, models and methodologies illustrating and embodying this concept. Our focus will then be directed to relating intercultural communicative competence to foreign language education and its practices; we will analyze what can be done to build intercultural communicative competence in the classroom, hence highlighting the learning and teaching processes implicated.

In chapter two, the concept of mobility will be introduced and analyzed both from the point of view of the societal phenomenon it represents and from that of the student experience. We will try to define the related terms, the global trends and effects of mobility, as well as its historical background and features in the United States. We will then also look at mobility from the students' perspective, that of a multidimensional life experience. Language learning, sociality and intercultural communication are equally fundamental dimensions constituting study abroad and fundamental factors to consider in implementing our course. We will first show common practice in assisting outgoing students and the programs designed to support them before, during and after their stay. We will present some examples of training in higher education intended for mobility with the specific purpose of developing intercultural communication. By that means, we will come to stress the importance of intercultural education and the role it can play in training and supporting students going abroad.

In chapter three we will then put forward an example of program preparing outgoing students that we have designed and carried out in the context of the "*Destinazione Venezia*" project.

The argument in support of a preparatory training will be provided, hereby emphasizing the necessity of such a practice and the gains that it can engender.

First, we will introduce the context of our research, thus illustrating the situation in which the training takes place and the reasons for launching the above-mentioned project. After having outlined the characteristics of the study group that the project targets, we will illustrate the preparatory course offered

before departure. We will include the components, framework of reference, goals and approaches adopted in the course, as well as a thorough explanation of the course design and the participants involved. The purpose of introducing this course is also that of providing a concrete example of a training aiming at promoting intercultural communicative competence for mobility.

We will thus focus specifically on the workshops constituting the preparatory course. The lesson plans and activities proposed during the workshops will then be presented and explained in light of the theoretical framework previously discussed.

In chapter four we will then come to introduce the research conducted within the “*Destinazione Venezia*” project. The research is indeed connected with the course since it aims to investigate the effects of the intercultural training on the preparation of outgoing mobile students. First, we will propose the methodology of the research, hereby covering the context in which it takes place, its aims and design, as well as the instruments employed to investigate the matter. In this instance, the reasons, the conceptual framework for the study, together with the research hypotheses will be expressed. Following the detailed description of the methodology, we will then give an account of the process concerning data collection and report the results. These will be thoroughly analyzed and discussed to then provide an overview of the findings, in turn enabling us to draw our conclusions about the study.

CHAPTER 1: Intercultural communicative competence: from teaching culture to promoting intercultural communication

In chapter one we will come to define intercultural communicative competence after having analyzed the evolution of culture teaching in the field of foreign language pedagogy.

First, we will explore how culture has been taught in language classrooms and the most common approaches to culture throughout the history of second language teaching. The chronological perspective will embrace the early concept of culture as a subordinate component of language learning where only literature and history were taken into consideration, the introduction of everyday culture in the curriculum first and interculturality then, up to communication as the new focus of attention.

As these views developed, the role of language, culture, civilization and communication in language teaching have changed greatly according to the different periods of time and the convictions, innovations and political backgrounds that the latter have brought to research.

This review will result in introducing intercultural communicative competence, where the dimension of culture, interculturality and communication come into play. In the last three decades, second language acquisition scholars have turned to many different, yet related, fields of study in order to find a common framework for ICC: anthropology, sociology, linguistics and communication studies have all had a part in outlining the characteristics of this concept. Manifold ideas on the topic have therefore arisen, with researchers providing diverse views, definitions and models.

As a matter of fact, many models have been proposed to exemplify and include all the dimensions enclosed in this concept; the most accepted and significant models will be reported and illustrated. Among them, Byram, Bennett, Gudykunst, Deardorff, Fantini, Balboni and Caon's models will be analyzed and used as foundations for our work. Afterwards, the attention will move to intercultural education and its evolution from the early years when it was only meant for professionals training for intercultural situations to more recent years when it became a fundamental focus of education with the aim of creating citizens of the world.

We will then delve into the more practical aspects of intercultural communicative competence and, in particular, its application within the language classroom. Research has indeed paid great attention to the ways ICC can be implemented in teaching: from strategies that can be applied in observation and

communication to experience built through activities, the focus has always been on expanding knowledge, promoting attitudes and developing abilities. Scholars and teachers have therefore relied on theories and methodologies capable of supporting these principles, finding a rationale in Kolb's experiential learning theory. Learning in the context of ICC is therefore seen as a process where experience, perception, cognition and behavior are all involved concurrently.

1.1 Teaching language, culture and interculturality: an historical perspective

Culture has seen different treatments in the history of language pedagogy, many of which have arisen from diverging views on the concept of culture itself.

As a matter of fact, historical and political times have led to distinct interpretations of both what is considered to constitute culture and consequently, to be taught in the classroom. From the focus on information about the country associated with the target language, literary products as carriers of knowledge, exotic facts, differences between the native and the target culture, to the introduction of the intercultural dimension, pedagogy has undergone a great evolution in its way of approaching culture.

In addition to these influences, language teaching approaches and methods have also greatly affected the way cultural studies have been brought about: the rationale behind the grammar-translation method has had an impact on the literary perspective of culture teaching just as the communicative approach has led to the new concept of intercultural communicative competence.

1.1.1 Language and culture in the 1960s and 1970s: a highly debated issue

Although language and culture nowadays seem to be inseparable constituents of any language curriculum, they have been highly debated concepts over the history of second and foreign language education.

Perspectives have changed according to new political and historical eras, while, at the same time, linguists and pedagogists were reshaping the way language was to be taught.

The trend in culture teaching in the seventies was linked to the grammar-translation method and the idea of high culture. During this period of time, only those aspects related to the arts were worthy of attention as they were thought to be the only ones that could contribute to the real development of learners. The underlying idea was the cultivation of the person and personality that could be obtained through the study

of artistic cultural products. It is not surprising that the interest was mainly directed to literary texts, which were considered to be the only real source of cultural knowledge; thus reflecting the conviction that language teaching should aim to cultivate learners who are knowledgeable more than capable of using the language or making sense of the culture. In these years, culture seems therefore to be still a realm directed by philologists and literary scholars more than anthropologists and sociologists.

With time and a new emphasis on communication in language teaching in the 1970s and 1980s, however, the interest seems to shift from the so-called “culture with the big C” to “culture with small c”. The dichotomy between these two types of cultures is a relevant concept when looking at the way culture was approached in teaching during this period of time: on the one hand the “upper-case Culture”, or objective culture, represented through art, literature, drama, classical music, dance, and the subject of study is mainly social, economic, political and linguistic systems and on the other the “lower-case culture”, or subjective culture, describing the psychological features defining a group of people, their thinking and behavior, rather than the institutions they have created (Bennett, 1998).

With this acknowledgment comes the newly found interest towards the study of cultures of everyday life, of ways of talking, eating, behaving but also the customs, beliefs and values; somehow replacing the dated idea of culture being merely conveyed by literary works. A new anthropological and sociological perspective seems to be established among foreign language experts and teachers, thus partially reevaluating the role of authentic texts. In this modernist perspective, however, all these elements seem to be presented in a fairly superficial way, at times resulting in a mere listing of behaviors, beliefs, celebrations, thereby creating or reinforcing even more stereotypes. Often, the focus is highlighting the differences between the native and target culture, or those aspects that create misunderstandings (Kramsch, 2013).

Another important point in depicting the approach to culture pedagogy during this period of time is that the emphasis is still very much culture specific. This implies that the only goal of this type of education is informing about the target culture; there is no attention to the process of understanding another culture or no explicit focus on those models and characteristics underlying cultures.

Moreover, in this perspective, the identity of the social group that is studied corresponds to a hierarchical idea where “the main” culture associated with the given language is the only one taken into account, often leaving aside many other cultures deemed not primary or “the original”. In the field of English as a foreign or second language, for example, British culture is the only subject worthy of consideration,

whereas there is no mentioning of other English-speaking cultures nor a more inclusive perspective of English as a Lingua Franca. The same was happening to other languages and cultures such as French, where a Eurocentric view was still predominant and francophone cultures other than the French were discarded. Not only was a culture-specific approach to teaching limited in the way it presented culture, but also in the content and subject of analysis since a very constrained and insufficient idea of a culture was provided, in which the concept of nation, language and speaking community corresponded and were oversimplified.

1.1.2 The 1980s: from teaching culture to interculturality

Starting from the eighties, while communication was being established as the essence of language teaching, taking into account the context, also in terms of culture, became an increasingly valued practice. Because of the necessity to learn how to communicate in a context that was different from ours, attention given to culture as a whole was now growing. On the one hand, especially in relation to European studies, the concept of language awareness and the use of language as connected to a cultural and societal context are introduced, on the other hand the necessity of distinguishing real cultural models from stereotypes arises (Caon, 2013).

In this period, it is this new anthropological view to be established in the field and, as a consequence, a deeper perspective on cultural practices is offered, thus also triggering a change in pedagogy. As a matter of fact, a change happened in the way culture was dealt with in the classroom: observation and meaning making were now essential tools of analysis. Because of these new methods, the emphasis and aim of cultural activities began to move from the final product, namely the content that is learnt, to the process involved in learning. For instance, in the context of American research, Crawford-Lange (1984) argued for an integration of language and culture in the curriculum and stressed that “culture is in the process of becoming and should therefore be taught as a process”. A program was proposed in which students were asked to discuss critically and engage on a cultural and societal theme. In this innovative regard, a new conviction was developing: the need to focus on the psychological mechanisms of interculturality, on the awareness of cultural aspects.

This new idea arises from two main principles: on the one hand a shift from culture-specific to a culture-general learning and on the other hand a concern towards the individual characteristics of learners. If until then the content-centered pedagogy had not taken into consideration the process of learning nor the

individuals, an evolution was now underway. Although still slow and uncommon, for the first time the knowledge of the students' country of origin, their perception of themselves and national identity started to be acknowledged and addressed as starting points for culture awareness (Risager, 2007).

In addition to this newly found perspective, the newly found interest in anthropological approaches was supported by the development of technology. These new means, especially video recordings, gave way for new visual aspects to be strengthened: observing culture became more easily accessible in the classroom and more attention could be given to details and authentic sources, hence partially leaving aside the generalizations typical of earlier years. All those highly visual aspects of language and culture that were hardly found up to this moment in curricula, such as non-verbal communication and environments, were now available.

Meanwhile, these years brought about important changes in the economic and political realm: the Common European market became stronger and at the same time globalization affected more and more politics and international markets. With the European Union's political and economic project, a new linguistic policy became a fundamental tool of promotion and unity too: the goal was giving the possibility to European citizens to learn the main languages of the Union. This revolutionary policy resulted in an increase in language teaching and, simultaneously, in the popularization and generalization of culture pedagogy, with the beginning of the indissoluble connection language-culture and language teaching-culture teaching (Risager, 2007).

Moreover, after having laid the foundations for a new organization of language and teaching with the introduction of 'the Threshold Level' (1975), van Ek realized a groundbreaking model for communicative competence through a series of works paving the way for the establishment of the communicative approach (1986). This model includes six sub competences: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic, sociocultural and social. Through this structure, he emphasizes the importance of language and its intrinsic link to the social and cultural context where it is produced. In affirming that sociocultural competence is the awareness of the sociocultural context, he implies also that the cognitive dimension cannot be the only one taken into consideration; an affective dimension plays, in fact, an important role in the learners' development. He hereby suggests that attitudes, emotions, opinions, values have to be considered in cultural activities that engage the learner as a human being, hence pioneering a student- and attitude- centered approach that will become common use in the years to come.

1.1.3 Intercultural communication: the new perspectives of the 1960s

During the nineties, most of the earlier decade's assumptions were further developed; while research expanded on the concepts of intercultural and sociocultural competence, language experts became interested in the cultural dimension of language teaching, also following the internationalization of economy.

As a result of the new trend in language teaching represented by the communicative approach, widely accepted in the field by now, language was seen more and more as integrative, pragmatic and context-bound, thus showing the interconnection between language and culture to an even greater extent. As a matter of fact, during the nineties, the take on culture was widely influenced by Claire Kramersch's revolutionary work "Context and culture in language teaching" (1993). Kramersch shaped the notion of culture of the decade by affirming that language is to be considered as a social practice and construct where two or more individuals involved in communication create meaning. According to her, not only are language and culture inextricably linked, but the study of one depends on the other, thus making language learning also culture learning. She states that "culture is often seen as mere information conveyed by the language. If, however, language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching" (Kramersch, 1993, p. 8).

The other main event in this period leading to a change is the internationalization of markets and the newly affirmed relationships between countries both in Europe where the Maastricht treaty created a common European market in 1992 and at the same time worldwide, as economy expanded across borders (Caon, 2013). In this new scene, language policies were put in place to answer the needs of internationalization and to promote unity, especially in Europe.

The result is an unprecedented series of measures, issued by the Council of Europe and more specifically by its linguistic branch, the European Centre for Modern Languages, which affirmed the importance of language education of European citizens by introducing the right to learn two European languages other than their own. The intent is clear: unity and a common underlying European sense of belonging are to be achieved also through the study of European languages. Together with the increase that this brought in language learning, the political value of this decision represented a real breakthrough: a redefinition of the European citizen, who is now expected to know more than the English language and be familiar with more cultures, was underway. As a matter of fact, the reason for this choice was very linked to the cultural dimension of learning a foreign language: English is recognized as *Lingua Franca* and used in

exchanges and communication but if the aim is a veritable cultural integration, a shift from the pluricultural to intercultural dimension, then a second language and culture are needed (Caon, 2013, p. 26).

The innovation, brought by the fundamental studies led by Byram during these years is that culture is not merely a necessary component of communication, but it is also a tool to form a global citizen.

In addition to the European development and the subsequent language policy, another important factor linked to internationalization, made it possible for language and culture teaching to surge and evolve: study travel. As a matter of fact, during this decade, projects such as the one put in place by the European Union, Erasmus, thrived and gave the possibility to thousands of students to study abroad for at least a semester. If at a personal level this project was an opportunity for young people to explore new countries, languages and cultures, while also increasing their job opportunities, at an institutional level it represented, once again, the means to promulgate the Union and its values. The linguistic policy and the implementation of study travel are then vital and complementary components of a bigger picture, in which, nevertheless, language and culture teaching play a fundamental role.

Moreover, as a consequence of the rethinking of statuses of languages, the association language-culture was now challenged. The idea of a Lingua Franca used as a means of communication and that of culture tied with the characteristics of native members was not so clear anymore. A new perspective of culture as being determined by an array of different factors not directly identifiable with one's own country of origin or mother tongue emerged and the existence of multiple cultures even within a community was starting to be acknowledged. For instance, Kramsch's definition of culture exemplifies this view: according to her, culture is a "membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings" (1998, p.10).

Consequently, the old-fashioned analogy between country-language spoken by community-main culture was being debunked: communities share common values, memories and traditions, they are multidimensional and dynamic in nature and cannot be reduced to a single culture or description (Kramsch, 2013).

In light of these new assumptions, pedagogy changed accordingly moving from a culture-specific trend to a culture-general one.

The conviction, which also underlies more recent intercultural theories, is that it would be impossible for students to learn everything they need to know about the target culture, but rather they should be prepared

for unpredictable intercultural settings (Byram, 1997). For this reason, the mechanics of meaning-making and observation are analyzed and practiced in activities in order to train student in intercultural communication. Moreover, critical self-reflection became common practice in the language classroom, thus emphasizing the subjective standpoint from which learners access communication and culture learning. By doing this, students may undergo a change in self and recognize the cultural basis of self/other perceptions. They will, therefore, be prompted to become mediators between cultures, which is indeed the starting point for the development of intercultural communicative competence. This revolutionary conception is what Byram summarized in his very influential works in the nineties (Byram, 1991, 1995, 1997; Byram & Fleming, 1998) through the model of ICC (which we will analyze in detail below).

The shift is clear then also in the way teaching viewed students: just as culture is now approached from different angles, language learners too should be considered individuals who do not necessarily share goals, values, interpretations as other speakers of the language (Giddens, 1991). A new post-modernist approach to culture teaching was developing with the acceptance of a decentered perspective where meaning of events is built in the process of communicating with others. Students learning a new language will not then change their identity but might be led to change subject position (Kramsch, 2013). This essential theory is, indeed, what will gradually lead to the implementation of a student- and process-centered learning of culture.

1.1.4 After 2000: Intercultural communicative competence

The nineties pass on a valuable inheritance to the next decade in terms of approaches to language and culture; above all, the relationship between language and context. It is also thanks to this new conviction that the widespread introduction of the communicative approach was made possible.

As a matter of fact, after a large scholarly work on communicative competence expanding from the eighties on, it is the early 2000s that we see the establishment of a new and more inclusive model. In 2001 the Common European Framework provided both a set of guidelines for language teaching and learning with the introduction of the threshold levels and a model for communicative competence. The model relies on the notion of a competence that is largely defined by context and comprising several components: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic.

In addition to providing a model for language learning, deeply embedded in its contextual dimension, the work by the Council of Europe claimed that competent speakers build communicative competence through the expansion of their experiences of language and culture. In other words, under this conviction, the language learner becomes plurilingual and develops interculturality. “The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how” (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment, 2001, p. 43).

In a plurilingual and therefore also pluricultural approach, the speaker builds up a communicative competence where all experiences, languages, cultures contribute; thus differing from a multilingual or multicultural approach where there is a mere knowledge and coexistence of several languages and cultures. As a result, the language learner is seen more and more as an intercultural communicator, capable of mediating between more than one culture and finding meaning in cultural experiences.

The aim of a plurilingual and pluricultural education is therefore forming intercultural individuals who are successful in different types of communication and settings, from local to international ones.

The consequences in terms of who and what represent the model to be taken into consideration are significant: natives of a language and culture could not be seen as the target anymore. Although the culture of the people who use the language must be acknowledged, the traditional conception that native speakers and their contexts represent the only reliable aim starts to crumble (Risager, 2007).

By questioning the idealization of the native speaker, it became clear that authenticity did not belong only to the native speaker model presented thus far but had to be looked for in a wider perspective. This is apparent in the issue of English as a Lingua Franca, where one cannot simply reduce the representation, use, model to one single identity or community.

One of the proposals that arose from the debate over the role of the intercultural learner and the model to regard is the so-called “third place” or “third culture”.

First proposed in the nineties by Claire Kramsch and further developed in the 2000s, the concept of the third place was created to overcome the dichotomy of first and second culture, the self and the other, the us and them. It is defined as “a symbolic place that is by no means unitary, stable, permanent and homogeneous. Rather it is, like subject positions in post-structuralist theory, multiple, always subject to change and to the tensions and even conflicts that come from being ‘in between’” (Weedon, 1987 as cited in Kramsch, 2009, p. 238).

By working at the intersections and margins of cultures, learners themselves come to find a definition of the third place; they are not in fact passive observers, but they actively experience and explore the other culture in a decentered perspective. Cultural horizons of learners are to some extent changed and displaced in the process of understanding others, going through a dynamic discursive process (Kramsch, 2007).

The third place or culture has three characteristics: popular culture, the learner is in a controversial place and creates meaning on the edges of or in the gaps between cultures; critical culture, because critical thinking of the cultural content is central, there is a need to look beyond dominant cultural beliefs; ecological culture, the methodology is sensitive to the context and responds to the demands of the environment (Lo Bianco et al., 1999).

In light of this definition, learners, or rather intercultural speakers, are now conceived as active meaning seekers who find their own voices, their own cultural discourse, since third culture is to be thought as a neutral state for reflection (Lo Bianco et al., 1999).

The third culture is not, however, the only theory directing attention towards the creation of a cultural discourse and the relationship between language and culture: also, Agar's conceptualization of languaculture represents an important contribution to the field. Starting from an anthropological point of view, in his book "Language Shock: Understanding the culture of conversation" (1995), Agar introduced the concept of 'languaculture' in order to underline the inseparability of the two parts: language and culture. According to the concept, it is through discursive practice that languaculture is created: in particular Scollon explains that "you start with a set of frames or default settings; and when you encounter people with different default values, you construct a frame with those differences. [...] A frame is a metaphor for culture; and by building frames to account for discourse, one crosses the threshold into languaculture" (Scollon, 1995, p. 563).

The concept was then adopted by Risager (Holmen & Risager, 2003) to explain how "languages spread across cultures and cultures spread across languages", thus emphasizing that using language cannot be seen as a neutral cultural practice because different languacultures are always involved.

Once again, the attention was on the inseparability and interface of language and culture, on building one's own cultural discourse by standing at the margins of multiple cultures.

1.2 Intercultural communicative competence: definitions, models and methodology

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is a relatively new concept aiming at integrating the intercultural dimension of education together with language learning in a communicative perspective. Before we move on to define ICC, however, it is necessary to understand the groundwork making its birth and introduction into language teaching possible. As a matter of fact, we cannot ignore the roots ICC has in the notion of communicative competence. After having analyzed the notion of communicative competence we will focus on intercultural communicative competence, a newly found concept that encompasses a new approach to culture and intercultural communication. We will present Byram's definition of ICC and the innovation that he has brought to the field of second language pedagogy. Other important concepts connected with intercultural communication such as intercultural speaker and encounter will then be explained in order to understand better the notion of ICC and specifically its aims. Moreover, we will analyze a series of models outlining ICC or related theories that enable us both to see different conceptualizations and to gain a full view. Scholars have indeed represented ICC in manifold ways and at times they have found and described different components of ICC. We will therefore introduce and explain the models conceived by Byram, Bennett, Gudykunst, Deardorff, Fantini, and Balboni and Caon.

In conclusion, we will review the origins of intercultural communication with its roots in different fields of study and application and its consequent role in education. In particular we will highlight the importance that has been given to it recently by a number of institutions worldwide: from UNESCO, to the European Union and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), intercultural communication has become one of the main aims of education at all levels.

1.2.1 Intercultural communicative competence and related concepts

The term competence, despite being very controversial, is often associated with Chomsky who made a distinction in his book "Aspects of the Theory of Syntax" (1965) between competence, the knowledge of a language, and performance, the use of language in real situations.

Many linguists in the sixties, however, dismissed Chomsky's idea of competence, dubbed too abstract and purely linguistic by taking Dell Hymes's "communicative competence" as a reference. Hymes'

conception was indeed believed to be broader and more realistic since it represented the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative settings. Hymes' approach to competence led to a greater emphasis towards the sociolinguistic dimension of language use. In 1980 Canale and Swain further developed the concept describing communicative competence as a synthesis of an underlying system of knowledge and skill needed for communication (Bacarić & Djigunović, 2007).

They outlined a model for communicative competence, which they divided into other subcompetences: grammatical, sociolinguistic, where they also included sociocultural and discourse competence, and strategic. A few years later, in 1986, van Ek revised the definition and categorization of communicative competence classifying it into six components: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic, socio-cultural and social competence.

It is thanks to both these advances, combining social sciences and linguistics, and to a newly found concept and role of culture in language education that intercultural communicative competence emerged. The **term intercultural communicative competence**, firstly introduced by Michael Byram, reflects accurately the essence and underlying concepts that it is meant to convey: on the one hand the emphasis on communication and interaction using language and on the other the ability to do so in an inter-cultural perspective. Although a shared definition is difficult to find in the literature, Byram's conception of ICC seems to be the most accepted and complete. It is described as a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills applied through action which enables one, either singly or together with others, to:

- understand and respect people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself;
- respond appropriately, effectively and respectfully when interacting and communicating with such people;
- establish positive and constructive relationships with such people;
- understand oneself and one's own multiple cultural affiliations through encounters with cultural "difference".

(Barrett et al., 2014, p. 16-17)

The innovation Byram brought to the field of language and culture teaching is evident: while the concept of culture as being solely knowledge of a given community was already outdated, the idea of including a behavioral and affective dimension represented a real breakthrough. Intercultural communicative competence, then, encompasses much more than knowing a second culture; it is first of all a complex combination and interrelation of all of the components, whose foundation can be found in the attitudes of the intercultural speaker. In light of this realization, the success of the interaction cannot be judged only in terms of an effective exchange of information, but it has to depend on the establishment and maintenance of human relationships, capacity that depends, to a great extent, on attitudinal factors (Coperías Aguilar, 2002).

In addition, another important concept introduced by Byram that made it possible to move forward in research is that of the **intercultural speaker** as point of reference for learners, replacing the idealized notion of native speaker.

The intercultural speaker, also called mediator, has the ability to manage communication and interaction between people of different cultural identities and languages while he is also able to come out of himself and take other perspectives (Coperías Aguilar, 2002). Taking the intercultural speaker as a model cannot be perceived as lowering the standards, rather it is an evolution, a change of point of view. The model considering intercultural speakers incorporates a much more complex representation since they possess more than one cultural and social identity, they affiliate to different cultures and belong to several speech communities. Moreover, an intercultural speaker is determined to understand, to gain an inside view while at the same time contributes to the other's understanding of their own culture (Moeller & Nugent, 2014).

In a perspective that acknowledges the entirety and background of the intercultural speaker, it is expectable that interlocutors will bring their own knowledge into communication, their values and cultural repertoire, thus enriching the exchange.

As a consequence, an **intercultural encounter** differs from a "simple" encounter because a different set of cultural factors comes into play.

"An inter-personal encounter becomes an intercultural encounter when cultural differences are perceived and made salient either by the situation or by the individual's own orientation and attitudes" (Barrett et al., 2014, p. 16). The individuals involved in the interaction draw upon their plurilingual competence since the way in which people interpret and communicate in these encounters is shaped by the languages

and cultures they bring to them (Barrett et al., 2014). Only through encounter will the learners be able to become aware of the need to acknowledge the complexity of human beings and their multiple social identities coming into play.

1.2.2 Models of intercultural communicative competence

In the previous section we have introduced Byram's definition and concept of ICC because of the influence of his pioneering work, we will then delve into his model of intercultural communicative competence and present it in more detail. Other important models, however, exist in the literature and they constitute developments, modifications, alternatives or underlying theoretical frameworks to Byram's model, thus representing valuable insights on understanding more profoundly ICC, its characteristics, goals and pedagogical uses. After presenting Byram's model in more detail, we will focus on different models put forward by other scholars such as Bennet, Gudykunst, Deardorff, Fantini, Balboni and Caon.

As we have already mentioned, in **Byram's (1997) Multidimensional Model of Intercultural Competence**, three main components are included: attitude (*savoir être*), skills (*savoir comprendre* and *savoir apprendre/faire*) and knowledge (*savoirs*). According to him, attitude, *savoir être*, is the first factor that needs to be dealt with: a learner needs first of all to be curious, open and ready to suspend disbelief about other cultures and, at the same time, belief about their own. Attitudes to be developed are also respect towards other people, empathy, value of cultural diversity, toleration of ambiguity and research of opportunities to engage.

Skills can be divided into two main categories: skills of interpreting and relating, also called *savoir comprendre*, and skills of discovery and interaction, *savoir apprendre* or *faire*. The first encompass the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture and thus interpret, explain and relate it to documents and events from one's own. The latter, as the French definition suggests, are the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction. For instance, some of the most important skills can be discovering information, decentering, being cognitively flexible, adapting to new environments, but also more communication-related abilities such as linguistic, sociolinguistic, plurilingual skills and being able to act as a mediator.

Byram then refers to *savoirs* as the knowledge of social groups and their products and practices, together with the general processes of societal and individual interaction. Intercultural speakers than should understand the existence of heterogeneity in cultural groups, be aware and understand assumptions and stereotypes, understand the impact of one’s own language and culture on experience and be aware of communication and its implications.

Byram also introduces an additional component: critical cultural awareness, or *savoir s’engager*, describing it as the ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, products of cultures.

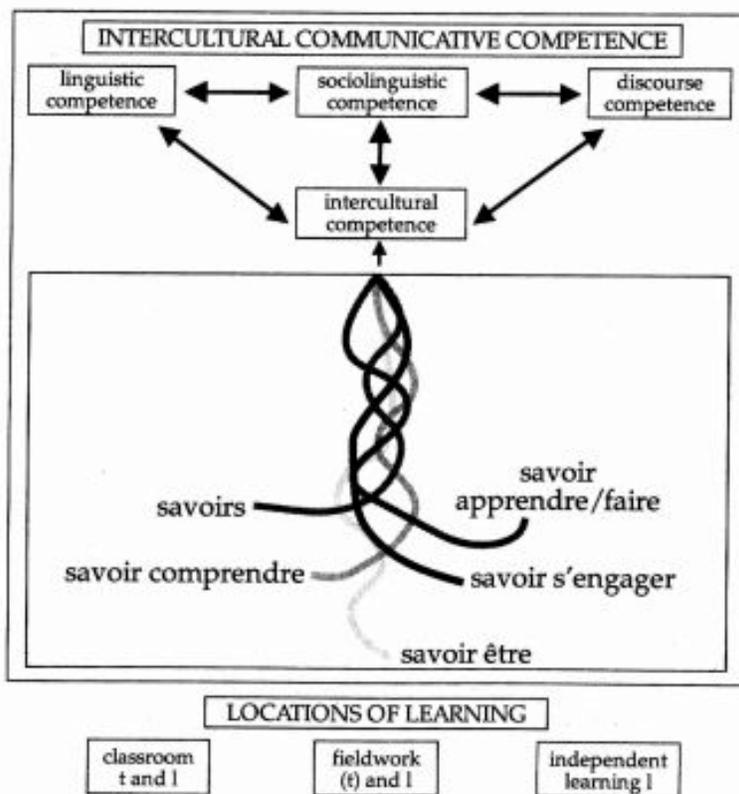


Figure 1.1 Byram’s (1997) Multidimensional Model of Intercultural Competence

All of the components introduced by Byram interrelate and they all come to create intercultural communicative competence. It should also be noted that according to him, learning does not happen only at a formal level, but also through fieldwork and independent learning. This concept will be useful in the

following section and chapter of our work to outline the importance of both autonomous learning and ICC in study abroad.

Bennett’s (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) charts the internal evolution from “ethnocentrism” to “ethnorelativism” within the context of intercultural interactions. In order to successfully navigate intercultural situations, Bennett explains that a person’s worldview must shift from avoiding cultural difference to seeking cultural difference.

Although not strictly outlining a model for intercultural communicative competence, Bennett focuses on the related topic of cultural awareness and, in particular, intercultural sensitivity. His Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) proposed in 1993, indeed, shows the evolution that an individual undergoes in intercultural interactions.

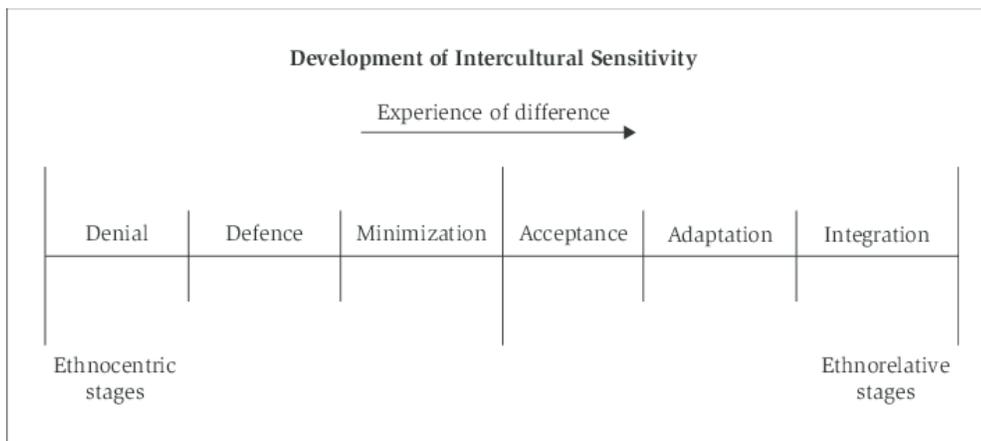


Figure 1.2 Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

There are six phases that represent different perceptions in seeing “the other” that go from ethnocentrism, “using one’s own set of standards and customs to judge all people” to ethnorelativism, “being comfortable with many standards and customs and to having an ability to adapt behavior and judgments to a variety of interpersonal setting” (Bennett, 1993, p. 26). These are: denial, defense, minimization,

acceptance, adaptation and integration. The first three stages, from denial to minimization, represent the ethnocentric view in which people do not or slightly perceive cultural differences, attribute negative evaluations to them, and are not willing to accept people who are different. In the last three stages people recognize and explore cultural differences, they may take other people's' perspectives and even reconcile the cultural frames that are conflicting. Moreover, these more ethnorelativist attitudes may lead to take up the role of intercultural mediators (Bennett, 1998, p. 25-30).

Another model representing a framework for intercultural communication is **Gudykunst's (1993) Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Model**. Based on Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory (URT), Gudykunst's model aims to explain the mechanisms of intercultural communication taking into account the levels of anxiety of the individuals involved. Specifically, he takes the example of those who are adjusting to new cultural settings and coming into contact with "hosts" from a different culture, who can show either a high or low level of anxiety, leading to different attitudes and outcomes.

As a matter of fact, according to him, "if uncertainty is too high, strangers cannot accurately interpret hosts' messages or make accurate predictions about hosts' behaviors. When anxiety is too high strangers communicate on automatic pilot and interpret hosts' behaviors using their own cultural frames of reference". However, "when uncertainty is too low, strangers become over-confident that they understand hosts' behaviors and do not question whether their predictions are accurate" (Gudykunst, 1998, p. 228).

Intercultural speakers should then try to manage their anxiety and uncertainty to feel comfortable in the host culture. Managing anxiety means becoming mindful, which is explained by Gudykunst taking Langer's descriptions: trainees, as Gudykunst labels them, should create new categories, be open to new information and aware of more of one perspective. As a consequence, Langer points out that the way learning should be approached is through a mindful mindset (Langer 1989, as cited in Gudykunst 1998).

Deardorff (2006) presented another model for intercultural competence, **Process Model of Intercultural Competence**, now widely accepted and used as point of reference by educators and scholars in the field. The Process Model of Intercultural Competence includes five components: attitudes, skills, knowledge and comprehension, internal outcomes and external outcomes. According to Deardorff, intercultural learning has to be conceived as a process, a never-ending journey where the learner evolves and is transformed by experience. In order to represent the processual nature then, she outlined a circular

model where one moves from one component to the other. For this reason, an individual can enter the process at any point, although Deardorff recognizes the fundamental role that Byram attributed to attitudes as a starting point. Indeed, she emphasizes the importance of attitudes, specifically “openness, respect (valuing all cultures), and curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity)” (Deardorff, 2006). What is really innovative in this model is the introduction of internal and external outcomes: the intercultural speakers move from an internal and personal change to an external appropriate behavior in interactions.

On the one hand there is an internal process where learners undergo a transformation becoming adaptable, flexible and empathic, they adopt an ethnorelative perspective and, as a result, shift frame of reference. On the other, “behaving and communicating appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations” becomes evident as an external outcome. According to Deardorff the two interact: “the internal outcome [...] although not requisite, enhances the external (observable) outcome of intercultural competence” (Deardorff, 2006, p. 255).

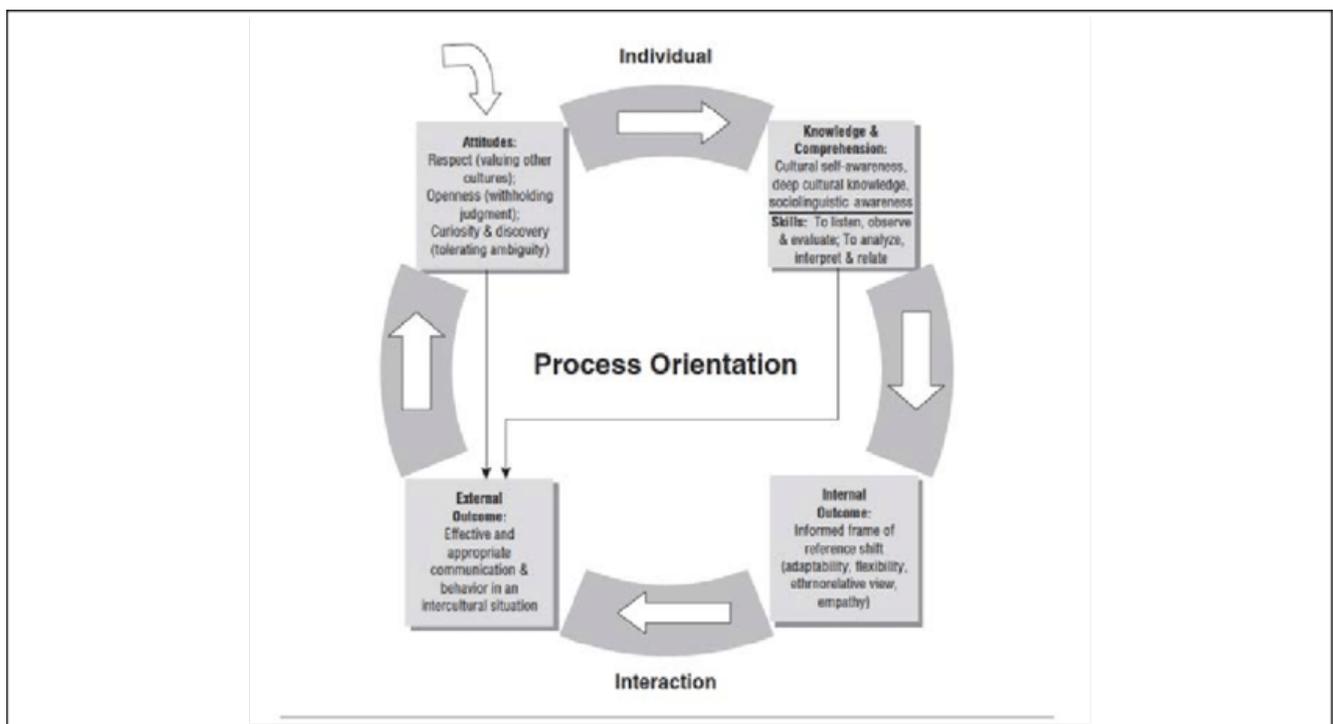


Figure 1.3 Deardorff's model of Process Model of Intercultural Competence

Fantini (2009) then outlined a model for intercultural communicative competence incorporating four dimensions: knowledge, (positive) attitudes/affect, skills, and awareness. According to Fantini, out of these components, awareness is especially crucial to the development and can be “enhanced through

reflection and introspection in which the individual's LC1 and the LC2 are contrasted and compared" (2011, p. 272). For this reason, Fantini places awareness at the center of his model, also to show that awareness is reinforced by all the other components.



Figure 1.4 Fantini's model of intercultural communicative competence

Balboni and Caon (2015) propose a model for intercultural communicative competence in which they take into account both a conceptual and performative part. These two dimensions are related respectively to the mind and the world: linguistic, extra linguistic and socio-cultural, and (inter-)cultural constitute the conceptual part, while the ability to interact in intercultural communicative events represents performative part. Moreover, it is thanks to the linguistic and relational abilities that one can move from one realm to the other, specifically the relational abilities are decentering, estrangement, suspension of judgement, active listening, relativization, empathy, exotopy and negotiation of meanings.

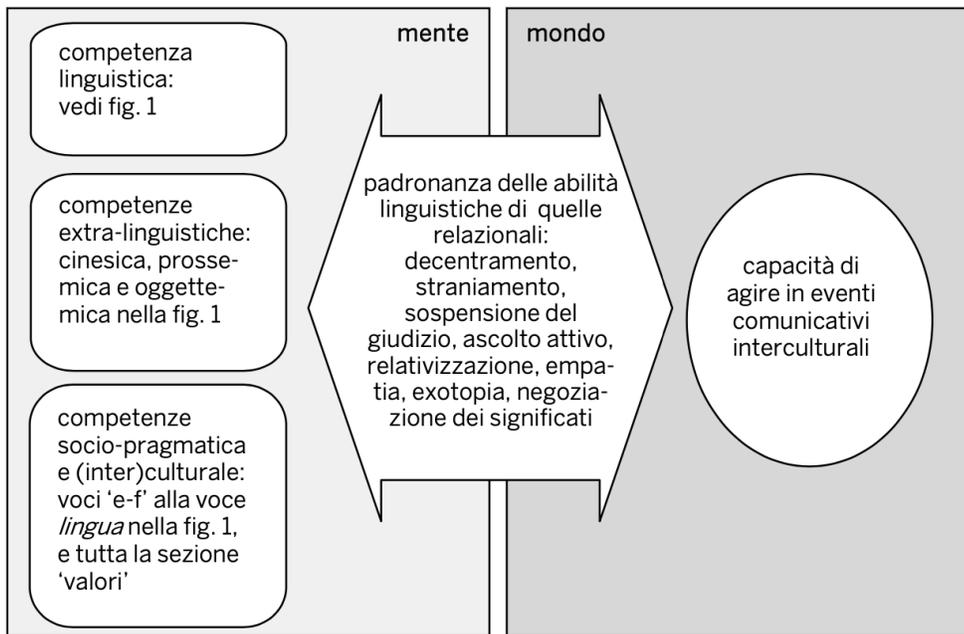


Figure 1.5 Balboni and Caon's model for intercultural communicative competence

1.2.3 Intercultural education

In a world that is constantly being reshaped by migrations, movements, exchanges, interculturality plays without any doubt a central role in modern education and can clearly be considered one of its major overall goals.

Intercultural communication first appeared in the years following World War II as a response to the inadequate knowledge of foreign cultural practices, the limited fluency in languages other than English and the unawareness of differences in communication styles on the part of government's and business' personnel of the United States (Kumaravadivelu, 2008).

For this reason, before being introduced in the classroom, intercultural communication was mainly a point of attention for other types of training: from military corps, business specialists, to sales managers and diplomats, it was, and still is, of great interest to all those involved in international relations.

Because of the evolution that internationalization, migrations and, more broadly, globalization have brought about worldwide, however, both research in educational studies, in other related fields, and institutions have turned to interculturality.

Interculturality, described by Byram as “the capacity to experience and analyze cultural otherness and to use this experience to reflect on matters that are usually taken for granted within one’s own culture and environment”, has since then greatly expanded (2009, p. 6). It is now regarded as a fundamental educational goal also as a consequence of the multiculturalism of our societies, plurilingualism of our populations and global citizenship.

As a matter of fact, interculturality has even become the key principle of UNESCO’s guidelines for education, where it has been defined as “the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect. Interculturality presupposes multiculturalism and results from intercultural exchange and dialogue on the local, regional, national, or international level” (UNESCO, 2006, p. 17).

Moreover, UNESCO has also outlined four basic principles underlying intercultural education:

Principle I

Intercultural education respects the cultural identity of the learner through the provision of culturally appropriate and responsive quality education for all.

Principle II

Intercultural education provides every learner with the cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to achieve active and full participation in society.

Principle III

Intercultural education provides all learners with cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills that enable them to contribute to respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals, ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups and nations.

(UNESCO, 2006, p. 32)

Although interculturality and intercultural education have affected all fields and subjects of study, it has especially received popularity among specialists and institutions related to language education.

As a consequence of the intercultural turn in culture pedagogy in the nineties and the introduction of the communicative approach in language teaching, as a matter of fact, interculturality emerged as a

fundamental focus of language education. Intercultural communication becomes a fundamental component of foreign language teaching, also thanks to the role that communication plays in learning and speaking a FL and the basic principle of fostering understanding between different cultures. It is not surprising, then, that interculturality has become the final aim of many frameworks and institutional policies about language education around the world: although the European Union's is the most evident example given the historical aim of promoting interculturality and plurilingualism, others have expressed the same orientation.

In a 2014 statement, for example, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) affirmed that “the ability to communicate with respect and cultural understanding in more than one language is an essential element of global competence” (p.2). Moreover, the 2017 NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements for Intercultural Communication establish precise guidelines involving ICC; they “provide a set of examples and scenarios that show how learners use the target language and knowledge of culture to demonstrate their Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)” (<https://www.actfl.org>).

These documents cannot certainly be seen as detached from their underlying political statements: on the one hand these policies embody the national ideals and on the other, they are the direct means to support and enact them.

Concerning this point, Pavlenko argues in her article “Language of the Enemy: Foreign Language Education and National Identity” (2003) that foreign language policies and practice are affected by the conceptions prevailing at any given time of the country's national identity and geopolitical situation.

Even though these frameworks may reflect partially different standpoints, they all share the aim of **preparing global citizens and active participants** who can communicate effectively in a foreign language in a variety of national and international settings. If the final aim of teaching ICC is that of training students to become successful intercultural speakers, on a larger scale the overall objective of intercultural education can be identified in educating global citizens and active participants of the world. The need to integrate interculturality in the language curriculum is therefore essential not only from the conceptual point of view but also, in the wider sense of the term, from the political one.

1.3 Building intercultural communicative competence in the language classroom

In this section we will suggest the connection between intercultural communicative competence and its applications in the language classroom. We will start off showing the interconnection of ICC and language learning, thus highlighting the importance of language in an intercultural approach. Moreover, we will put forward the need to address intentionally ICC with the purpose of creating skilled intercultural speakers.

We will then delve into classroom practices and principles for an intercultural education by analyzing the type of environment, learning and roles of the participants that a language classroom needs to promote. It will be explained that the active environment to be enhanced by educators requires a teaching approach that can stimulate inquiry, discovery and awareness.

Furthermore, we will emphasize the processual nature of ICC. An evolution is indeed necessary both in the content and in students, who undergo a transformation in their way of perceiving themselves and the world around them. Acknowledging that ICC is in fact a process entails that it is never fully achieved but only developed and expanded, thus highlighting the need to conceive it in a lifelong perspective.

In conclusion we will focus on the learning and teaching processes involved in promoting ICC. Students become skilled intercultural speakers if they acknowledge their own cultural perspective and are able to discover new points of view. In order for this development to happen, educators have to plan the learning process and the activities taking into consideration some basic principles: experience, comparison, analysis, reflection, action.

Given the importance of experience in intercultural development, Kolb's "Experiential learning theory" will be outlined and analyzed.

1.3.1 Intercultural communicative competence and language learning

Developing intercultural communicative competence is not an automatic process that comes simply from learning a language or about a culture, it results from explicitly addressing it in the classroom and by building ICC oriented activities (Aba, 2015).

In the process of building ICC, language and language learning play a central role and cannot be thought as unrelated to the development of skills, knowledge and attitudes. The main focus of ICC and its main difference from other concepts such as intercultural communication, is indeed the importance given to promoting language. As a matter of fact, there is a strong connection between foreign language learning and the development of intercultural competence: learning a foreign language is indeed a direct and powerful way to experience otherness on a physical and emotional level and an important means of interacting with other societies (Beacco, 2013).

However, research has shown that a positive correlation between proficiency and ICC is not so direct (Aba, 2015). Students who have a high level of proficiency have demonstrated to have quite different levels of intercultural competence, hence highlighting that there are other factors coming into play. While one of these can be found in having experience of intercultural encounters in home settings or in traveling and studying abroad (which we will further develop and closely analyze in chapter two), a great share is taken by intercultural training within formal education. This proves that the need to integrate this approach into both language curricula and common classroom practice cannot go unnoticed.

While, as we have seen, educating to interculturality aims to ultimately create global citizens, the specific goal of language education is that of creating skilled intercultural speakers.

A skilled intercultural individual is then described as being successful in:

- building relationships while speaking the foreign language,
- negotiating how to effectively communicate so that both communicative needs are addressed,
- mediating conversations between individuals with different backgrounds,
- continuing to acquire communication skills in foreign languages.

(Moeller & Nutgent, 2014)

Although a definition of skilled intercultural speaker can be given, it is widely accepted by scholars that there is no precise level at which we can assert that a learner is fully interculturally competent. Intercultural educators then have to recognize that the aim for learners is not that of attaining a given level of competence, but rather continuing a process of developing skills, knowledge and attitudes.

1.3.2 The intercultural classroom

Seeking after an intercultural approach, a more culture-generic pedagogy and a focus on communication, engenders certainly a series of changes in the language classroom. In order to have a certain coherence between educational principles in theory and in practice, educators will also have to respect the underlying principles and criteria of an intercultural communicative approach.

Indeed, “when an **intercultural classroom environment** is described, student learning is frequently depicted as learner-centered, engaging, interactive, participatory and cooperative” (Byram et al., 2002; CEFRL, 2001; Moore, 2006; The New Zealand Curriculum Framework, 1993 as cited in Moeller & Nugent, 2014)

This statement depicts, in a resolute way, the features that an intercultural classroom and learning present and it also clarifies that a traditional approach has no part in promoting ICC.

The first fundamental pillar of such a pedagogy is that it should always be learner centered. Learning has certainly changed of focus in the last decades shifting from a content to a learner-centered approach in language pedagogy just like in many other subjects. In intercultural education, however, such approach is even more imperative. In developing skills, knowledge and attitudes, students are required to go through behavioral, cognitive and affective processes that involve them fully, both on a mental and a physical level. According to Deardorff (2006), learners undergo a transformation of attitude, including self-awareness and openness to new values and beliefs as a first step to becoming interculturally competent. In order to do so, “transcending boundaries in regard to one’s own identity is crucial in developing ICC” (Deardorff, 2009, p. 267).

If we consider that they have be able to go through a process that is so complete to ultimately trigger a change and an enrichment in their identities, it is clear that **the role of students** is that of being active participants in their evolution.

These processes can certainly not happen if students are not put at the center of their learning and if they are not the promoters of their path to become intercultural speakers.

For this reason, an engaging and interactive environment is fundamental: activities should always aim to involve students on different levels, where their active participation is the most salient characteristic. If we consider learners as active participants of a broad cultural discourse, then they are not perceived as passive receivers of knowledge, rather, they are researchers, discoverers and gatherers of knowledge,

anthropologists who explore and investigate a topic inside and outside the classroom (Moeller & Nugent, 2014).

The role of language teachers is therefore fundamental in creating this environment of curiosity and inquiry. Teachers do not merely pass on knowledge to students and do not provide questions and answers, in fact, they promote an independent discovery that addresses open-ended questions.

The role of teacher, and more widely of education adopting an intercultural perspective, is that of guiding students through the process of developing knowledge, skills and attitudes while using a foreign language. Teachers must facilitate this process while engaging and involving students in exploring, discovering, analyzing and evaluating meaningful information and material. We cannot think of ‘intercultural teachers’ as simple providers of knowledge or omniscient conveyors of information, rather they are co-creators of knowledge and just like students they undergo the process of inquiry and discovery (Moeller & Nugent, 2014). In short, teachers too are asked to develop and improve their own intercultural competence. They will therefore not only help learners see the relationships between their own and other cultures but they will also acquire interest, curiosity and awareness of themselves and their cultures from other people’s perspectives (Byram et al., 2002).

1.3.3 The process of developing intercultural communicative competence

Although intercultural education should aim at maximizing student learning at present, it is also responsible for preparing students for the future.

By nature, intercultural competence has to be viewed as an ongoing **process**, a constant development of knowledge, skills and attitudes through experiences and training. If we look at it from this perspective, building ICC is a lifelong commitment that can never be really considered complete or perfect (Deardorff, 2006). There cannot be a finite goal or a common achievement, rather the focus should be the extent to which students are able to respond appropriately, effectively and respectfully in an intercultural situation (Barrett et al., 2014). If students are conceived under a humanistic approach, they are individuals with different backgrounds, viewpoints and worldviews who will then have a different intercultural growth and achievements (Moeller & Nugent, 2014).

It is also for this reason that teaching in an intercultural perspective cannot be about passing on knowledge but it has to encompass an enlargement of mental and social abilities that allow learners to “teach themselves” (Camilleri, 1998). Another principle of ICC is indeed its processual nature, where

time and experience are valuable factors contributing to growth. This leads us to state that another cornerstone of learning in intercultural perspective is its indissoluble connection with **lifelong learning**.

Learners evolve and grow interculturally throughout a long journey of reflection, discovery and experience. Educating to interculturality then, means taking into account the long-term purpose of promoting autonomy in students. According to Bennett, it is necessary for students to cultivate their own intercultural competence, where “identifying our own patterns, acknowledging the patterns of others and eventually learn to adapt across cultures” play a key role in such development (Deardorff, 2009). Students are therefore urged to understand the mechanisms underlying the intercultural process and to recognize the functioning of intercultural encounters so that they are able to apply them in any intercultural situation. This is an essential feature of intercultural competence: the approach serves as a scheme, a structure not only to teach a culture but to learn how to observe cultures in general. As Balboni (2018) points out, the role of teachers is that of teaching to learn intercultural communication, which essentially means helping them to observe.

This is a fundamental goal not only because learners can enhance their knowledge, skills and attitudes in addition to and after formal education through experience but also because intercultural objectives evolve. As a matter of fact, culture and society evolve rapidly, now more than ever, and learners need to update their knowledge, to increase their skills and adjust their attitudes accordingly (Moeller & Nutgent, 2014). This conception has a great impact on the way that the teacher is conceived as well: if we presuppose that building ICC is a long process where content is being constantly reshaped, then this ongoing learning involves teachers too.

1.3.4 Learning processes and teaching methods

Developing ICC is a process in which skills, attitude and knowledge are involved and through which the learner experiences a change and intercultural growth. This evolution, however, requires great effort both on the part of learners, who undergo affective, cognitive and behavioral change, and teachers, who have to guide students and facilitate them throughout. Furthermore, teachers play the crucial and difficult role of creating a path for students where all the components of ICC have to be included and enhanced, while at the same time promoting an evolution, where some sort of change happens. The consequence is that a learning path should be regarded as a process made of steps with increasing challenges, expected outcomes and goals

In the field of intercultural communication, there is agreement that some kind of process is required, going from awareness of the self to understanding of the other. We can claim that the development begins from an internal reflection where one becomes aware of one's own cultural beliefs, values, practices to an external encounter and understanding of the "other". The goal for the students is to start by questioning their preconceived ideas before entering into a process of discovery about the "other" with the intent of becoming more willing to seek out and engage with otherness in order to ultimately experience relationships of reciprocity (Byram, 1997).

Beacco identifies this progression, specifically from an attitudinal point of view, in an evolution "from spontaneous reactions to controlled, considered ones through interpretational competences, fundamental for managing attitudes" (2013, p. 9) According to him, then, three factors must be included when planning activities: access to new knowledge, development of interpretational competences and increase in complexity of attitudes.

It is acknowledged that the aforementioned change to become intercultural speakers cannot happen without stimulating all dimensions of intercultural communicative competence. We have indeed argued that cognitive, behavioral and affective dimensions all take part in the development and they cannot be thought as separate entities.

The challenge that teachers face is then including different experiences within the process that altogether will result in a development of intercultural skills, knowledge and attitudes.

By way of example, in "Developing intercultural competence through education", the authors describe five "principles of planning", which take into consideration the components of ICC: experience, comparison, analysis, reflection, action. They develop the terms by explaining the importance each holds in intercultural teaching and learning:

- Experience: the best way to develop attitudes of respect, curiosity and openness, and to acquire knowledge of other cultural orientations and affiliations, is by directly experiencing how people act, interact and communicate – from their perspective. [...]
- Comparison: [...] [l]earners often compare what is unfamiliar with what is familiar and evaluate the unfamiliar as "bizarre", as "worse" and even as "uncivilised". Facilitators need to be aware of this kind of comparison of value and replace it with comparison for understanding,

which involves seeing similarities and differences in a non-judgmental manner and taking the perspective of the other in order to see ourselves as others see us. [...]

- Analysis: [...] [f]acilitators can support their learners in the analysis of what may lie beneath what they can see others doing and saying. [...]
- Reflection: [c]omparison, analysis and experience need to be accompanied by time and space for reflection and the development of critical awareness and understanding. [...]
- Action: [r]eflection can and should be the basis for taking action, for engagement with others through intercultural dialogue and for becoming involved in co-operative activities with people who have different cultural affiliations. [...]

(Barrett et al., 2014)

Scholars have therefore looked for a theoretical framework that could encompass all of these elements. Clearly, this would be required to reflect both the processual and complex nature of intercultural competence where a practical approach is preferred. Many of them have found in Kolb's "Experiential Learning Theory" (1984) a solid foundation.

Kolb introduced a model for learning in which experience is placed at the center of the process, which makes it an important reference for intercultural communication.

He indeed outlined some characteristics of learning that are shared with intercultural communication.

First of all, he described learning as being "best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes", assumption that, as we have showed, underlies intercultural education.

Kolb's explanation for this statement is that ideas are not fixed but formed and re-formed through experience. Learning is then a "process whereby concepts are derived from and continuously modified by experience" (p. 26). This concept is clearly the basis of an intercultural approach as well where, as we have demonstrated, process, rather than outcomes, is the focus and the aim. Moreover, knowledge is not "accumulated in a storehouse" but should be thought as ever-changing and developing, thus emphasizing once again the importance of self-construction and the central role of autonomous learning.

Kolb then asserts that learning is a continuous process grounded in experience. Every experience takes up something from those before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after. The

important implications for educators are that their job is not to implant new ideas but to modify, integrate the already existing ones. This concept has a great impact in IC where self-awareness and the processes of challenging, constructively criticizing and debating ideas represent fundamental practices. Moreover, it gives the possibility to see the learner and learning as continually reshaped by both past and future experiences, to think of them as individuals with different experiences behind them influencing their own identity and their representations of the world.

An additional characteristic of this type of learning is indeed that the process requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world. As we have proposed, some of the most important activities in intercultural education involve the discovery, observation, inquiry and acknowledgment of cultural differences, where tension and conflict are normal consequences. According to Kolb, new knowledge, skills and attitudes are achieved through the confrontation among four modes:

- 1- concrete learning abilities: being able to involve themselves fully, openly and without bias in new experiences
- 2- reflective observation abilities: reflecting on and observing their experiences from many perspectives
- 3- abstract conceptualization abilities: creating concepts integrating observations into logical theories
- 4- active experimentation: using the theories to make decisions and solving problems

Furthermore, learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world. Once again, the learner is taken in his totality, all functioning, thinking, feeling, perceiving, behaving, have to be integrated in order to provide conceptual bridges across life situations, in a lifelong perspective.

Another principle highlighted is that learning involves transactions between the person and the environment. The subjective and objective realms interrelate to create a situation; the contextual approach we have analyzed in detail in the previous sections does, indeed, find a place in Kolb's conceptualization too. We cannot see learning, specifically cultural learning, as detached from its contextual and situational setting but rather as a reciprocal relationship.

The author then places emphasis again on the role of knowledge: learning is the process of creating knowledge. As a matter of fact, this is the result of the transaction between social, the previous human cultural experience and personal knowledge, the individual subjective life experiences.

The principles therefore come down to define learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38).

In order to exemplify his idea of learning, he introduced a model in which the process is divided into four main phases: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active implementation. Since learning is conceived as a process that is non-linear, then the outline is that of a cycle. Moreover, it can be entered from any point, as long as the order is respected.

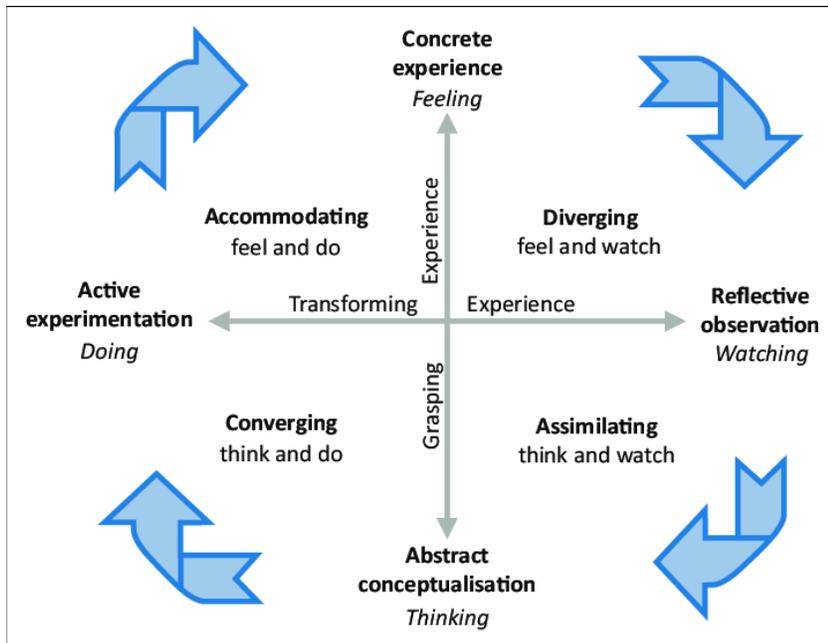


Figure 1.6 Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984)

Kolb's experiential learning theory emphasizes an applied, hands-on and dynamic approach where learners and their experiences, past, present and future, are greatly valued.

Much of the research on ICC then, taking Kolb's theory as a framework, embraces a learning-by-doing approach where experience is highly valued and students are always placed at the center.

The activities for the intercultural classroom should reflect such conviction, hence serving as opportunities for students to learn by doing, in realistic situations and through authentic material.

Being able to communicate interculturally entails being able to communicate in a real situation, where intercultural encounters happen spontaneously. The language classroom often serves as a controlled environment where fictitious and non authentic activities are involved to assist learners, especially in

traditional approaches to teaching. In a communicative setting, even more when intercultural communication is involved, the need to carry out activities that are closely related to real-world situations becomes essential. In intercultural classroom practice it is common then to find authentic material that represents a starting point for observation and analysis on the part of learners: articles and texts, videos, movies, pictures, real situations and conversations are just a few examples of the manifold possibilities. What is fundamental, however, is the authenticity of the material presented, because only in this way will students be able to really challenge their assumptions and stereotypes by questioning the sources, they will become active gatherers of knowledge, attentive observers and interpreters of the world.

Moreover, in an approach where communication is the focus, situations of contact and exchange must be the norm. Social interaction then becomes the means to confront oneself with the other, not represented only by cultural differences, but also the many identities, personalities and identities that form a classroom. Debates among classmates are, indeed, powerful tools for starting to realize those different perceptions and world views that constitute one of the main purposes of intercultural education. If interactions and exchanges support the development of learners, then cooperative learning represents one of the most valuable techniques in the intercultural language classroom. Not only is communication at the base of such a methodology, but interdependence and active construction of knowledge are greatly enhanced. In cooperative learning, indeed, students rely on each other to understand and make sense of the subject of study, thus learning to work together, take individual responsibility and develop autonomy.

Developing intercultural communicative competence is a complex process where educators, students, experiences and encounters all contribute to a growth and increased understanding of oneself and the others.

CHAPTER 2: Understanding study abroad: a complex phenomenon and multifaceted experience

In this chapter we will introduce the concept of mobility and analyze it both from the point of view of the societal worldwide phenomenon and from that of the student experience.

First of all, we will give a definition of mobility and its related ideas. As a matter of fact, the complexity of the phenomenon is reflected in the multiplicity of terms revolving around this concept. After having illustrated some of the most used names and their connotations, we will shed light on the global phenomenon of mobility. This is far from being an event involving only education and its overarching consequences must be examined in a much wider perspective. We will therefore go into specific detail about the characteristics and historical background of study abroad in the United States, being it the context of our research. This will indeed enable us to understand in depth the situation in which we conduct our training and research.

Furthermore, we will also represent mobility from the students' perspective, that of a multidimensional life experience. Considering the dimensions that constitute study abroad and their interrelation is indeed fundamental if we want to look at the phenomenon in its entirety and address it thoroughly. We will start from language learning, fundamental factor of student mobility and study abroad research to then concentrate on the often-neglected social dimension. This is indeed key in gaining a more complete picture of the experience and therefore enhancing the success of the stay abroad. We will come to explain the role that intercultural communicative competence plays in study abroad and show its importance in this type of experiences.

Consequently, we will argue for the necessity of supporting outgoing students in their study abroad. We will illustrate what constitutes common practice in study abroad support and outline some characteristics that programs often present. However, supporting students in their experiences also requires careful training in intercultural communication. We will indeed show the typical traits of support specifically addressing interculturality. Finally, we will pass in review some examples of programs directed at study abroad focusing on intercultural communication. These are programs that embody the principles of ICC, that have proven to be effective and that may serve as models to follow in designing our intervention.

2.1 Defining study abroad in higher education

Study abroad is an increasingly important and widespread phenomenon in the world, involving more than 5 million people.

First, we will define the concepts of mobility, study abroad and other related ideas. While the concept of study abroad might seem obvious, the reality is that several terms exist to depict this experience, often carrying with them different connotations.

We will show the examples of “mobility”, a concept lying its roots in anthropology and describing the phenomenon in a wider sense but also a generic term encompassing at once many types of experiences, which may vary in terms of place, length, aim, target.

We will then provide an explanation for “study abroad”, a more specific phenomenon related to an academic experience abroad. Moreover, we will argue that the choice of terminology is greatly influenced by the context of action and therefore by the rationale behind it.

We will then move on to present the global phenomenon of student mobility and explain the reasons that have led to such a significant surge in the past 20 years worldwide.

After having shown its characteristics, we will illustrate, with the aid of statistical data, the global trends of the phenomenon, from the most popular destinations to the profiles of mobile students. We will then prove that countries and institutions have a lot at stake and are indeed interested in promoting international mobility, both outgoing and incoming. Moreover, the phenomenon articulates in very different terms in each country, with variability depending on historical, political, economic factors.

In conclusion we will focus specifically on the phenomenon in the United States, since this is where our research takes place. In order to understand its importance and structure nowadays, we will briefly look at the history of study abroad in the United States. This can indeed shed light on many elements that shape study abroad as we conceive it today.

Our final aim will be revealing some figures that are representative of the situation. This description and analysis will indeed be key to understand the phenomenon and the situation we will encounter in our research.

2.1.1 Defining study abroad

Defining study abroad is no easy task, both from the point of view of terminology and of definition. Although the concept of “study abroad” might seem obvious, the reality is that countless conceptions, implications and terms exist around it. These depend on several factors such as culture, country of origin, type of experience, length of stay, governmental and institutional policies involved, just to mention a few. The terminology itself that we have decided to use, “study abroad”, has a precise connotation and will probably convey different meanings to those reading this work according to their country of origin, for instance.

As a matter of fact, Kinginger, by making reference to Coleman’s studies, argues that defining study abroad is indeed challenging and many names exist to express the concept. "Coleman discovered several nomenclatures circulating in the published literature, including: ‘study abroad,’ ‘student mobility,’ ‘residence abroad,’ ‘in-country study,’ ‘overseas language immersion,’ ‘*séjour à l’étranger*,’ ‘*estancia al extranjero*,’ ‘*auslandsaufenthalt*,’ and ‘academic migration.’ Clearly, each of these terms refers in some way to education taking place outside a given student’s home country or region, but each also limits or expands this phenomenon in a specific manner” (Kinging, 2009, p.7).

Before we move on then, it seems extremely important to us to explain the main concepts and terms and to clarify what we mean when we say, for example, “study abroad” or “academic mobility”.

Although no term can be thought as neutral or conveying the same meaning to everyone, our starting point will be the concept of **mobility**, since we see it as a hypernym. We have indeed argued in the introduction to our work that one of, if not the major reason for such a surge in students going abroad has to be attributed to globalization and, as a consequence, to the internationalization process that has involved education at all levels. Mobility is then a wide concept that recollects the idea of movement; for instance, Salazar notes that “mobility captures the common impression that one’s life- world is in flux, with not only people, but also cultures, objects, capital, businesses, services, diseases, media, images, information, and ideas circulating across (and even beyond) the planet” (2016, p.1).

Mobility is not only a wide and abstract concept, but it is also a specific term used in many social sciences. Many anthropologists have in fact described globalization through the lens of mobility: “[i]nfluential theorists such as Anthony Giddens, Arjun Appadurai, Ulrich Beck, Manuel Castells, Bruno Latour, David Harvey, Zygmunt Bauman, and John Urry all conceive contemporary capitalism and globalization

in terms of increasing numbers and varieties of mobility: the fluid, continuous (and often seamless) movement of people, ideas, and goods through and across space” (Salazar, 2016; p. 3).

Mobility is, however, also a commonly used term in the field of international education. Thanks to its versatile and generic nature, it can include many types of movements, at different levels and involving different people. It can for example concern secondary level of education, where high school students go abroad for a limited period of time to study, usually within bilateral agreements with foreign schools, or work, such as in cross-border apprenticeships. At secondary level it can also involve teachers, going abroad for a short period as it happens for the Erasmus + program for teachers in Europe. When we refer to it as academic mobility, the term encompasses students at higher education level going abroad to study for a short or longer period, such as a few weeks, a semester or a full academic year; in the case of Erasmus + programs, for example, the duration is from a minimum of 3 months to a maximum of 12. Students may even go abroad for a period of research, for instance for a thesis project, but also for internships and traineeships, in the European context usually for a duration of three months, either during or after their degree. Erasmus + is, as a matter of fact, the most renowned program in Europe and probably worldwide involving European universities.

Academic mobility however is also aimed at academic teaching staff who may for example go abroad for a teaching period at a partner institution or training sessions and exchanges among teachers. Although we have shown examples of cross-border mobility, national mobility exists too, or mobility within borders; this is the case of the Spanish program “SICUE” supported by the Spanish university organization “Crue”. SICUE is indeed defined as “*programa de movilidad*” (<http://www.crue.org/>) even though students at a Spanish university do not study abroad but rather go on an exchange to another Spanish institution.

As it can be deduced by our examples often referring to the specific case of Europe, the term mobility (more specifically academic or learning mobility) is usually employed in European projects and programs. Throughout this chapter we will indeed demonstrate that different circumstances affect both the terminology used and the type of experiences abroad that exist; these differences often derive from historical, political, educational and ideological factors related to a given context. Moreover, mobility can be defined as outgoing, when we consider the students leaving the “home” university and country to go abroad or incoming, when we take into account those coming to study or work in a given country, organization or university.

The European Platform of Learning Mobility (EPLM) for example defines learning mobility as “transnational mobility undertaken for a period of time, consciously organized for educational purposes or to acquire new competences or knowledge. It covers a wide variety of projects and activities and can be implemented in formal or non-formal settings” (www.eu.coe.int/youth-partnership). We will then consider the definition of credit mobility given by the OECD in their annual report: “[c]redit mobility is defined as temporary tertiary education or study-related traineeships abroad within the framework of enrollment in a tertiary education programme at a home institution, usually for the purpose of gaining academic credit. Credit-mobile students do not obtain their qualifications from the host institution abroad” (Education at a glance, 2019, p. 238).

Academic mobility has a different connotation and is found in different contexts than **study abroad**. First of all, as we have argued, study abroad can be considered a hyponym because of its more specific association with a precise experience: studying. There is indeed no ambiguity: when we refer to it, we certainly allude to a period spent in a foreign country with the main aim of studying. Certainly then, the people involved are students, and more specifically university students. By using this term, we suggest that the focus of the experience abroad will be the action of studying, somehow highlighting its academic nature, whereas, if we take other terms such as mobility, we are putting the stress on the movement itself involved in going abroad for diverse purposes. Moreover, “study abroad” seems, again, to have a precise place in the literature and context where it is employed. The term is indeed unique to the United States where it is massively used both in the literature and in more popular circumstances. This is the result of a long tradition of American universities offering mainly programs at bachelor’s level to study abroad and therefore using this label or the synonym “off-campus study”. Nowadays many more programs and possibilities surely exist in the United States but there still seems to be a specific terminology that puts emphasis on the type of experience (i.e. internships abroad, research abroad, summer language programs or overseas language immersion). Study abroad is commonly thought of as an opportunity granted by universities aimed at mainly bachelor’s students who go abroad for a semester (3 to 5 months) and attend university courses at a foreign partner institution or classes organized and directed by the American home university itself. As Coleman notes, “definitions of “study abroad” vary depending on the particular research context, and the professional identity and disciplinary background of the researcher, for “study abroad”, being such a substantial social and educational phenomenon, not unexpectedly retains the attention not just of linguists, but equally of academics concerned with higher education policy, economics, psychology, social identity, gender studies, human geography and many more” (2013, p. 21).

We will however take Kinginger's definition as a basis: according to her, study abroad is "a temporary sojourn of pre-defined duration, undertaken for educational purposes" (2009, p. 11). We will have an opportunity to analyze further and trace the phenomenon of study abroad from an American perspective in the next sections.

Residence abroad then emphasizes the experiential part of going abroad and living in a foreign country. Although the studying dimension is lost in the term, a stronger focus is in fact directed to the inevitable and just as essential part of having to move to and conduct a life in a new place. According to Coleman, "[f]rom a UK perspective, then, it is certainly the more inclusive "residence abroad" that should be the over-arching category, and "study abroad" a sub-category, rather than the latter being, thanks to the dominance of North American research, both an all-encompassing genus and a specific species" (2013; p. 20). As Coleman points out, residence abroad is indeed mainly used in the context of UK studies and universities, also thanks to its more generic nature encompassing a number of experiences that are common among British students: study, assistantship and work placements. Aside from study and work or internships that are typical of all of the other settings, assistantship seems to be peculiar to or at least more popular among British and anglophone students who often embark on an assistantship abroad to teach English as a foreign language. The common denominator of all of these experiences, however, is living abroad, herein the widely used term "residence abroad".

Different nomenclatures typical of other European countries and languages exist; this is the example of '*séjour à l'étranger*,' '*estancia al extranjero*,' '*auslandsaufenthalt*' mentioned by Coleman and Kinginger, to which we can add "*soggiorno all'estero*", all accentuating the experience of residing or staying abroad. These terms, however, seem also to refer to holiday-like periods abroad, most likely originating from the summer immersion programs abroad for language learning, characterized by a double nature of studying a foreign language while also visiting the country.

In conclusion, we would like to give an explanation of the terminology that we have used so far and will use throughout our work. We have indeed opened the chapter introducing the concept of study abroad and we have also employed these terms in other parts of the thesis. Two factors have influenced our choice: first of all, our field research and the project that we will present take place in a North American context, specifically at a university in the United States, where study abroad is the term commonly used by both scholars and university officials. The second factor depends on the nature of the experience abroad that will be described; the students involved in the project will, in fact, go abroad on a study

program. This term seems therefore to be more specific and transparent when it comes to our situation. Moreover, the term mobility (academic, student or international mobility) will be used as a synonym for study abroad especially when we refer to the broader phenomenon.

2.1.2 The phenomenon of student mobility

As exemplified by the wide array of terms used and their different implications, study mobility is a complex phenomenon involving and being shaped by different countries, institutions, participants, experiences and convictions. However, it has to be acknowledged that if we leave aside all of these variations, student mobility is a worldwide phenomenon that has greatly increased in number and largely expanded in reach in the last decades. We have indeed argued that in line with the exponential growth of movements of people, ideas, and goods caused by globalization, studying abroad has become a common experience for students all over the world. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the total of internationally mobile students in 2017 reached 5.3 million, rising from 2 million in 1998 (<http://data.uis.unesco.org/>). Moreover, although in 2017 students from Asia accounted for 56% and those from Europe 24% of all mobile students across the OECD, there has also been a general growth for the other areas of the world. As far as this growth is concerned, projections show that “countries that were lagging behind should experience the fastest increases and catch up, while countries with initially larger shares of tertiary-educated adults should face slower growth” (OECD 2019, p. 231). This is the case, for instance, of Latin American countries, where an increase in attainment of tertiary education is expected in the upcoming years with a consequent boost in number of mobile students.

The statistics show that in 20 years the rate of students going abroad has surged dramatically, demonstrating that this is one of the most important changes that both our higher education systems and our societies have experienced. As a matter of fact, not only has the number of students going abroad increased, but also the scope of the phenomenon widened, thus affecting and continuing to affect more and more countries and people in the world.

The data are striking and certainly deserve some reflection: why and how has it become so important and popular worldwide? What factors influence the choices of students going abroad?

As we have already stated, student mobility is certainly not a phenomenon that we can look at detached from a wider situation, a situation where economies, countries, politics are more and more interconnected and interdependent. This has brought to an **internationalization** of our societies, where peoples have

become more multicultural, more used to cross borders, whether for occasional traveling, work or migrations. In this reshaping of the world, student and academic mobility certainly play a central role too. In addition, the advancement of **technology** has indeed been a facilitating and enhancing contributor, whether we take into account the transportation sector or information technology and the internet. On the one hand transportation, on the other information and virtual connections have become much more accessible to everyone, thus making it easier to travel, from the economic point of view, thanks to cheaper flights for example, psychological, because distances have shortened with virtual connections, and of information, because now more than ever, retrieving information is simple and quick. This complex innovation in our societies triggered surely new needs from the **job market** and economy, hence demanding different educational requirements and setting new goals.

First, a higher level of education is needed to be able to enter the job market, with a great increase in number of people obtaining a degree, for instance. Second, a higher quality of education is required, where students research opportunities in more prestigious and international institutions. In order to be more competitive in the job market, students are indeed pushed to aim at higher standards in their education. These factors led in turn to greater competition among universities not only at national or local level but also at global level, thus requiring students to move across borders for educational purposes.

All of these factors then have greatly contributed to the surge of international students' mobility. In addition, a cultural factor has emerged: the globalized economy naturally relies on intercultural competent individuals, people who have experience with other cultures and are skilled in dealing with intercultural situations, while at the same time proficient in foreign languages. A rather obvious, yet representative example is the status of the English language, by now indispensable in almost every sector and country in the world, with one in four people using it worldwide (Sharifian, 2013 as cited in OECD, 2019). The predictable consequences are that English-speaking countries rank as the most attractive student destinations, with four countries, namely the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada, receiving more than 40% of all mobile students in OECD and partner countries (OECD, 2019).

While there are general and shared factors influencing the trend of students going abroad, it is clear that we should also consider more specific circumstances having an impact on both outgoing students and host countries/institutions. Specific circumstances in choosing a given institution and country (which are much intertwined) are related to status, economical condition and wealth, educational opportunities and fame, scholarships and financial aid, immigration policies and relationship between home and host country. A great role indeed is played by countries themselves, home and host, which affect more often

than not individual choices. As a way of illustration, most countries have put in place immigration reforms to smooth the way for highly skilled individuals and at the same time they have launched funding programs to support inward, outward or return mobility (OECD, 2019).

Both countries and higher education institutions are indeed aware that not only is student mobility an important enriching event from the cultural point of view but also a revenue-generating phenomenon. As a matter of fact, a Studyportal report (2019) authored by higher education strategist Rahul Choudaha estimates that the global economic impact of international students accounted for US\$ 300 billion in 2016. As a consequence, mobility programs have soared, and countries have invested in promoting their educational system and national institutions in order to attract foreign students. The OECD identifies four different approaches to cross-border education: mutual understanding, revenue-generating, skilled migration and capacity-building approach.

- A *mutual understanding* approach affording intellectual and cultural enrichment and stimulus to academic programs and research. Such an approach is exemplified by the European Union's ERASMUS program funding over a million student exchanges from 1987 to the present.
- A *revenue-generating* approach promoting the services of a country's higher education system to fee-paying students abroad in an effort to control a large share of the market. This approach has been adopted in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, which all have international agencies for the promotion of national interests in the educational marketplace.
- A *skilled migration* approach, such as the report attributes to Germany, aiming to attract highly skilled students who may remain in the host country after their studies, thus countering the economic effects of an ageing society and stimulating academic life and research.
- A *capacity-building* approach within which countries encourage their domestic students to study abroad in order to build or improve the quality of their home educational provisions upon their return.

(OECD, 2004 as cited in Kinginger, 2009, p. 8)

These approaches should not be thought as mutually exclusive but rather complimentary and implemented to different extents by each country and institution.

The country's policy and rationale concerning international mobility depends therefore on a complex combination of factors, greatly affecting the variability of the phenomenon in the different contexts. International mobility displays a much greater picture than commonly thought, a complex set of intertwining factors, often of (geo)political and economic nature, that nonetheless influence the choices of students and institutions at lower levels.

2.1.3 Study abroad in the United States

In order to understand the phenomenon of study abroad in the United States and its characteristics today, we need to set it in a wider historical, political and societal context.

As we have seen in the previous section, study abroad is indeed greatly influenced by factors that do not seem directly linked to it. This is well exemplified by the current American direction of the phenomenon. After describing the history of study abroad in the US, we will show the main aspects characterizing it nowadays, also by analyzing important statistical data. This analysis will certainly lead us to gain an insight into the phenomenon, the design of a typical program and its implications for our study.

Study abroad was formally born in 1928 out of a proposition, put forward by some faculty members to French language faculty at colleges throughout the US, in which they envisaged a junior year in France for undergraduate students with faculty supervision. Not only did they argue that such an experience would improve the students' language skills, but also "...a significant advance in our sympathetic knowledge of another country that may well exert a real influence upon the attainment of mutual understanding and good will" (The Junior Year in France: An Open Letter to Teachers of French and College Faculties as cited in Contreras, 2015, p. 16).

The visionary experiment of sending the best students abroad had indeed already proven successful in 1923 and 1925 at the University of Delaware and Smith College: students came back from France with improved knowledge of the language and an expanded world view.

The two institutions paved the way for many other to launch elite programs in the following decade, usually to France and Switzerland, despite the hostility that advocates still had to face on the part of some universities and governmental institutions.

In the following decades study abroad became a widely accepted practice and if 22 different junior year abroad programs with more than 500 students were recorded in the middle of the 1950s, these became

50 with 1,500 students by 1959 (Contreras, 2015). During these years an increased interest in study abroad came from the US government too, who found in the project a way to promote diplomacy and world affairs. At the same time, universities were concerned with setting the standards for study abroad by considering the principles of academics, selectivity, and control first, and with finding ways to legitimize the period of study abroad then. The 1970s and 1980s brought about a need, mainly arising from the increasingly global markets and economic boom, to prepare Americans for the future economic success and national security. Study abroad was therefore the perfect means, according to its advocates, to enhance the awareness and language skills that were lacking in the American people. This culminated in a report in 1979 by Jimmy Carter's Commission on Foreign Language, *Strength Through Wisdom*, where a clear emphasis was put on the importance of promoting languages in the context of the new global competition (Kinging, 2009).

From the 1980's on, however, a great urgency arose to make that elitist practice a much more accessible and inclusive phenomenon. As a matter of fact, while the debate over accessibility and inclusiveness in American campuses was spreading all over the country, a similar renewal was to be envisaged in study abroad programs too. A quest for internationalization of education was underway and many institutions focused mainly on opening their doors to international students and faculty rather than enhancing study abroad. Kinginger (2009) claims that even today internationalization is marginal and limited to the presence of foreign students and scholars instead of focusing on internationalizing teaching and learning for American students. As a way of illustration, data published by the International Educational Exchange (IEE), a project conducted by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs and the Institute for International Education, show that in the 2017/2018 academic year the number of incoming students in the U.S. amounted to 1,094,792 while, in the same year, outgoing students were only 341,751 (<https://www.iie.org/>).

Nonetheless, the potential that this type of experience can bring to students is now widely acknowledged, both in terms of awareness of diversity, knowledge of other cultures and understanding across borders and within the United States. Programs have therefore been greatly implemented and students have been given increasing access to such opportunities. As a matter of fact, nowadays, one in ten students at undergraduate level goes abroad to study before graduating (<https://www.iie.org/>).

Although study abroad has greatly changed since its early years, and many aspects have evolved, some still reflect traditions and convictions of the past. For instance, the collective nature of the study abroad has not changed: the typical design, even today, features a group composed of deserving students from

the same university who go abroad together accompanied by a supervisor, usually a professor employed at the university. The experience abroad is still mainly undertaken at undergraduate level, namely 87% of the students, during the third (33.0%) or fourth year (28.2%) (<https://www.iie.org/>).

The university, often even the professor, is in charge not only of providing housing, administrative assistance and personal support but also organizing and implementing the classes abroad for the students. The courses are then usually held at the foreign branch of the university or at a partner institution and are aimed exclusively at the study group and often “accustomed” to the students’ needs and requirements imposed by their academic path. In sum, the home university serves as *in loco parentis*, to provide oversight of the students as they discover their adult predilections and prepare to assume personal and financial responsibilities (Matthews, 1997 as in Kinginger, 2009). This practice implemented by many American universities, according to Kinginger (2009), might even be the result of a prejudice that the overseas educational offer is not qualitatively comparable to the American one and that courses at the host institutions could then be detrimental to the student outcomes.

Nonetheless, a great shift took place in the design of study abroad: the full year abroad that has represented the common practice for many years is now rare and obsolete. Figures show that the great majority of American students (64.6%) in 2017/2018 chose short-term programs (a summer long, eight weeks or even less), followed by mid-length experiences (one semester, or one or two quarters), while only 2.3% engaged in long-term (academic or calendar year) study abroad.

This is the result of several factors, namely the increasing requirements that students have to meet before graduation, often setting the pace for many other experiences, and perhaps the minor role given to language and language learning. If the initial aim of study abroad was solely learning the foreign language and gaining knowledge of the culture, the objectives now seem much more varied and encompassing the whole experience. While a foreign language class is, however, still an important requisite during the stay, the classes taken during the period abroad are often taught in English. As a way of illustration, many American students prefer anglophone destinations: in 2017/2018 the favored country to study abroad was indeed the UK (39,403 people), followed by Italy (36,945), Spain, France and Germany. The choice is also often imposed by the type of program (i.e. the subjects and fields of study addressed) rather than by the language or country.

Moreover, these figures show us that even if many more destinations all over the world are available today, Europe still takes the lion’s share with 54.9 % of all the mobile students in 2017/2018.

In conclusion, study abroad in the US has certainly been shaped by contextual factors and has often embodied the trends and events of its times, therefore changing along with the innovations and implications that the evolving society has brought about. Indeed, study abroad in the US, as we conceive it today, is the product of past decisions, ideas and practices but also the reflection of today's world.

2.2 The dimensions of the study abroad experience: language learning, sociality and intercultural communication

So far, we have described mobility as a worldwide and societal phenomenon, but we must acknowledge what it represents for students: a multidimensional and enriching life experience. In this section we will introduce the most important dimensions constituting study abroad and how they interrelate. We will start from language learning, fundamental factor and often important objective of going abroad. Much of the research on study abroad has been conducted from the linguistic perspective, focusing on how the immersion experience affects language learning. Due to the often inconsistent and diverse findings, SLA has tried to shed light on the topic shifting to a more specific approach that encompassed personal characteristics and variables. We will indeed argue that the success of the experience depends to a great extent on the opportunities given to students, thus emphasizing the importance of supporting students in their growth from different points of view. One factor that has been neglected in SA research for many years is indeed the social dimension: not only is it important for establishing valuable relationships, but also because it is precisely the social network created by the students that will allow them to have access to opportunities. Many factors affecting the success in establishing it exist and a deeper understanding of them might aid students, as well as educators and researchers in gaining a more complete picture of the experience and therefore promote success. In conclusion we will claim that all of these dimensions are enclosed and integrated in the concept of intercultural communicative competence. As far as this competence is concerned, not all students arrive prepared to face the intercultural situations while abroad and this has often to do with their lack of experience and preparation. Given the negative repercussions of such inexperience on the views students hold towards the host country, community and experience itself, it becomes clear that more attention should be given to intercultural communicative competence.

2.2.1 Study abroad and language learning

In the previous sections we examined student mobility, the typical study abroad design, and its main characteristics. This analysis served as a framework to understand the phenomenon and a way to see its contextualization. However, international mobility cannot only be seen as a broad phenomenon moving students across the globe, but it has to be considered also as a multidimensional and all-encompassing life experience. It is clear to us that whatever definition and features we assign to it will be reflected in the way we approach our research and pedagogical work.

We have argued that study abroad is a varied phenomenon, often encompassing many factors and characteristics, but it is also a quite complex field of research. Many different sciences and fields of study are indeed involved in research about study abroad according to the focus, namely second language acquisition, sociology, anthropology, pedagogy, psychology and economics. This is not hard to believe; already if we describe it as a life experience, we acknowledge the richness and complexity that it can entail.

One of the central aspects of such an experience is certainly language and language learning. It often represents an important aspect for students going abroad and it is also the focus of many researchers. As a matter of fact, outgoing students have recognized the fundamental role that language plays in their experience, the improvement it can engender in their social relationships, in their studies and understanding of the host culture. Likewise, researchers have turned to the correlation between study abroad and language learning. Study abroad has indeed been the focus of much second language acquisition (SLA) research, which has in turn depicted the experience as mainly a linguistic one. As we have shown, the very first reason driving students and institutions to undertake or promote the journey was language and perhaps (high) culture learning. Accordingly, researchers have been interested in the linguistic aspect of the experience, with attention given mainly to the gains that living abroad brought to language learners.

In particular, scholars interested in language learning through study abroad have grounded their theories on the expectation that great exposure to the foreign language would lead automatically to acquisition. However, if we review the extensive research in SLA, we will easily realize that this logic is in fact erroneous (Coleman, 2013).

As reported in Marijuan and Sanz (2018) researchers and practitioners have questioned the widespread conception that the immersion experience leads undoubtedly to language development and overall learner growth (Cubillos, Chieffo, & Fan, 2008; Freed, 1995; Sanz, 2014; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004 as cited in Marijuan & Sanz, 2018).

At first, the majority of researchers looked at grammar and lexical development to find answers to the question. It soon became clear, however, that language achievements cannot be purely measured on the basis of grammar correctness or lexical richness and the focus shifted towards proficiency and standardized tests. Proficiency of study abroad participants has often been compared to control groups of students who continued their learning at the home institution. This in turn has proved problematic because of context and learners' differences. What became clear in later studies, however, was the great variability and consequential insistency of the findings: a common trend turned out to be hard to find and a final decision on whether all students improved through SA seemed unreachable. In other words, some students return from a sojourn abroad with a significantly broadened second language repertoire, some do not, and some even present lower scores on a proficiency post-test than they did prior to their time away (Kinginger, 2008). In the last years then, scholars have acknowledged that results depend greatly on the variability of learners and contexts. Some have even claimed that study abroad *amplifies* individual differences (Huebner, 1995). This has become key in modifying SA and SLA research methods, thus encompassing more and more specific characteristics.

According to Coleman, "individual variability of course comprises a number of cognitive, affective, and biographical variables, each of which can itself can be infinitely sub-divided, and each of which is fluid and context-dependent" (2013, p. 26).

Focus on personal characteristics has shed light not only on different motivations, attitudes, language aptitudes but also on the experiences themselves that students had. We cannot indeed ignore that, regardless of the specific features of each student, their experiences influencing language learning contribute to the difference of outcomes too. For instance Kinginger argues that "what language students learn during study abroad depends upon the kinds of access to learning opportunities that they are able to negotiate, how they evaluate the performance of identity in the contexts they frequent, and which elements of language they choose to attend to and/or incorporate into their own communicative repertoires" (Kinginger, 2013, p. 352).

Research has shown accelerated development when opportunities of learning occurred. This has clearly emphasized the importance of instruction before, during and after the period abroad (Kinging, 2013). Furthermore, these opportunities are not only merely related to language classrooms but they have to be thought in the wider sense possible, where informal contact with language and interactions with people are the added value of learning abroad. These, however, are not automatic and easily accessible experiences, they are often conscious and voluntary actions undertaken by learners. A certain agency has to be recognized in this process, both from the point of view of creating or seizing opportunities and of learning from them. Language learning abroad depends on many more factors than the those often outlined by research, which has often ignored the importance of the other dimensions of the experience, namely the social dimension.

2.2.2 Study abroad and the social dimension

We have argued that opportunities can modify the outcomes of study abroad. When we say opportunities, we mean a wide array of them, from linguistic to experiential, from more informal to more formal. What is certain is that study abroad may be an extremely rich source of opportunities in this sense.

We have claimed that language learning is a key element during the experience and that, as a consequence, language instruction is to be promoted before, during and after the residence abroad.

We must acknowledge, however, that many other forms of learning contribute to increased language proficiency, especially when we take into account the case of study abroad. Study abroad has indeed been the focus of much SLA research because of the naturalistic, realistic and spontaneous setting it represents for language learners. Everything that happens outside the classroom when living abroad can become significant input for learning. Many have argued that this is precisely what makes SA so special for language acquisition; the experiences that one is presented with have the potential to enhance language learning. A too narrow approach to SLA and SA, however, has often led to overlook the complexity and multidimensionality of this phenomenon. Foreign language learning is indeed just one aspect of the experience. As Coleman states, “to define sojourners principally as “learners”, let alone the even narrower “language learners” is to restrict the perspective to a single lens, which can only result in distortion” (2013, p. 24).

Study abroad participants often describe their experiences as life-changing, as “the time of their lives”. Although it may be the case for a few of them, presumably the language enthusiasts, language learning

is not the decisive factor inducing them to depict it in such remarkable terms, nor is it their final aim. Both the aims and the results of many experiences are related to the discovery of new places, the meeting of new people, the establishment of life-long relationships, the self-reflection and growth that these experiences encompass.

In the students' eyes, it is rather the social dimension that really influences the final outcome. We soon realize that knowing the foreign language is not their number one goal, it is not even a negligible factor, but it is seen more as a means. Language is then "just" the way to establish, maintain and develop those social networks that determine the experience.

We must acknowledge that, from a researcher or teacher perspective, those social networks are the keystone of learning: "social networks [...] are crucial to learning outcomes, since they can determine access to linguistic and cultural input, and the quantity, nature and functional coverage of target language interactions" (Coleman, 2013, p. 29). Far from being only relevant to the students and their amusement while abroad, then, they represent a determining factor in the overall success of the experience.

In light of these considerations, Coleman (2013) focused his attention on the types of networks and the implications for students when abroad. The concentric circles of representation of social networks, described by him, show the different levels and phases that mobile students go through. For instance, the closest and easiest type of relationship one has access to is the one with co-nationals. These are the relationships created to evade loneliness and exclusion, especially during the first phase of the stay. The following circle is constituted by other outsiders, who are the second people with whom relationships are built, often other foreign or international students, somehow interested in the socialization process too. Only at the end do mobile students find locals, who are then described as the most difficult to reach.

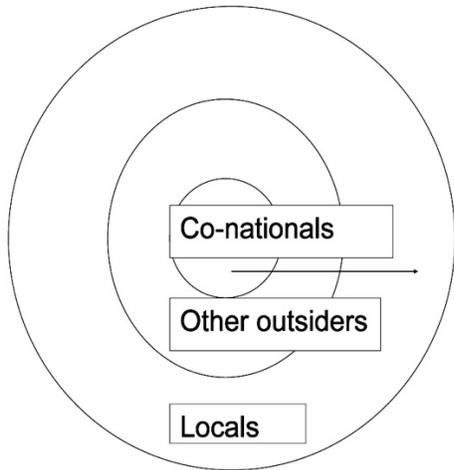


Figure 2.1 Coleman's concentric circles of representation of study abroad social networks

This is a phenomenon affecting the majority of international students; as a matter of fact, if we take into account both American and European study groups, we will find these same patterns.

Considering the typical American study abroad program design where students are sent abroad in large groups of co-national attending the same university, it becomes clear that these are the first people that the mobile student resorts to. They are often placed in the same classes, at times they even share accommodation, resulting perhaps in great cohesion, that might, however, prove detrimental when trying to enlarge social relations. This is partially true for European students too, who are not part of a large group but are often accompanied by at least one student from the same university, who usually attends the same university abroad and, at least for those who choose bigger cities as destination, will easily and quickly find compatriots.

The fact that mobile students tend to relate more to their co-nationals is indeed recognized by study abroad specialists, but many times actions have not proven sufficient or adequate. Examples range from an exhortation at a preparatory meeting urging students not to hang out exclusively with their fellow American mates to the organization of social occasions such as “mix and mingle events”. However, many of these attempts have not resulted in increased socialization or expanded relationships with locals. One reason has to be found in the **different level of interest** that mobile students and locals have in international and intercultural encounters: from the common perspective incoming students certainly have more to gain from interactions than locals, unless they are linguistically motivated (Coleman, 2013). Locals can, indeed, show very little interest in short-lasting relationships with foreigners and host communities might at times not be as inclusive and welcoming as one thinks. Another reason might lay

in the difference or difficulty of “social environments” or **loci of socialization** as Coleman labels them: students and locals inevitably attend different places in everyday life or, whenever these coincide, scarce social interaction might happen.

Nevertheless, students who have described their experience abroad as successful even in terms of interaction and relationship-building with locals often recall having had specific opportunities to meet and interact with them in a favorable environment. Coleman for instance notes that advice might be given on loci of socialization (usually student restaurants, bars) or strategies for continuing home activities (e.g. choir, hobby, sport, church) in order to get to know locals, a process which is considered to be easier outside the university premises and away from other foreign students (2013). The higher success of the experience, then, relies also on **how students decide to invest their time abroad**.

We have to acknowledge that much depends on **students’ willingness** and openness, even behavioral attitude towards meeting new people and interacting. A possible reason for the lack of interaction and relationship-building lies in the unpreparedness of students to meet new people, to communicate, to speak the foreign language, to know how to approach someone in the host country.

We can clearly see that the considerable individual differences we have mentioned when pointing out the variability of results in foreign language acquisition keep adding up. The overall picture becomes more and more complicated, thus showing the challenges students often face in study abroad.

This is precisely why support must be considered one of, if not the most, valuable resource for students. Nonetheless, support must include all the factors involved in the study abroad experience, its multidimensionality and complexity must be acknowledged throughout the whole process.

2.2.3 Study abroad and intercultural communicative competence

We have argued that an automatic improvement in the foreign language during study abroad is not to be assumed; in fact, individual differences influence to a great extent the outcomes. Not only do personal characteristics have a significant effect on levels of success, but also the opportunities, which often involve the social networks that students were able to establish. For these reasons, we have called for the implementation of support to students encompassing all the dimensions of the experience.

As a matter of fact, study abroad students are not always linguistically and culturally prepared to optimize the learning opportunities abroad and they struggle to negotiate the cultural difference they encounter

abroad (Block, 2007). In particular, research has often targeted American students, arguing that in SA settings they display a sense of superiority, inability to engage with diversity and tendency to affirm their national identity (Block, 2007). However, evidence has suggested that this is far from being exclusively an American problem, it involves in fact many mobile students regardless of their nationality or culture. “When some students encounter challenges to the habitus associated with their national identity, their reaction is to withdraw from the negotiation of difference. Particularly if their sojourn is short term, they may never overcome the tendency to interpret the cultural practices of their hosts in terms of their own sociocultural history” (Kinging, 2013, p. 346-347). As a matter of fact, in describing the social psychology of the academic sojourn, Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977) highlight that students are under pressure to maintain and rehearse their cultural and national identity, often coming from their own insecurity, coping strategies employed, the influence of the co-nationals and even the expectations of the hosts.

For instance, Kinginger reported the example of American students in France who were not ready to deal with the idea of the United States that their French interlocutors presented them with, thus leading to conflicting interactions they were not able to handle and eventually resulted in an estrangement from their hosts (2008).

Moreover, other aspects have to be taken into account when describing American students. First of all, as we have argued when depicting the typical design of study abroad in the US, language learning is often not the focus of the experience. This can be deduced from the popularity of anglophone destinations or from the specialization fields of students going abroad. The paradigm of language students going abroad merely to put in practice the language studied for a long time in the classroom is outdated. Today, students going abroad are mainly students in the STEM fields, business and social sciences, whereas only 2.9% are language students (<https://www.iie.org/>). This is relevant to support the cause for the implementation of language instruction before, during and after study abroad. First, these students might not have had any specific training in the foreign language that they will be confronted with and second, they might not even have had training in foreign languages in general. Far from being the language specialists that were once the only participants of this type of experiences, they are today beginners of the language learning process. As a matter of fact, many of the models of language competence we have depicted incorporate a sociocultural or intercultural dimension, thus implying that a skilled speaker of a language is also someone who is (inter-)culturally competent. If we associate language learning to intercultural learning too and if this approach is actually favored in the classroom, then certainly those

students who have had at least some language training will benefit from it in SA settings. On the contrary, those students who have not had any or very little contact with foreign languages might not even have had contact with other cultures, with intercultural communication and their underlying mechanisms. In addition to being foreign language beginners then, they are often inexpert intercultural speakers. Moreover, taking into account that American students going abroad are often in their first years of undergraduate studies, with few or no experiences abroad before that moment, it becomes clear that their level of preparation to face intercultural situations many times is not adequate. American study abroad participants have indeed little experience of border crossing, especially if compared to their European counterparts. The reasons are multiple and are certainly to be attributed to the different cultural background and political rationale of both the US and Europe. As a consequence, European students are more likely to have traveled, studied abroad and have been confronted with many languages and cultures from a very young age.

Despite all these variables, however, studies on motivation of learners show that there is interest towards the foreign people and their culture (Ely, 1986; Evans, 1988; Roberts, 1992; Singleton & Singleton, 1992; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Meara, 1994; Coleman, 1994; 1995; 1996 as cited in Coleman, 1998). That is to say that students going abroad are not unenthusiastic and careless travelers who avoid any contact with the host community or a deeper understanding of their cultures.

As Coleman notes, the underlying assumption is that residence in the foreign country will inevitably lead to cultural understanding, which in turn will trigger positive attitudes, and therefore enhance language acquisition (1998). This reasoning has proven incorrect and misleading. For many years, institutions, governments, teachers and even students have invested in study abroad thinking that this would be the extraordinary remedy to language learning, cultural understanding and personal maturity.

In fact, extensive research in the intercultural communication and SA field has demonstrated that merely being exposed to languages and cultures, spending time abroad and living in a foreign country are not sufficient to become intercultural competent speakers.

Although experience is an influential factor in developing intercultural communicative competence, as we have shown in the previous chapter, it is also not sufficient. Simply finding yourself in a different setting, meeting new people or trying to communicate with someone who does not share your values will not automatically make you a competent intercultural speaker. The complex models of ICC presented so far clearly show that there are many conscious processes that one has to internalize before starting to

think interculturally. Processes such as the ones described by Byram, reflection, observation, analysis of oneself and the other, do not simply happen if one is confronted with difference. They result from an evolution taking place over time and with guidance.

As a matter of fact, according to Aba, “the literature in the area of intercultural education warns that exposing students to international experiences without preparing or supporting them adequately to make sense of their intercultural experience can result in negative learning outcomes” (Bridges et al., 2009; Coulby 2006; Sercu 2006, as cited in Aba, 2015, p. 2).

For instance, in Coleman’s study, language mobile students demonstrated still having clear national stereotypes after their stay, at times even having reinforced them and presenting a more negative view than those who had not gone abroad (1998). According to Kinginger (2009), when the expectations of students are challenged in intercultural encounters, they may either choose to avoid these interactions or interpret them in terms of negative stereotypes about the host group.

Studies both in the European and American context put forward the hypothesis that, although students have become more aware of the international dimensions and abandoned ethnocentric views, results are by far unsatisfactory. This is true especially if we consider the large investments made by European institutions in promoting the active citizen ideal (Anquetil, 2006). This, however, can also apply to the American context, where universities invest in a large number of programs abroad with the aim of offering a more intercultural education without the desired outcomes in intercultural learning and growth.

In sum, regardless of the context where the efficacy of study abroad is investigated, the period abroad certainly offers a unique experience in intercultural living but intercultural learning cannot be seen as its automatic outcome (Roberts, 2002).

What are the implications deriving from these considerations?

While individual differences will naturally and inevitably remain and different background experiences are always to be expected in participants of study abroad programs, the need to intervene in the process of forming intercultural competent students is essential.

2.3 Supporting students in their study abroad experience

Supporting students throughout their mobility experience is essential and training and instruction should be provided. We have shown that the “existential experience” encompasses many dimensions and that

they are all equally important; accordingly, support should be inclusive in addressing language, sociality and intercultural communication in a complementary manner.

In this section we will begin by claiming that support through training and instruction is not only relevant but even necessary to seize all the opportunities that SA has to offer and to eventually lead to a development of the individual. Opportunities such as intercultural encounters, interaction, observation and understanding are in fact not the result of mere immersion in the new environment but planned, thoughtful and intentional actions.

At first, we will illustrate what constitutes common practice in study abroad support and highlight some characteristics that these programs present. While we will show that these actions have often proven beneficial, we will also remark that they are not sufficient in developing all the aspects of study abroad aims to enhance. Programs are centered on practical and administrative needs and tend to lack a more intercultural approach.

As a matter of fact, supporting students in their experiences also requires careful training in intercultural communication. We will therefore delve into the description of the constituents and features of those programs specifically addressing the intercultural dimension of SA. These programs share a theoretical framework and are based on the anthropological concepts and methodology, thus making the practice scientifically sound. Moreover, they adhere to the principles of intercultural education. All of these implications, however, also show the complexity of outlining and implementing a solid program. In light of this consideration, we will try to identify the causes of the scarcity of programs focusing on ICC and therefore disclose the difficulties that institutions and educators may encounter in designing this type of trainings.

In conclusion, we will propose some programs developed by educators around the world that may serve as examples of good practice. They embody the concepts we have discussed so far and have proven to be beneficial for their participants. We will first explain their structure and characteristics and then show their common traits despite relating to different contexts. These will indeed serve as guides for designing and carrying out our program.

2.3.1 Common trends in training for study abroad

In the previous section we have demonstrated that study abroad is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses many realms: among which language learning, sociality and intercultural communication

all play an important and equally essential role. They are not separate entities but interrelating components of a complex structure, all contributing to the development of the individual. More proficiency means greater access to social interaction, greater social interaction means a wider and more varied social network, a more varied social network means more intercultural communication. Intercultural Communication, in turn, results in growth, openness and overall development of the student. This “existential experience” becomes a rich source of multiple learning opportunities. Mobility programs are indeed recognized as one of the most powerful pedagogical instruments for plurilingual and intercultural education (Cuenat et al., 2015). The need to seize all of the learning opportunities is certainly of great interest to teachers, educators and institutions, who usually are aware of the possibilities it gives. Nevertheless, this is far from being only an external acknowledgment: participants often describe it as “the time of their life”, as a period of maturation and growth in multiple directions, thus highlighting a value assigned by students themselves. How could the enormous potential of this experience remain unfulfilled? How could these opportunities be ignored?

A lack of planning and student preparation can cause the international placement programs to become a wasted opportunity for all stakeholders (Aba, 2015).

As we have discussed in the previous section, while many conceive study abroad as a magic formula allowing students to naturally develop linguistic and intercultural competences, this has proved not to be the case. Students confronted with diversity or other perceptions of the world, when inexperienced and unprepared, have become even more ethnocentric. This has led to the realization that preparation, training and support are needed. They are not to be seen merely as extra measures to upgrade students’ skills or knowledge, but necessary steps towards the students’ overall development. In order to really seize all the opportunities we have illustrated and to exploit the full potential of the residence abroad, participants need to be ready and able to make the most of it.

This is, however, not a new concept nor an extraordinary realization: those involved in SA organization have long recognized the importance of supporting students. Many organizations have taken action in this sense and have developed plans to support students adopting different approaches. At times, they have also become aware that support is needed at different phases of study abroad: before, during and after the programs. Practice is varied and levels of support differ greatly from program to program; as a matter of fact, each institution has developed its own program. A generalization would certainly be a

simplification but it is our intention to highlight some of the most common traits of support programs for mobility.

Support before departure is thought by many as information meetings to illustrate the destinations and programs or, at a later moment, preparatory meetings to help students with documentation and bureaucratic obligations. Preparation is usually a home institution task, which involves giving information about the place or university the students will attend, a generic review of the difficulties they will face (from the most practical such as accommodation to more psychological like homesickness and culture shock) or meetings with former mobile students who usually expose their experiences and give advice. In addition, language classes may be available or even mandatory for students going abroad, these can be either the normal departmental courses of the given language or specific courses for outgoing students.

Preparation is often seen as the most important phase and, as a consequence, pre-departure support is also the most common. Support during SA, on the other hand, may involve the host institution, especially when students are integrated in the foreign university, or representatives from the home institution when they are accompanied by the university of origin. This is the case for instance of the American study groups, that we have shown in detail, where universities serve as *in loco parentis*. This type of support often entails showing around the new university, the city, or being paired with a local student who will become a tutor to the incoming student. This is the case of the Erasmus “buddy program”, rather popular among European universities. In addition, during this phase language learning is usually promoted with special classes for mobile students arranged at the host institution.

Finally, post-mobility support may include sharing the experience with new students, or co-presenting information sessions. Language learning is often not the focus of attention after the experience and, except for the students who are willing to attend other language courses and proceed with their learning, it will be discontinued.

It should also be noticed that these last two phases tend to be regarded as less important and the actions taken by both the home and host institution may be limited.

These widely available practices have indeed proved to be helpful and even fundamental in supporting students throughout their experience.

In light of the arguments we have put forward so far, however, what is clearly lacking is a type of support that goes beyond mere guidance through administrative tasks or superficial and declarative information

about the place and experience. The already existent support should then be integrated with a clear and well-planned program guiding students through a much deeper understanding of the context where they will be, are and were. First of all, the conviction is that preparing students to become intercultural communicators is the key solution to overcome inexperience and unpreparedness in study abroad settings. Institutions and educators have the duty to prepare and assist students from the intercultural perspective too in order to fully exploit the potential of the intercultural encounters and allow students to seize all the enriching opportunities they may find. It is only through experience, training and expert mentoring that participants will be able to suspend judgment, strive toward relevant interpretations of events and eventually succeed in the SA contexts (Kinging, 2009).

Second, the strong belief is that this specific type of support cannot be reduced to a couple of meetings before departure illustrating the cultural differences students will face while abroad. Rather, the aim should be providing participants with intercultural support throughout the whole program, comprising the very delicate preparatory phase, the process of direct experience during SA, and the much-needed debriefing and reflection phase afterwards.

As we have demonstrated when describing its characteristics, intercultural communicative competence is deeply processual in nature and this process of learning is in fact endless. This feature makes it even more evident that intercultural learning cannot happen in two sessions before departure. In addition, if we consider the trend nowadays of students going abroad for shorter periods than before, the need to make use of that time to the fullest becomes imperative. A highly structured and experience-long program assisting students will be beneficial in optimizing the time and opportunities given.

Nevertheless, irrespectively of their length and form, mobility programs need to be carefully planned. Coherent learning objectives and support throughout the entire experience will be required on the part of institutions: before, at the preparatory stage, during the mobility activity itself and afterwards (Cuenat et al., 2015).

2.3.2 Training for study abroad in an intercultural perspective: common traits

Thanks to a great expansion of student programs and worldwide mobility in general, especially in the last decades, some institutions and educators have come to the realization that there is a need to further enhance the SA participants' learning. While many institutions were putting in place linguistic trainings and information sessions, some other were conscious that an additional support was required. In

particular, they tried to answer the needs of study abroad students by focusing on developing intercultural communicative competence. This came from the acknowledgment of students' insufficient preparation in the intercultural matter and the necessity to really take advantage of the period abroad as a rich opportunity to learn and grow.

With these objectives in mind, educators themselves explored a rather new branch of pedagogy, to eventually conceive new approaches and methodologies. Some common features of ICC training aimed at study abroad can be outlined by looking at those programs that specifically address intercultural education.

First of all, in these types of training educators turned to intercultural communication in order to find a **framework** for their practice and drew upon models of ICC and its related concepts. Many practitioners based their methodologies, and continue to do so, on the most common models of **intercultural communicative competence**: in particular, Byram's Multidimensional Model of Intercultural Competence, Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) and Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence. As a consequence, the skills, knowledge and attitudes proposed in the models are also the focus of these trainings.

Furthermore, educators have also relied on other fields of study to find a rationale for the projects in an intercultural perspective; in particular, anthropology has greatly influenced the design and methodology of the programs. The **ethnographic approach** has been taken as a model by researchers and teachers because of its usefulness in observation and analysis. As a matter of fact, anthropology is interested in exploring the behavioral practices and beliefs of a particular group of people at a given time and understanding the meanings behind them. Moreover, the work of ethnographers consists in collecting data directly, through active observation, by becoming part of the culture(s) they are investigating. Their methods are often observation and informal interviews to gather information from the participants of the group themselves (Roberts, 2002).

The common aims of discovering and understanding different cultures and the fieldwork methodology make anthropology especially relevant to the study abroad pedagogy. While some practitioners in the SA field have found important concepts to integrate in intercultural communicative pedagogy, others have borrowed much more than a few basic concepts. Bano, Jordan, Roberts, Byram (2001) have indeed had the idea of turning learners into ethnographers and have conceived residence abroad as an extended

period of fieldwork. We will go into more details about these projects in the next section where we will introduce some examples of training for SA focusing on ICC.

As far as **structure** is concerned, many projects are divided into three phases: pre-mobility, during mobility and post-mobility. These phases are not only the logical subdivision of the study abroad experience but also the pedagogical coherent stages of intercultural development. The programs therefore are designed to gradually follow the process: at first and before their “field” experience, students are asked to reflect on their identity and culture, to become aware of their cultural practices, values and views and find out the mechanisms and models underlying cultures in general. At the same time, they draw upon their preexistent knowledge of other cultures, they come to realize their previous experiences and start exploring new elements. This is also an important moment to set goals for language learning, for the intercultural exploration and in general the experience abroad. The preparatory phase then serves to build a solid structure for further enhancing the learning and it is the foundation for being able to work autonomously on interculturality while abroad. For this reason, other than starting to develop and acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes, a fundamental role is played by strategies and methods that will help students to advance their learning at a later phase.

During mobility, fieldwork and hands-on experience really take off: students, who have now the tools to explore the culture they find themselves in, observe, communicate with those who are there and progress in their language learning. They become active observers of the world around them but also within them, thus allowing a dialogue and comparison of their own identity and culture and those they see. In this phase they keep track of this process, both linguistic and intercultural, through writing (notes, diaries, blogs, letters) which serves as a reflection tool (Cuenat et. al, 2015).

After mobility, participants analyze and reflect upon their observation and experience. The products of their writing are examined in order to draw insightful conclusions. This is also the moment in which students share their works and discuss with the aim of better understanding the experience. Moreover, they outline the expectations they had before mobility and whether they were met or not, if something changed and what they have learnt. Assisting and guiding future mobile students might also be a helpful tool of reflection and learning at this moment, serving as a way to become aware of their own starting point and final achievements.

Another common trend of trainings that is outlined in these activities is its **focus** on the student and experience. We have argued in the previous chapter that these two characteristics are indeed typical of

intercultural education in general. When working in the field of study abroad, this assumption becomes even more relevant. Students are indeed undertaking a long journey of discovery that will lead to their personal development and self-realization. In this real-life experiential process, they are indeed the protagonists and agents of their own change, reason why an approach not centered on the students or direct experiences would be unsuccessful and ineffective.

Moreover, many educators insist on the importance of integrating language instruction into the programs, as they recognize that language is in fact a fundamental part of the experience abroad and of the ICC framework models. However, some have also created more language and culture generic programs arguing that in some settings it is more important to be aware of the general underlying mechanisms of communication.

The **role of educators** in the process is again that of guides and skilled ‘architects’, able to build a balanced program that challenges and allows students to grow. The most problematic aspect is that several professionals are involved in SA, at times also varying from context to context, such as administrators, teachers (also belonging to different fields of study), program directors, former SA participants. In some cases, both those working at the home and at the host institution have to be included. It becomes clear that numerous people work, for instance, towards the realization of a single program. All these agents involved are then required to build a strong, connected and inter-dependent network rather than working in a disjointed and autonomous way. This implication shows the difficulties that institutions can face in building support programs for SA and, at the same time, unveils some of the reasons why ICC focused training is still an exception rather than a rule.

First, a group of people with different tasks and competences, each with their own role, needs to work together toward a common goal. This necessity is rather obvious and acknowledged by every institution where very often highly skilled and prepared professionals are present: international office administrators specialized in organizing trips or information sessions, teachers providing students with language instruction, trained former participants and experienced program directors. Just as we highlighted when illustrating common practice in SA support, however, what is often lacking in this network is an intercultural communication specialist. It is also for this reason that programs supporting students in an intercultural perspective are not so widespread. As a matter of fact, those few programs that somehow excel in this type of support have in common the vision, knowledge and willingness of experts, mainly educators interested in interculturality, promoting, planning and carrying them out themselves.

These are in fact people who also really believe and see the benefits of this type of approach. While the scientific community has clearly proved the necessity and advantages of such an education, many institutions still do not see the need. Mobility is indeed extremely popular among students and it continues to grow relentlessly, thus making believe that the level of internationalization required has been achieved. Mobility has indeed often been measured by the quantity of mobile students and academic staff. “This situation has been detrimental for exploring the pedagogical aspects of intercultural learning and improving the educational quality of international experiences” (Bridges et al. 2009, as cited in Aba, 2015 p.2).

Second, the group has to collaborate. Suffice it to say that, if we really believe in a complete and well-structured program supporting students throughout the whole experience, this network becomes extremely large, often encompassing multiple institutions, countries, languages, cultures. Collaborating in outgoing-incoming students activities is clearly a complex work of the two partner universities, let alone those institutions that have an extended network of partnerships with foreign universities, as in the case of Erasmus+, and see outgoing and incoming students from all over the world.

The problem of such scarcity of strong programs supporting students in study abroad is mainly to be researched in the lack of resources, in terms of money and preparation of educators, effort required and misconceptions of the study abroad experience.

2.3.3 Examples of training for study abroad in an intercultural perspective

After having highlighted some common characteristics, we will pass in review some examples of programs focusing on intercultural communication. These are programs that have been conducted in different settings and at different institutions but that somehow embody the principles of ICC and have proven to be effective in its promotion in study abroad.

The first example is a program, applied in two different contexts, drawing upon the ethnographic approach. This type of program was conceived by the British researchers Jordan and Roberts and is based on the conception that an ethnographic approach can be helpful in observing and becoming aware of one’s own culture and the target one thus recognizing their complexities and differences and leaving aside stereotypes and generalizations. As a matter of fact, Jackson states that “ethnography has a vital role to play in demystifying the language and cultural learning experiences of student sojourners. If used

appropriately, it can have a significant impact on the quality of programmes of this nature by providing essential direction for their refinement and revision” (Jackson, 2006, p. 156).

In the activities introduced by the researchers, students become ethnographers in charge of investigating the target cultural group while also living within it.

Borrowing Agar’s terms, according to Roberts the process allows the learner to become a ‘professional stranger’ (2002). The novice ethnographer will be given the tools to research in depth and to find richness in the small detail of everyday life.

In particular, the “**Ealing Ethnographic Programme**” carried out by Roberts is aimed at British language students who undertake study abroad in two different countries for a total of 10 months. The project is founded on Byram’s conception of ICC and gives language a key role in the learning process too.

The project is divided into three parts: a taught module, an ethnographic study and a written ethnography on return to the home university. In the taught module students are provided with basic anthropological and sociolinguistic concepts and a methodological component introducing ethnographic techniques for a total of 45 classroom hours. While abroad, students conduct an ethnographic study and through their fieldwork they produce a written account of a particular group or set of practices in that country. This work will eventually become the final ethnographic project, in the foreign language, upon return (Roberts, 2002).

A similar approach was taken in Jackson’s program at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The offering consists of seminars in literature and applied linguistics (ethnographic research), summer fieldwork in England, debriefing sessions, and a research report-writing course related to the experience abroad. In the seminar students develop the skills necessary to carry out ethnographic research in England (e.g. participant observation, note-taking, diary-keeping, reflexive interviewing, the recording of field notes, the audio-recording and analysis of discourse). Moreover, weekly tasks outside of classroom are employed as training in the home setting in order ‘to make the familiar strange’ and become more aware of aspects of their own culture (Jackson, 2006). After having analyzed the ethnographic works, both of these programs were considered successful. The participants demonstrated careful observation and reflection, they had become more curious about the world around them, more accepting of differences, more reflexive. In conclusion, this program follows a scientific methodology, it is carefully planned and

allows participants to become active observers and autonomous learners, while encouraging them to look deeply into their own experience.

The University of the Pacific's Intercultural Training Program was created by La Brack in 1975 and it was first offered as informal, noncredit, voluntary seminars, then upgraded to two-unit, credit-bearing courses. La Brack is indeed an early skeptic that students learn effectively if left to their own devices (Vande Berg & Paige, 2009). Following these convictions and the success of this first trial, the program became more structured and two credit-bearing courses were created: cross-cultural training I and II. These courses are designed to facilitate intercultural competence by introducing students to basic intercultural concepts and skills before their departure, these are applied while living in the new culture. Once the students come back, they reflect on how they employed these concepts and skills and make sense of what they are experiencing at home and on campus (Bathurst & La Brack, 2012).

Particular attention is given to the educators involved in the program too, who are required to attend one week of formal instruction in intercultural training at the Intercultural Communication Institute's Summer Institute for Intercultural Communication in Portland, Oregon (Bathurst & La Brack, 2012). This important detail allows the training to rely on more than one single specialist and therefore to be passed on.

In order to assess their ICC, students at Pacific undertake the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) during their first year at college and, again, during their senior year prior to graduation. In addition, IDI is also administered in the second module of the cross-cultural training class to track change not only over the entire undergraduate degree program, but also before and after study abroad. The results support the hypothesis that students increase their ICC after the study abroad experience and training.

However, Bathurst and La Brack also recognize that resistance is encountered because of "the lack of understanding and the dismissive attitude toward the value of intercultural training" although "research evaluations show that students provided with good pre-departure training, reinforced by in-country orientations and pre-reentry training, perform better overseas" (2012, p. 278).

The Interculture Project at Lancaster University is an intensive, five-day course, held late in the summer before departure aimed at preparing students for their residence abroad. In particular, the course intends to sensitize individuals to the variety of cross-cultural challenges, both stressful and exhilarating, that they are likely to meet in their period abroad (<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/users/interculture/>). In addition, a more structured credit-bearing training, divided into the three typical phases of preparing for,

experiencing and returning, is also provided. The course is based on Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence and the aim is "to equip students with the tools which will enable them to gain greater awareness of their own cultural values and of the intercultural issues and to develop a working knowledge of life in the country in which they intend to spend their period of residence abroad" (<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk>). The pre-departure training addresses issues such as cultural identity, intercultural incidents, sociolinguistic awareness and competence, expectations, objectives and motivation. During the year abroad students are asked to write a personal diary, carry out sociolinguistic investigations and continue the portfolio they had started before leaving. Upon their return, they present their works, develop the diaries into learning process analyses, give feedbacks on their observation experience and prepare workshops for other outgoing students.

Many other projects and programs exist nowadays in order to enhance the mobility experience of students and institutions have started acknowledging the amelioration that this type of support can bring. The examples we have brought forward, however, are good representations of programs founded on intercultural communicative competence and supporting students throughout their whole experience. Although they are set in various contexts and present differences, some common traits and practices can be found. The tendency in these projects is indeed that of carrying out a preparatory course or workshops where basic concepts of intercultural communication and anthropology are introduced. These become the fundamental tools for students during their residence making it possible to observe and account for, often through writing in diaries or field notes, their discoveries. Once the participants return, they undergo an important path of reflection, analysis, discussion and eventually share their experience. These programs are not only the embodiment and practical demonstration of the concepts and theories that we have proposed throughout our work so far but will also serve as guides in designing and carrying out our program.

CHAPTER 3: *Destinazione Venezia*: the pre-mobility training

In the third chapter, after having introduced the context of our research, we will present a project for pre-mobility training.

First of all, we will describe the context in which our course takes place, in particular the university and the mobility program object of analysis. By illustrating the institution and its specific services concerned with international relations and mobility, we will come to outline the characteristics of the related study abroad program. It is, indeed, only through a deep understanding of the factors influencing and shaping the program that we can design a suitable and thoughtful project. Following a more generic description of the mobility programs offered at Colgate University, we will concentrate on the Venice Study Group, specifically the one occurring in the fall of 2020.

The project involving the 2020 Venice Study group will be outlined: a pre-mobility training for outgoing students, focusing on intercultural communicative competence. We will indeed argue for the necessity to implement a course preparing students on a deeper level than the mere informative sessions. The reasons for implementing the intercultural training, as well as the main components included in the course will be put forward. Afterwards, we will explain the framework and approaches adopted in the classroom in order to demonstrate the rationale behind the project. We will then portray the participants, representing the target of our workshops, and the course design, serving as an important “map” to guide us and the students through the learning process.

In conclusion, we will propose the lesson plans designed specifically for these preparatory workshops. The detailed description of the modules in which the training is divided will be included, together with the activities presented to the students. Not only will the tasks be outlined, but also the reasons, goals and further developments of each activity will be defined.

3.1 The context

In this section we will describe the context in which our project takes place. This project is indeed strictly connected to one international mobility program offered by Colgate university. For this reason, we will begin by illustrating the institution involved, Colgate University and after having briefly introduced its history and setting, we will try to explain Colgate’s mission and approach to academics. Afterwards, we will present two specific services provided on campus: the language study and the international programs

center. These two centers are of paramount importance for our research since they are very much concerned with the preparation and support of the mobile students going abroad. We will therefore focus upon the types of mobility programs offered by Colgate, thus highlighting the possibilities students can choose from for going abroad.

We will then dwell upon one specific program, subject of our attention and work: the Venice Study Abroad program. First, the partnership between Colgate and Ca' Foscari University will be explained, then the program. In particular, we will highlight some characteristics typical of this mobility program set in Italy.

The Venice Study Abroad is a well-established program at Colgate Universities taking place every two years with some recurrent features. However, there will also be the need to describe in detail the specificities of the program designed for the fall semester of 2020.

This deeper understanding of the program will indeed allow us to know the study abroad experience that our students will embark on and therefore enable us to design our preparatory course accordingly.

3.1.1 Colgate University and study abroad

Colgate University is a private liberal arts college in the United States, specifically in central New York state. Founded in 1819, it was first conceived as a seminary, the Baptist Education Society of the State of New York. With time, Colgate has become a leading institution for undergraduate studies in the United States and it is now ranked among the best liberal arts colleges of the country.

The school's mission statement is:

Colgate's mission is to provide a demanding, expansive, educational experience to a select group of diverse, talented, intellectually sophisticated students who are capable of challenging themselves, their peers, and their teachers in a setting that brings together living and learning. The purpose of the university is to develop wise, thoughtful, critical thinkers and perceptive leaders by challenging young men and women to fulfill their potential through residence in a community that values intellectual rigor and respects the complexity of human understanding.

[\(https://www.colgate.edu/\)](https://www.colgate.edu/)

Moreover, thanks to its reduced size, Colgate is renowned for its attention toward students and academics. Approximately 2,900 undergraduate students enroll in the university each year and the

student-faculty ratio is 9:1. The average class is composed of 17 students, emphasizing Colgate's approach to supporting its students and focusing on the quality of the teaching. 56 majors and several additional minor study options are offered by the university, from social sciences to politics, natural sciences and economics. Despite the heterogeneous offering of subjects, Colgate remains a liberal arts college, where great attention is indeed given to the liberal arts. For this reason, many mandatory and interdisciplinary core courses are required, often aimed at promoting skills of critical thinking and acquiring eclectic knowledge. Another requirement of the school is language related: students who have taken less than three years of any language in high school have to choose one language course for at least one academic year.

Furthermore, several opportunities are given to students for their academic success: not only strengthened faculty support but also a great number of services such as peer-tutoring and many centers and institutes dedicated to research, development and collaboration.

Among them, two are of particular interest to us and our research: the W.M. Keck Center for Language Study and the Center for International Programs. The first, open to all students on campus, is a high-tech space for the exploration of language and culture and support in learning. In addition to the language courses offered by the college at departmental level, this center represents an opportunity for students to enhance their language learning. It also serves as a place of confluence for all the languages present at Colgate, namely Italian, French, Russian, Spanish, German, Arabic, Chinese and Japanese, which are otherwise distributed in several different departments. As a matter of fact, besides offering a space for studying, the Keck Center promotes language related events and coordinates the work of language interns and student tutors.

The second, the Center for International Programs, serves as a coordinator and facilitator for internationally focused programs across the campus. On the one hand the Office of Off-Campus Study and on the other the Office of International Student Services (OISS). This center is then dedicated both to incoming and outgoing mobile students and it represents an important hub for the college's international programs.

For incoming **international students**, who represent nearly 10% of the class every year, OISS provides immigration services and support to their student experience.

As far as opportunities abroad are concerned, the Off-Campus Study Office is in charge of organizing and administering off-campus study programs. Their tasks are therefore mainly administrative and

organizational. However, they also organize information sessions for study abroad programs and pre-departure meetings for outgoing students.

A variety of opportunities for off-campus study are offered at Colgate and they include full semester programs led by Colgate faculty in specific subject areas, extended studies of just a few weeks and approved programs at other institutions.

Full-semester, faculty-led **study groups** are opportunities for students to study off campus both domestically and abroad. Participants receive instruction and mentoring from the study group's director, a professor at the university who accompanies the group to the target location, is in charge of carrying out courses and assists students. In most programs, students also participate in courses taught at a host institution. This is usually a partner university hosting students while abroad and in charge of certain aspects of the exchange. All of the academic credits a student earns on a Colgate study group are applicable toward graduation.

As the courses are usually taught by a specific Colgate professor, each study group has its own academic focus. Subjects of interest of study abroad range from geography to physics, history to literature. This focus, then, greatly depends on the department involved in the study abroad.

Study group destinations at Colgate span all over the world from Australia to France, China to Russia. The rate of Colgate students going abroad on a study group is very high. Colgate is indeed ranked first nationally among baccalaureate institutions by the Institute of International Education for the number of undergraduates participating in semester-length off-campus study programs with 72% of Colgate students going abroad (Walden, 2016).

Besides semester-long study groups, students can also choose from more than 100 **approved programs** in 50 countries. In this case students are not led by a Colgate professor and do not move to the foreign country with other students. They choose a specific program at a host institution, attend classes there individually and carry out their mobility autonomously.

Finally, **Summer Study Abroad** is a shorter experience abroad during the summer. These are once again faculty-led group programs with an academic focus depending on the professor and destination.

3.1.2 The Venice study abroad program

Among the many programs that Colgate has to offer, the focus of our attention will be the Venice study abroad program. After having presented the context where the program takes place, Colgate University, and the general phenomenon of study abroad in the previous chapter, we will try to outline the specific features of this program. As a matter of fact, the typical design of American study abroad programs that we have introduced above has much in common with the specific example that we will put forward.

The long-lived Venice study abroad program is the result of a partnership between Colgate University and Ca' Foscari University, holding a decades-long cooperation agreement. This entails several opportunities for the two institutions: Colgate leads the study group to Venice, relying on Ca' Foscari university for administrative support, providing spaces and structures for the courses and allowing students to take some courses organized by Ca' Foscari, both Italian language and departmental courses. Since 2018, within Ca' Foscari university, Colgate has specifically partnered with the School of International Education enabling students to choose from a variety of courses offered by the School as well as courses taught by faculty from Colgate.

Ca' Foscari students on the other hand benefit from the agreement thanks to a scholarship to work as Italian language assistant at Colgate University for one academic year.

The Venice study abroad program recurs every two years in the fall and is a full semester program (from the beginning of September to December). Students are required to sign up by December of the previous year and receive the confirmation of acceptance by January. The prerequisites vary from year to year but they usually consist of a language requirement, namely the completion of an Italian beginners' course, and at times basic knowledge, interest or completion of a course regarding the focus subject of the program.

Moreover, the mobility is defined as a study group, meaning that it is not individual but involves a group of students regularly enrolled at Colgate and the focus is clearly that of studying abroad. For every program, then, a fixed group of students is formed by a program director, who collects the applications of students and decides if the requirements are met and if the student can join the group. The study group is mainly targeted at second-year students but it is also open to first-years.

The study group is led by the program director, who is charge of organizing, assisting students while abroad and carrying out courses at the host institution for the group of students. As a matter of fact,

students are required to attend a total of four courses, two specifically organized by Colgate and tailored to their needs and two other courses among those offered by Ca' Foscari. The two mandatory Colgate offered courses concern the subject focus of the program while the other two include a compulsory Italian language course and one course offered by the University of Venice, either in its main branch Ca' Foscari or through its School of International Education, chosen by the student.

From a more logistic point of view, students are housed in private apartments in Venice and usually grouped among them, with a varying number depending on the apartments available. Housing arrangements are made by the director before the arrival of the students. Moreover, the Office of International Student Services at Colgate provides support to the participants, helping them with bureaucratic procedures and generic advice.

In conclusion, the department responsible and the academic focus of the program varies from year to year. In particular, the departments that are involved for the Venice Study Group are the Classics department, specifically archeology, and the Music department. These two departments are supported by the Romance Languages and Literatures department, which offers Italian Studies courses. As a consequence, the focus of the study abroad is either archeology, including courses and first-hand research at the city's archaeological sites and museums or music, with courses and attendance to music events in Venice and music related field trips to other cities in Italy and at times abroad. The common aim for Colgate's study groups to Venice is therefore the promotion and discovery of the arts, with the precise focus on "Italy's cultural heritage and in its position within the world of modern culture" (<https://www.colgate.edu/academics/off-campus-study/campus-opportunities/colgate-study-groups/italy-venice>).

Students who choose these programs, then, are usually, although not exclusively, interested in these subjects, which are often their majors or minors.

For this reason, as we have mentioned in the previous chapter, the choice of the destination is to be attributed rather to the type and focus of the program. The destination and language are then recognized as important by both faculty and students, but they are not the main focus or aim of the program.

3.1.3 The Fall 2020 Venice Study Group

We will now go into the details of the program taking place in the fall of 2020, which is the mobility program addressed in our research. Many of the characteristics that we have just described indeed apply

to this specific study group object of our attention too: we will therefore recall some of them and give more detailed descriptions of certain aspects.

The overall objective of studying in Venice is that of discovering the cultural achievements of ancient, medieval, and renaissance Italy, their centrality in the study of western civilization, and the city. The Venice Study Group is therefore said to be open to students who have a strong interest in Italy's cultural heritage and in its position in European cultural history. In sum, participants will acquire a deeper sense of western civilization as well as a better understanding of contemporary Italy (<https://offcampusstudy.colgate.edu/>).

Specifically, this study group is affiliated with the music and romance languages and literature departments. While the latter serves mainly as a linguistic support in preparation to the period abroad, the first is the promotor and organizer of the mobility program. The academic focus of the 2020 program is, indeed, music.

Participants of this study abroad will then take two courses in Venice offered by Colgate and taught on site by a Colgate music professor, as well as program director. The two courses are "*The Arts of Venice During the Golden Age*" and "*The Italian Opera Tradition*". The first focuses on the history of music in Venice while the second includes principles of music drama and concentrates on operas representative of important periods of the Italian tradition. Since the program also features field trips to opera houses in and around Venice, this latter course also introduces students to the operas they will attend. Both courses are taught in English and do not have prerequisites.

The other two courses are offered by the University of Venice or the School of International Education: one of the two is a mandatory Italian language and culture course taught by local instructors where students take different Italian language courses according to their level.

The other course is chosen by each student among a list of available courses taught in English at Ca' Foscari university.

The Venice Study Group is open to applicants from all concentrations but the satisfactory completion of the introductory course to Italian is required, which can be satisfied in the term prior to departure (spring of 2020).

In conclusion, as we have discussed in the previous section, support before and during the period abroad is given by the program director and the Off-Campus Study Office. The program director is mainly concerned with organizing the academic part of the program, namely the courses and field trips, and the

logistics on site, such as accommodation and traveling. The Office, on the other hand is in charge of supporting students through the most practical and administrative tasks before departure, from visa processes to insurance and scholarships. Following two information sessions held in October, participants are asked to attend three meetings before departure where the focus is mainly of bureaucratic nature. In the final meetings, advice and information about the destination, the host university and the city are also given to students. Although extremely helpful for the often very complicated administrative tasks required by mobility programs or the fundamental logistics of living abroad, these meetings, however, remain rather superficial. They certainly do not enhance the acquisition of much cultural knowledge, the awareness of intercultural processes involved in study abroad or the psychological obstacles of living in a new community and culture. It is mainly to fill this gap that a pre-departure course addressing these issues was conceived for the 2020 Venice Study Group during the 2019 spring semester.

3.2 The pre-departure training

After having outlined the context of action, we will move on to analyze and describe the project that we have conceived. We will start from illustrating the idea behind the “*Destinazione Venezia*” project; in particular, we will explain the reasons for implementing the intercultural training in support of the 2020 Venice Study Group and the main components to include. In this stance, the nature of the course programmed before mobility will be described. Moreover, it will be argued that the experiential project should be looked from a wider perspective and other more comprehensive developments of the program could be imagined.

Furthermore, we will point out the role of intercultural communicative competence and language in the course by highlighting the conceptual framework supporting the training. According to the rationale, then, the teaching and learning goals will be outlined, together with the expected outcomes for the participants of the “*Destinazione Venezia*” workshops. Attention will also be directed to the role of the languages used during the course and the goals for language learning.

Afterwards, the approaches, methods and principles guiding our practice will be pointed out: these exemplify and embody the rationale behind the training. As a matter of fact, these are reflected in the design of the course and the activities that will be presented.

In order to better understand the target of the training, we will portray the generic characteristics of the participants taking part in the Study Group and also in the training. Identifying the level of experience, language proficiency and academic focus of the students will help in building a successful course.

In conclusion, we will come to outline in detail the design of the course. In this instance, our choice of the content will be explained, and the topics outlined; these, in turn, form the modules in which the course is divided in. Moreover, we will also reason the choice for the name “*Destinazione Venezia*” assigned to our project, thus highlighting also the path that we have envisioned for the students.

3.2.1 The project: idea and components

The project of designing and carrying out a preparatory course for participants in the Venice Study Group comes from the realization that support for students going abroad was insufficient but very much needed. As we have shown, the type of assistance provided to mobile students at Colgate University is normally of informative, administrative or logistic nature. This is a strong point of many American universities, often extremely supportive in this sense, thus relieving students from the burden of bureaucracy required by mobility. However, this type of support may be a weak point too if we consider its lack of preparation on a deeper level.

The necessity to fill this gap, then, became obvious to us but it was also recognized, to some extent, by students. From the participants themselves arose the request to learn more about this “new place” they were about to explore, to understand better what they would experience, beyond the mere informative sessions they attended.

The underlying motivation for the creation of a pre-departure training was then to answer the students’ needs and to fill the gap of an unsatisfactory preparation. Furthermore, the impetus came also from the desire to challenge the preconceived idea, which we have already introduced, of spontaneous development of intercultural communicative competence when abroad. This in turn was also dependent on the extensive research in the field pointing out the importance of intercultural communicative instruction. The rationale behind the project then is to prepare participants for their experience abroad, to equip them with the instruments they will need during their stay.

The conviction is, as a matter of fact, that initiating students to intercultural communication before their departure will enable them to have more tools available to understand the context of their study abroad

and to interact with increased awareness. It also becomes clear that this will multiply the possibilities of students once abroad.

As we have previously discussed, possibilities during mobility are countless, in terms of language acquisition, cultural discovery and understanding, social network expansion and, more broadly, personal development. For this reason, the training conceived aims to provide students with a sufficient preparation to their study abroad embracing as many aspects as possible. As we have demonstrated, mobility abroad relies, to a great extent, on its intrinsic dimensions: language, intercultural communication and sociality, with the ultimate aim of personal growth. It is for this reason that our conception of training could not ignore the multifaceted and complex nature of the experience. As a consequence, the training aims to include all of these aspects. The project is certainly ambitious and it is our acknowledgment that a comprehensive and thorough preparation on all of these aspects would be unattainable. However, it is our firm conviction that the intrinsic interrelated nature of language, intercultural communication and sociality inevitably leads to address them simultaneously. For this reason, these three components were all considered in designing and carrying out the preparatory course.

Moreover, it should be clarified that the purpose is introducing students to these aspects, giving them the basic tools, teaching them to learn more and further. We are indeed aware that intercultural communicative competence, just as language learning, is in fact a long process and that this training serves only as a small step forward.

The project arose from all of these considerations and, as a result, a training pre-mobility was created. This training takes the shape of a rather experimental and unofficial course, only aimed at the participants going on the 2020 Venice Study Group, taking place during the spring semester of 2020 at Colgate University. The course was held at the Keck Center for language study, one of the services offered by Colgate that we have described in the previous section.

The course, although approved and supported by the program director and Italian faculty, was not mandatory for the students nor recognized at academic level. Students could not receive credit for it nor any type of acknowledgement. The course was not thought of as a replacement of any other type of support to the participants: it tried to both complement and expand on the already existing compulsory meetings and curricular course of Italian. For this reason, the course, which we have decided to call "*Destinazione Venezia*", is defined as an informal course or as a series of workshops in preparation to the study abroad.

In conclusion, we would like to imagine this project under a wider perspective. Our course is indeed quite small and limited, in terms of target, amount and duration, recognition on the part of the university. We are indeed aware that the resources, time at our disposal and general circumstances could not have led to a more complete work. However, we strongly believe that this could represent a small first step. As a matter of fact, many of the well-established trainings that we have analyzed in the previous chapter are said to have begun as small, informal and spontaneous meetings between faculty and students. They became, slowly and not without obstacles, more important projects, academic courses, mandatory and year-long preparation trainings. These were then recognized by their respective universities, scholars and educators, they were expanded and further developed. By way of illustration, the cross-cultural training at Pacific that we have shown in detail was said by its founders to have changed and developed greatly from its beginning. They point out that “first offered as informal, noncredit, voluntary seminars, then upgraded to two-unit, credit-bearing courses, both evolved from informal discussions initiated by students trying to understand what their international experience meant” (Bathurst & La Brack, 2012, p. 261).

It is also for this reason that we believe that even such a small and experimental project could be a beneficial step forward in the promotion of study abroad support.

Moreover, we have also argued for extensive support during the whole period of study abroad showing that this is usually divided into three phases: before, during and after mobility. These are indeed all equally fundamental toward the development of the students.

In light of this conviction, we see our preparatory training as a first intervention and a part of a bigger picture. Ideally, this would include extensive support throughout the experience abroad, with targeted activities to be carried out periodically and post-mobility debriefing workshops that could help students in the delicate phase of understanding, rationalizing, debating and sharing their own experiences. It is also for this reason that many of the activities and topics covered in the preparatory training are viewed as a starting point that would need further development and continuity in all of the above-mentioned phases.

3.2.2 Framework, goals and expected outcomes

The conceptual framework for this training is **intercultural communicative competence**. We have argued that our training aimed first of all to prepare students for their experience abroad. This in turn

entailed taking into consideration all the components that are involved in mobility, all the aspects that contribute to the learning that this experience enhances. It became clear that learning from the study abroad experience happens on multiple levels and concerns several subjects; among them, the language, culture and social components seemed to be the pillars. They are indeed the foundations of the mobility, without which the whole experience could not be complete. Far from being distinct and separate factors, they interrelate and come to form the very same competence: language depends on sociality, which depends on being able to communicate, which entails being intercultural competent speakers. All of these components converge and are encompassed within the concept of intercultural communicative competence. The training then, wishing to put emphasis on culture, thanks to its much richer and far-reaching definition, finds in ICC the ideal framework. International mobility is indeed an exemplary situation where ICC is required and at the same time a great training field where it can be practiced.

For this reason, the **teaching goal** of this training is that of guiding students before their departure through a process of discovery and development of skills, attitudes and knowledge that they will need but also continue to practice and improve while abroad.

In particular, the main teaching **goals** of our pre-departure training are:

- a. to provide support to students in preparation to their study abroad experience;
- b. to enhance the development of intercultural communicative competence;
- c. to offer them experiential opportunities to develop intercultural communication and language.

In order to attain these goals, we believe that Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence is the most comprehensive and suitable framework for our course.

We will therefore include in the training the **components** outlined by Byram:

- Intercultural attitudes (*savoir être*): curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own. [...] This can be called the ability to 'decentre'.
- Knowledge (*savoirs*): of social groups and their products and practices including knowledge of social processes, and knowledge of illustrations of those processes and products; the latter includes knowledge about how other people see oneself as well as some knowledge about other people.

- Skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*): ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own.
- Skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*): ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction

(Byram et al., 2001, p. 4-7)

Although all skills, attitudes and knowledge deserve attention and with the conviction that they cannot be addressed individually or separately, certain will be the main focus of our attention. These are indeed what we value as the most relevant for this precise mobility experience and are the result of evaluation of the context of action. This comes from the analysis of the situations in which students are likely to find themselves in during the study abroad experience and the students' needs, thus considering their previous experiences and existing competence.

The **learning goals** of this training, reflecting the teaching goals and the theoretical framework we have adopted, are therefore specified by the attitudes, skills and knowledge outlined by looking the ICC model. We will draw upon the comprehensive descriptions of the Council of Europe in *Developing intercultural competence through education* to express them (Barrett et al., 2014).

The **attitudes** that represent the goal of the training are respect, openness, curiousness, willingness to question one's own perspectives and what is considered "normal", to tolerate uncertainty. Moreover, we will also concentrate on the disposition to seek out opportunities and cooperate, these seem to be very relevant aspects of an experience such as the one of study abroad.

The **knowledge** and **understanding** include awareness and understanding of one's own and other people's assumptions, preconceptions, stereotypes, prejudices and therefore understanding the influence of one's own language and cultural affiliations on one's experience of the world and of other people; knowledge of the beliefs, values, practices, discourses and products that may be used by people who have particular cultural orientations; understanding of processes of cultural, societal and individual interaction.

The **skills** addressed will be the ability to decenter from one's own perspective and to take other people's perspectives into consideration, skills in discovering information about other cultural affiliations and perspectives, skills in interpreting other cultural practices, beliefs and values and in relating them to one's own, skills in critically evaluating cultural beliefs, values, practices, discourses and products. Other more linguistic skills will be considered too, namely sociolinguistic and discourse skills and skills in managing

communication, plurilingual skills, for example the use of more than one language or drawing on a known language to understand another.

Moreover, although we recognize the culture-generic nature of the ICC model, it is also our intention to focus primarily on Italian culture, the host culture of the study abroad experience for the Venice 2020 study group. The other point of departure for cultural analysis will be American culture, because of the students' affiliation to it and the context where the course takes place.

The **expected outcomes** are then related to the development of intercultural competence and its components, in particular students will be able to:

- interact and communicate appropriately, effectively and respectfully;
- discuss differences in views and perspectives;
- seek opportunities to engage with people who have different cultural orientations and perspectives from one's own;
- cooperate with individuals who have different cultural orientations on shared activities and ventures;
- challenge cultural stereotypes and prejudices.

(Barrett et al., 2015)

Furthermore, **language** holds an important place in the preparation of study abroad. For this reason, we consider including language learning essential. Not only is language a fundamental part of study abroad, but it is also inextricably linked to ICC. Addressing language in such a course is no easy task, especially taking into account the different proficiency levels of the participants and their limited language learning experience. For this reason and because of our final goal concerned with preparing students for their experience abroad rather than teaching them Italian, our specific teaching goal for language will be that of introducing them to the language, giving them the possibility to familiarize with it and providing with an input for further study and learning.

As a matter of fact, we have already pointed out that a language course is available for the participants of the study abroad and our workshops can only serve as additional practice and learning but cannot represent a substitute. We conceive language and language learning in this course as rather spontaneous components. It is not our intention to plan a course addressing in detail all the language components but

it is certainly our purpose to foster learning of the language by concentrating on communication. Nonetheless, the activities that we will present are not haphazard or unconnected from the students' overall learning process. Language learning and intercultural communicative competence are, in fact, two parts of the same concept and should go hand in hand.

In light of these considerations, two languages, Italian and English, will be used during the workshops. The first will be the focus of our training: activities, as well as instruction, will be carried out principally in Italian, thus making it the main language used for communication by the instructor and the students. The approach adopted is therefore communicative where the aim is for students to communicate as much as possible in Italian.

English will, however, be employed too. The reasons for this choice are multiple: first of all, as we will soon point out is our description of the participants, the students' proficiency in Italian is for most of them very limited, making it difficult to convey even basic meaning. It became clear to us that the support of a second language was indeed needed in a course not aiming solely at teaching Italian to beginners. Secondly, the group is quite heterogeneous in its experience with languages in general. This resulted in a very different understanding and use of the language in class among the participants: many with more limited skills were obliged to opt out of the activities. It seemed sensible to us to prefer promoting participation and cooperation, even if the communication required the use of English, rather than leaving out some students. Finally, several activities focusing on intercultural communicative competence demand a great degree of analysis, reflection, understanding and sharing. Students, especially those who were less proficient, felt restrained or incapable of carrying out such thoughtful actions in Italian.

Furthermore, a sort of agreement between the instructor and the students was reached at the very beginning of the course: the common decision was indeed that of promoting Italian as much as possible and limit English to when strictly necessary. In particular, those students who are more proficient in Italian language were asked to employ Italian whenever they could and those who are less proficient were encouraged to communicate how they could, using both English and Italian. The first group recognizes that by doing so they are given more opportunities to improve their Italian in view of the study abroad. In addition, these more proficient students are motivated by this role they are asked to take up in the training since they represent an anchor for their classmates. By recognizing their competence then, they tend to be more willing to choose the foreign language over their mother tongue. Students that are less proficient, on the other hand, clearly benefit from their classmates using Italian, both thanks to more

exposure to the language and to the assistance they may receive from them. This peer-support does, in fact, represent a strong point during all phases of mobility and promotes learners' autonomy.

In sum, acknowledging the intercultural perspective and respecting the main aim of our course, language use and choice was often left to the students and the different moments of the training. Although the use of Italian was strongly encouraged, it was also not imposed.

3.2.3 Approaches, methods and principles

Based on the theoretical framework and the goals of this course, some important considerations must be put forward related to the approaches, methods and principles guiding our practice.

First and foremost, we believe that a **student-centered approach** must be adopted when designing a course such as the one proposed in our work. As a matter of fact, we must consider that the type of learning that we envision is very engaging at all levels, requiring students to undertake learning from a cognitive, affective and behavioral point of view. Developing intercultural communicative competence is a very delicate and peculiar process where a certain degree of personal transformation is demanded. The change of one's perspective, the reflection on one's and the other's experience of the world, the understanding of the other can certainly not happen if students are not placed at the center of their learning. In a student-centered view of the training then, the role of the instructor is that of a planner and guide, rather than simply a conveyor of information. In our case, the instructor has both the task of envisioning a path for the students to follow and promoting the learning process. The instructor holds an important place in making decisions and in organizing and carrying out the activities, it is someone who creates, promotes, conceives the learning process. Nonetheless, the instructor is able to always place at the center of the process the learner, to engage the students in their own creation of an individual path. They collaborate in finding a way to become a successful intercultural speaker, they build the process together. As a matter of fact, in such an individual and transformative process, students cannot only be at the center of the learning, they must be also the creators and active promoters.

Moreover, becoming an intercultural speaker is a long process happening at different moments and different "places": outside the classroom students must be ready to foster their own learning. This seems extremely relevant in the context of study abroad where it is precisely the non-formal nature of learning that makes this experience so rich in terms of opportunities. Mobile students live in an environment where almost anything can, potentially, represent intercultural learning, in the form of observation,

encounters, reflection. As we have argued, however, students must be capable of discovering, noticing and seizing these learning opportunities.

This can only happen if the training is effective in fostering these attitudes and skills in learners; they must become autonomous researchers. Throughout our training we will embrace the idea put forward by Moeller & Nugent (2014) of students as researchers, discoverers and gatherers of knowledge, anthropologists who explore and investigate a topic inside and outside the classroom. Following this principle, the training intends to encourage **autonomy** in students. This will be fundamental during their period abroad for taking their learning further, using the tools that they will have gained to explore and understand more, to observe the reality around them. We are indeed aware that becoming autonomous in one's learning does not just happen. Learning to learn is key to becoming a successful intercultural speaker and much effort in our training will be taken to promote it. If, additionally, we consider among our goals the long-term purpose of cultivating active global citizens, rather than only looking at the shorter-term goals of the study abroad program, it becomes even more evident that autonomy should be the focus of the training. As we have argued, intercultural communicative competence should be always conceived as a long process and not a final or completed achievement.

Furthermore, in order to promote this transformative process in learners, an **experiential approach** must be adopted. We have already demonstrated that leaning in this perspective is a “process whereby concepts are derived from and continuously modified by experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 26). With the intent of promoting a truly experiential learning, we have decided to turn to Kolb's “Experiential learning theory” to identify a framework for our course, embracing the learning-by-doing and student-centered approaches that it encourages. This theory, that we have described in great detail in the first chapter of our work, will serve us both in designing the course and the activities. As a matter of fact, we conceive the cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active implementation as first of all a sequence affecting the whole study abroad experience: in this sense the phases we outlined for mobile students' support mirror the conception of the experiential cycle. Throughout their whole program, which we consider beginning with preparatory training and ending with post-mobility workshops, students are asked to go through the above-mentioned phases. The study abroad experience, then, can be viewed as a long experiential learning cycle. On another level, however, we also take Kolb's model as a structure for the intercultural activities that we will propose. In these activities, students will be guided through the experiential process as well, in order to be able to learn from each task we have programmed.

In sum, the principles that we have outlined require an approach that can put these ideals into practice. It is indeed our intention to include the above-mentioned views of learning into a well-defined approach. Our training should therefore try to include an approach centered on students, aimed at fostering active engagement, putting emphasis on experience and promoting autonomy.

An effective approach that embodies all of these elements is the cooperative approach. Firstly, it emphasizes the central and active role of students by promoting discovery and autonomous learning. Secondly, it encourages cooperation between students, thus creating a positive environment where exchange is at the base of learning. Moreover, the role of communication in ICC is certainly central and much attention should be given to it in the classroom. Cooperative learning, then, is also a powerful instrument to give the opportunity to students to communicate: the final success of the activity cannot be achieved if there is no effective communication. For all of these reasons, we believe that our activities should always integrate the cooperative element.

3.2.4 Participants

Outlining who the participants are with their previous experiences and motivations is a fundamental step in understanding the design of the training. First of all, the participants of the 2020 Venice Study Group are 12 students, all enrolled at Colgate University. As far as their nationality is concerned, all students are American except one who is Chinese. Eleven are in their second year of college while one is a first-year student. The age range of the participants is 18-20. Their specialization is principally music: ten of them major in music and two in other subjects. This pattern is clearly to be attributed to the academic focus of the study group and the promotion that the music department has done for the program.

In addition, being the music department a rather small environment at Colgate University, with a limited number of courses available, these are also students who already know each other and, in some cases, have already collaborated in projects (i.e. in common academic courses, in the same band, in extracurricular activities). This entails, both for the study abroad and the training, that participants are not strangers. This can be seen as a benefit for the cohesiveness of the group and for the reciprocal motivation that it brings. However, it also means that a certain attention should be paid to the already existing relationships among the group.

The training was clearly aimed at all participants of the study group, regardless of their language level and experience. An invitation was sent via e-mail and was reaffirmed during a meeting where everyone

was present. In both occasions, a description of the course and its aims were explained, and the optional attendance was specified.

However, out of the twelve total participants, only seven decided to attend the training. For this reason, when we refer to the participants of the training, we actually refer to only a part of the entire group. Since our focus in this instance will be the training rather than the study abroad group, we will take into consideration and describe in detail the seven attendees of the preparatory course. During the first workshop, which we will present thoroughly in the section dedicated to the lesson plans, we tried to understand the motivation, aims and previous experiences of the participants. From this analysis we could clearly define the students and their characteristics that we will now report.

As far as **motivation** is concerned, the seven participants of the training accounted choosing the Venice Study Group mainly because of its strong focus on music, being them all music students. However, they also reasoned the choice remarking that the destination was an important factor in the decision-making process too. Students declared being interested in the country and the culture associated to it. On the one hand they affirmed being fascinated by Italy as a country to travel to and live in, thanks to its enjoyable lifestyle, thus implying a more touristic view of their destination.

On the other hand, they acknowledged the importance that Italian culture and history hold in music; exploring Italy and the culture means also gaining a better understanding of their subject of study.

The interest and motivation toward the destination is therefore both personal and professional.

A similar approach is expressed for Italian language: students claim being interested in the language both for personal taste and for a more practical and professional reason. As a matter of fact, many of them have already been in contact with the language before thanks to music, namely in the study of opera and music history or for singing performances. Finally, it should also be noted that some of the participants have Italian origins and have a part of their family still living in Italy. In these cases, they claim wanting to know more about their roots and possibly be able to talk to and visit their relatives.

As far as motivation for the training is concerned, participants decided to attend the course, even if optional, because they believed it was a good opportunity to learn more about the culture and the language, but they also acknowledged the importance of preparing for their experience abroad.

In terms of **language**, six out of seven students are native speakers of English and one is a native speaker of Chinese, with high proficiency in English. Only one of them is an intermediate speaker of Italian, currently enrolled in the Italian intermediate class, four attend the beginner class and two are not in any

class and have never studied Italian before. These last two students were not able to include the Italian course in their schedule and were therefore asked by the director to learn autonomously. Moreover, besides the intermediate level student who had studied Italian at high school level too, all of the others had studied another language besides Italian either at high school or university level, specifically Spanish in the case of four of them and French for two. This is an important factor that was considered too, even during the workshops, to help with the acquisition of Italian and for intercomprehension purposes. However, it must be said that for the majority of them, even the proficiency level of this second language was rather low and the general experience with language learning was limited. Finally, most of them had the opportunity to travel extensively in and out of the United States, but only one had a previous experience of short international mobility. All of the others have only traveled for touristic purposes.

From all of these elements we can gather that our target students are not experts of languages and language learning nor are they very used to experiences abroad beyond touristic traveling. These are very important elements in both conceiving our course and carrying out the actual activities. As a matter of fact, this implies that great attention is needed in designing activities and the overall path of the students: the initial steps towards the development of intercultural communicative competence cannot be ignored and many basic concepts, skills, attitudes and knowledge cannot be given for granted. However, it also represents a stimulating challenge for us since the argument for implementing instruction and support in preparation to studying abroad seems even more compelling.

3.2.5 The course design

The training that we have designed takes the shape of a series of workshops carried out during the semester prior to the participants' study abroad. Being it a non-mandatory and experimental course, we defined and conceived it as informal meetings. This definition does not undermine the content, the importance or the aims of the course but it explains the type of environment and approach that it wants to convey. As a matter of fact, these meetings serve not only as training of ICC but also as a free space for participants to meet and discuss. We strongly believe that, especially in the context of study abroad, but not only, a friendly environment is key to learning and development.

Students who demanded a preparatory training for their period abroad are certainly curious and interested participants who wanted a space for sharing their thoughts rather than a highly structured course not

leaving any possibility for their concerns, questions and needs. We are aware that an important part of the course should be dedicated to the understanding of the experience abroad itself.

We strongly believe therefore that the topics and activities covered by the training should unquestionably serve the need to learn Italian and develop intercultural communicative competence but should also be strictly linked to the mobility experience. With this intention, we identified some specific topics and situations typically involved in study abroad experiences. Specifically, we have analyzed the most important aspects of the life of a mobile student and the different moments of an experience abroad. The choice of the topics and the path to follow are based on common and recurrent themes of student mobility, aspects that inevitably involve each student abroad.

However, these topics and the objectives of the course were not the mere result of our analysis and decision, they were carefully proposed and discussed with the participants of the course themselves. Respecting the cooperative and student-centered approach we envisioned, even the decision-making process of designing the course had to be coherent with our conceptions. For this reason and since we believe in an exchange relationship between instructor and students where common views must always be found, the first meeting served also as a debate session over what everyone considered to be an important element to be included in the training. As a matter of fact, an informed brainstorming was carried out in which the instructor at first put forward the goals, objectives and theoretical framework for the training, thus establishing a structure for the course. Then, once this was understood and shared, a brainstorming activity was carried out where students and the instructor could freely propose topics, questions to be answered throughout the workshops, anything that was thought to be relevant toward the design of the course. Apart from being a fundamental part of a learner-centered course, a shared decision-making process is a highly motivating factor for students who take responsibility for their choices. We believe this is even more important in a training that aims to promote autonomy in students and envisions a learning process that goes far beyond the preparatory meeting itself.

Consequently, all the elements that were discussed and those considered to be the most important to include in the training were grouped under several labels. These labels became the starting point for the creation of sections in the training, i.e. the modules we will indeed outline. It is this shared and debated decision-making process, together with the theoretical approaches and aims we have described, that served as the blueprint for the design of the course. This process as a matter of fact resulted in a syllabus mirroring the decisions of both students and the instructor. This represents a guidance for both the instructor and the students, rather than a strict program to be followed at all costs. It is in a way an

itinerary, a map that can help all participants in understanding the process. This concept exemplifies perfectly another underlying principle of our course: the training should be viewed as a journey. The design of the course aimed at reproducing an actual journey of students going abroad, with its elements, moments and phases. The course is therefore compared to a journey that we would like to conceive as metaphorical and concrete, where topic after topic we learn how to travel but also where a personal journey happens.

It is indeed not by accident that we have decided to call the course “*Destinazione Venezia*”. This training, just as the actual travel, is a journey where a process of discovery and transformation is underway. By using words semantically related to traveling, then, we wanted to emphasize this aspect from the very beginning, indeed from the title. Additionally, this title clearly recalls the aim of preparing students to go abroad: when pointing out that our destination is Venice we are, in a way, stating our goal from the start.

In light of these decisions, we have divided the course into five modules: preparation (*La preparazione*), arrival and city (*L’arrivo e la città*), university (*L’università*), friends (*Gli amici*) and coming home (*Il ritorno*). These were deemed all important aspects of mobility for a student, whose life and experience usually very much depend on the city they live in and its discovery, the academic dimension and the “real” students’ life, that of friends, nights out and dinners. These modules are also designed to follow some important phases of discovery and personal growth happening during this journey. First, a preparatory phase where feelings, expectations, emotions, goals are prevalent. Second, the arrival and the city represent a first approach to a new place and, in a way, to a new personal self. Here is where one begins to understand what goes on outside and within oneself, but always in a rather personal manner. Third, with the new academic life one begins to explore in more depth the outside world and to interact with it. Here is where a real confrontation and encounter with the other begins. Fourth comes the moment of real sharing and interaction with “the different”, that of meeting people, making friends, having fun. These are the moments where encounter also triggers a change in one’s personal perspective. Finally, coming home brings a reflective and very meaningful phase. The sum of the experience leads to understanding one’s perceptions and evaluating the development. This journey, then, follows with increasing depth the process of learning, discovery and encounter with “the other” in line with the intercultural perspective adopted.

Moreover, we decided to adopt a portfolio to store all the activities completed. This is not only a useful tool to save all the work done but also an important instrument for self-assessment. On the one hand the instructor can record the ongoing progress of students’ learning through the products derived from the

activities. These products often consist of written reflections or analyses done during or after the tasks, thus representing valuable insights in the students' competence. These works, then, are important assessment materials for an instructor who can track the developments. On the other hand, the portfolio is also constructive for participants of the course and of study abroad. As a matter of fact, it illustrates the learning process that students underwent and can become a means for learning itself: thoughtful analysis can result from comparing one's early assumptions, ideas and perceptions with those arisen later from experience and observation. As noted in *Plurilingual and intercultural learning through mobility*, "the portfolio approach to assessment supports the development of autonomous learning skills" (Cuenat et al., 2015, p. 26). As pointed out by Byram (1997), portfolios are indeed helpful in assessing intercultural competences because students analyze their own accounts of encounters with otherness and learn how to reflect on their evolving intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Moreover, this is an instrument that can be introduced before mobility and then maintained also during the stay abroad. Students can update it with other works to eventually form a complete narration of their experience. This can in turn be used upon return to look back at the mobility and reflect.

Finally, the course was planned to last from February to April, throughout the spring semester of the 2019/2020 academic year. The course was intended to be composed of twelve meetings happening every week for one hour of duration each. Unfortunately, however, we must remark that our project did not go according to plan. We were in fact obliged to discontinue our course after the sixth meeting because of the shutdown of Colgate University and its face-to-face activities in March due to the recent outbreak of the pandemic. After the first six workshops which regularly took place at Colgate University, another meeting online was carried out in the month of May. This was in fact the only solution possible and it is with great regret of both the instructor and the students that it was not possible to accomplish part of the course.

Although all the activities and topics that were planned will be described in the next section, only the first three modules were actually covered during the workshops.

3.3 Lesson plans

In this section we will present the activities planned for the "*Destinazione Venezia*" preparatory course. As we have described in the previous part, the course design is conceived as a journey, somehow mirroring the trip that study abroad participants will undertake. The activities, therefore, follow the same

logic and represent the practical exemplification of this virtual journey. The activities, however, are also thought in a sequence that promotes progress and to increase challenges. This section is indeed divided into the five modules we have already proposed: preparation (*La preparazione*), arrival and city (*L'arrivo e la città*), university (*L'università*), friends (*Gli amici*) and coming home (*Il ritorno*).

The activities that we present are designed specifically for this course and embody the principles and structure we have proposed thus far. Although we are aware that a comprehensive training on intercultural communicative competence and language is in fact rather ambitious, we believe that this course should aim to give at least the basis of both.

For this reason, the activities put forward encompass both components and wish to develop both the intercultural communicative competence and the Italian language proficiency of the students.

We will therefore describe the activities, both from a more theoretical and argumentative point of view and from a practical one. As a matter of fact, the lesson plans start off with an introduction to the activities, in which an overview is presented and at the same time the aims and the reasons for implementing the activities are provided. Afterwards, the learning and teaching objectives, together with the expected outcomes, will be listed. In the following part, more practical instructions will be given: the materials and resources needed to carry out the activity, the total duration and the detailed description of the tasks. We will then highlight the final product of the activity that will be included in the portfolio as a way to keep track of all the work done and the progress as well. Finally, in order to give continuation to our project and envisage future learning for the students, we will also give some suggestions for follow-up of complementary activities to carry out during the study abroad or afterwards. In particular, we will try to propose how the activities we have described can be used again, adapted or continued at later phases of the mobility.

3.3.1 First module: *la preparazione*

The first module of the course, "*la preparazione*", represents the beginning of the journey. As we have claimed, we thought of the course as a comparison to a journey, thus also exemplifying the phases that students normally undergo in an experience abroad. Moreover, we are convinced that the experience is not limited to the stay in the foreign country, rather it comprises an important moment before mobility and one after going back home. With this logic, according to us, the journey, just like our course, begins before the actual mobility, from the period prior to departure.

The first activity: “*Aspettative, obiettivi, domande*”

Introduction

The first activity “*Aspettative, obiettivi, domande*” allows students to express their feelings, goals and expectations about the upcoming mobility experience. Outgoing students find themselves imagining, dreaming, thinking, hesitating about the study abroad they are about to embark on. For this reason, we believe attention should be given to the expectations, feelings, goals and questions that participants have a few months before the study abroad in Venice. This activity, then, aims to give a possibility to express and share the thoughts and feelings of students. This is a way to first of all reflect on one’s emotions and considerations and also to set goals for the SA. Moreover, students also benefit from sharing them with other participants: they may feel less frightened or lonely, they may help each other before leaving and even understand others’ ways of conceiving the experience they are about to do.

An additional advantage of this activity is the possibility to set goals, in terms of language, experiences, learning. This is a fundamental step in any type of learning and experience since it clearly helps envisioning one’s path and enhancing the progress. In brief, students’ emotions and perceptions affect significantly their learning and the way they can approach the preparatory course or the study abroad program itself. The role of emotions in language learning and in the classroom has been the object of a great amount of research and has proven to be a key factor having an impact on learning. This cannot be ignored during the training and starting the workshops by acknowledging the emotional sphere of learning can indeed convey its importance.

The emotions before leaving are for sure greatly related to many factors connected to language learning, cultural differences but also to the experience in a broader sense. The anxiety related to not knowing the language, the core values of the culture they will immerse themselves in or having to live far from home are all important aspects to address that cannot be easily dismissed in the preparatory training. Similarly, the excitement of exploring a new environment represents a valuable factor in learning: the curiosity toward the place, the target language and culture, the independence of leaving alone and abroad are certainly key factors in motivating students in their learning.

In addition, the activity does not only serve the purpose of putting into words and sharing the students’ feelings, expectations and goals, but it is also an important tool for the instructor at the beginning of the course. Thanks to this activity, motivation(s), preconceived ideas about the experience, goals and concerns of the participants can easily be assessed. It is clear that motivation is the fundamental factor in

language learning and can completely change the students' attitude towards learning. For this reason, the motivating factors derived from the experience of going abroad cannot be ignored but rather taken as the structure of the course itself. Students' motivations are strictly related to their goals. The objectives of the course cannot be isolated from those expressed by students and this activity can help finding a common ground for the final goals and outcomes.

Students' expectations for the experience represent another fundamental starting point for the instructor. Students' preconceived ideas and expectations are essential when creating a program: it is from their own conceptions that a course, even more so if focused on (inter-)cultural communication, has to be built. Moreover, it is also their questions that it has to address; in a learner-centered view of the curriculum set upon specific needs of learners, their concerns cannot go unnoticed. Students should be able to find an answer to their concerns throughout the workshops by exploring different topics. Moreover, the questions show the students' interests and curiosity: two fundamental factors when thinking about a learner-centered curriculum.

As we have argued in the description of the design of the course, the syllabus was built together with the participants in a shared decision-making process that is, in a way, also the result of this activity. It is for this reason that we would like to conceive this first activity as a "free" and informal assessment and serve as a guide for our training.

Objectives and outcomes: learning and teaching

To summarize then, the learning objectives of the activity "*Aspettative, obiettivi e domande*" are:

- Expressing emotions and feelings towards the period abroad
- Sharing one's expectations to the group
- Setting realistic goals for language learning, the experience abroad and personal learning
- Increasing one's motivation toward language learning, personal development and engagement in learning

The expected outcomes are:

- Students can understand and reflect on their emotions before departure
- Students can set goals for their own learning

- Students can express their own thoughts and respect those of others

The teaching goals are:

- Understanding students' expectations, goals, emotions, questions toward the SA
- Enhancing students' motivation for the SA and the preparatory course
- Starting from students' answers to co-design the preparatory course

Materials and resources

Post-its, pens, signs (expectations about the experience, emotions, goals, questions)

Duration

One hour

Language

Instructions are given first in Italian and then in English. Students are free to choose the language to write their answers in. This is to give the possibility to those who can already express some ideas in Italian to practice the language and at the same time to allow those who are not confident enough to still take part in the activity. Moreover, the answers are read in the language they were written in and translated by the instructor in the other language.

Overview and description of the tasks

1. Students think about their emotions, expectations, goals and questions related to the experience abroad.
2. Students write down on different post-it notes their answers.
3. Students stick the post-it notes next to the corresponding sign.
4. Students share their thoughts by reading out loud the post-it notes.
5. The whole class discusses the main points and ideas that came up during the activity: concerns, questions and doubts are shared and discussed, thus becoming aware of everybody's thoughts and feelings.

After the task:

1. Students and instructor decide how to incorporate in the course the questions asked in the activity and debate over important themes and topics to address

Final product for the portfolio

As a final product to include in the portfolio, the students will have at their disposal pictures of the signs and the post-it notes attached to them. In this way it will be possible to keep and have access to the answers given at the very beginning of the journey. Students can be reminded of the feelings and thoughts they had before leaving.

Further developments

This activity could be proposed again after mobility. Having the possibility to look again at the first impressions can indeed allow for a reflection on the development of those ideas and transformation of students during SA. Moreover, participants would also be able to be confronted with their initial goals and therefore decide whether they were achieved. In general, analyzing the initial thoughts can serve as a way to become aware of the progress, the changes and learning that students have been able to develop throughout their experience.

The second activity: “*Visibile, meno visibile, invisibile*”

Introduction

The second activity of the module *Preparazione* is titled “*Visibile, meno visibile, invisibile*” and focuses on the definition of culture and the components constituting it. In particular, in this activity students discuss the visible and invisible aspects of culture by considering the iceberg model of culture proposed by Edward T. Hall in 1976. The activity has been taken and adopted from the *PluriMobil lesson plans for upper secondary school* (Cuenat et al., 2015b, p. 4-8).

Students analyze both aspects of their own culture and they explore those of the target culture.

We have decided to plan this activity for the beginning of the training because it represents a fundamental starting point for a course specifically focusing on intercultural communicative competence. As a matter of fact, understanding the concept of culture is a first step toward awareness of the mechanisms underlying culture. First of all, then, this activity serves to create a theoretical model for culture where both the universals and peculiarities of cultures can be taken into account. Secondly, it is also useful to

realize those aspects constituting one's own culture, which often go unnoticed. Being able to analyze the cultural values, ideas and phenomena affecting directly one's perception of the world is essential to move from an ethnocentric view to a more ethnorelative. Through this activity students can reflect on their own practices and values and become self-aware of aspects they had not realized before. Thirdly, students express their previous knowledge also about the target culture by finding visible, less visible and invisible aspects of Italian culture. By doing so, the fundamental process of comparison is involved: students come to realize differences or similarities between their own and the target culture. They are indeed encouraged to reflect on phenomena related to Italian culture and find the reasons behind them, reflect on possible explanations. This activity then is also important to start a thorough analysis of the culture students will immerse in, going beyond the informative knowledge they had previously acquired. Moreover, this reflection may lead to understand the preconceived ideas, stereotypes and generalizations that participants may hold in the first place. By finding reasons and explanations for phenomena, however, students are also allowed to start analyzing, dismantling or modifying their preconceived ideas. This fundamental process, representing one of the central points of ICC, can be launched. The reason for proposing this activity at the beginning of the learning path is then evident.

Moreover, students share their experiences of the world and are confronted with the perceptions of the other, thus acknowledging that even within "the same" culture great differences can exist. A shared and debated analysis, then, can lead to meaningful learning. Students do not learn from the teacher or external sources but from their own classmates.

Not only, however, is this an important activity for students. By taking into account the ideas that are put forward by the participants, the stereotypes and the overall analysis, even the instructor can find in this activity a very helpful tool for assessment. The activity enables to understand previous knowledge about one's culture and the target one, skills in analyzing and interpreting, attitudes towards other views. The observation of the students' activity and products, then, is a valuable instrument to understand the competence of participants and also the starting point of the course. This activity, just as the first one then, represents an important source of information for the instructor, who pays attention and notes the knowledge, skills and attitudes displayed.

Objectives and outcomes: learning and teaching

The learning objectives for the activity "*Visibile, meno visibile, invisibile*" are:

- Analyzing the elements constituting cultures in general and specifically

- Expressing one's own representation of culture
- Expressing representations and expectations about other cultures
- Becoming aware that some aspects of culture can be perceived easily while others are subtler and require more analysis
- Comparing one's own cultural elements to those of the target culture
- Stating and finding explanations for stereotypes and generalizations

The outcomes are:

- Students can analyze elements constituting their culture and the target culture
- Students can explain the "Iceberg model of culture"
- Students can formulate hypotheses in view of an analysis of cultural phenomena
- Students can compare some basic constituents of their culture to those of the target culture
- Students can find explanation to some common stereotypes about their own and the target culture
- Students can argue their own ideas respectfully and listen to other opinions

Teaching objectives are:

- Understanding students' concept of culture
- Gathering information about the students' previous knowledge of the target culture, their expectations and stereotypes
- Observing students' skills in interpreting and relating
- Observing students' attitudes toward the others and their views

Materials and resources

Images of a blank iceberg, a completed iceberg as an example

Duration

One hour

Language

Instructions are given first in Italian and then in English. Students are encouraged to write the words in the iceberg in Italian, using the dictionary or asking the teacher/classmate if necessary. The discussion about culture is held in English.

Overview and description of the tasks

1. Students brainstorm and list the aspects which in their opinion constitute their own culture(s).
2. The instructor presents the picture of an iceberg as a way of representing cultural values: the visible part and the invisible part. S/he explains briefly the meaning and structure of the model.
3. Students are asked to fill in the blank iceberg with the cultural aspects they think are relevant in their own culture.
4. Students discuss their findings and modify their iceberg model if needed. The instructor also leads the discussion and potentially gives them prompts to reflect on.
5. Additionally, students are asked to think of some items to include in an iceberg representing the target culture.
6. They then discuss their ideas, stereotypes and previous knowledge of the aspects in the context of the target culture.

Final product for the portfolio

Completed icebergs and brainstorms

Further developments

This activity could be taken up again during and after study abroad. During the stay, students can be asked to fill the iceberg models with other aspects they discover, both about their own culture and Italian culture. These new concepts can be added using another color, for instance, in order to keep track of the developments in the observation. Moreover, a related activity that can be implemented while abroad, following an ethnographic approach, is that of choosing one particular element highlighted at first and carry out a research. For example, students can focus on one specific cultural practice and investigate its meaning, characteristics, social value and roots. These reflections can then be then included in a diary or research paper. This activity could even be paired with another follow-up activity we will propose in section 3.3.3 regarding ethnographic research and observation.

By looking back at all the aspect highlighted, after the SA, students can describe more thoroughly and comprehensively the culture they explored. Moreover, they will also be able to reflect on their progress in observing a new culture. The increasingly detailed and profound nature of the elements taken into consideration can indeed show the acquisition of observation skills throughout the experience. Preconceived ideas about the culture may also be analyzed in more depth and discussed based on the direct experience students have had.

3.3.2 Second module: *l'arrivo e la città*

In the second module of the course called “*l'arrivo e la città*” (arrival and city) the students continue their virtual journey and arrive in Venice. The discovery of a student abroad naturally starts from the exploration of the new place, in all of its aspects. The interest, then, lies in the experience itself of going about the streets, or *calli* as in this case, and not only the fact of learning about the important landmarks of the city. This implies that the discovery of a city is the discovery of its history, its traditions and architecture but also its people, its “life” and culture, indeed. This is in fact what we wanted to convey with the activities of this module: while a distracted tourist may see Venice only as a beautiful city for its architectural splendor, famous artworks and fascinating channels, an *attentive explorer* might notice much richer details and deeper roots. The different ways of navigating Venice become the perfect metaphor for the exploration of new cultures, where a superficial approach and a more observant one coexist. Learning about the city where the study abroad participants will move to, then, is also an opportunity to learn how to get in contact with a new culture.

First activity: *le identità di Venezia*

Introduction

The first activity of the module “*L'arrivo e la città*” is called “*Le identità di Venezia*” and focuses on the exploration of the city of Venice from different points of view. In this role-play task, students are asked to take up a new identity and virtually tour the city for a day as their assigned characters would do.

This activity is first of all an example of how a place can be explored, showing students the different processes involved when going around and different ways each character, or us, can adopt in doing so. Throughout this imaginary visit, in fact, they are required to pay attention to and later describe many elements involving all of the senses: from the voices of the people around them to the smells of the streets, from the details of the places to the taste of the food. This is a way to raise awareness of the

manifold perceptions one can have when encountering something new and the complexity of the perception itself. By taking into account the different perceptions and ways of experiencing, students are encouraged to think of a city as a complex system concerning many elements, all equally important when looking at it. They are therefore led to understand that a comprehensive view of a city or culture is the result of an all-encompassing process of discovery.

Moreover, this activity does not only encourage to consider the process of experiencing but also at the perspectives from which this can happen. As a matter of fact, by assigning different characters to the students, they will soon realize that the type of exploration depends also on the point of view. In particular, the characters that the students are asked to play represent the population of Venice: the tourist, the Venetian or the student represent different conceptions and perspectives of the city. The students are therefore asked to put themselves in the shoes of someone else and try to empathize with them, to understand what their point of view may involve. The fundamental skill of multiperspectivity, to be considered for the development of ICC, is here entailed. This is indeed described as “the ability to decentre from one’s own perspective and to take other people’s perspectives into consideration in addition to one’s own” (Barrett et al., 2014, p. 20). In the description of the discoveries, these characters require a different narrative and students must undertake a profound analysis to come to this realization.

Furthermore, the plurality of identities also introduces students to the problematic phenomenon of *overtourism* affecting the city of Venice. After having immersed themselves in the assigned character, students are spurred to reflect and then discuss the different perspectives of those people in “real life”. By asking the question “what does each character think of the other?”, students will be prompted to analyze the conflicts that may arise between these people. They will soon come to realize the problematic coexistence of tourists, inhabitants and students in such a peculiar city, thus engaging them in a current issue of paramount importance. In analyzing this problem, the students themselves are called to look at it from a different perspective and take into consideration what they might not have thought of before. Understanding such a central issue in modern society is indeed a focal point of an intercultural education aiming to form active global citizens.

Objectives and outcomes: learning and teaching

The learning objectives of the activity “*le identità di Venezia*” are:

- Employing multiperspectivity
- Considering the different approaches to exploring culture

- Understanding the attitudes and opinions of other people
- Acquiring knowledge about social issues affecting the target culture

The teaching objectives are:

- Understanding students' approaches to cultural learning
- Noticing students' ability to take into consideration different perspectives
- Introducing students to relevant socio-cultural issues

The outcomes are:

- Students know about the issue of overtourism, especially in the context of Venice
- Students are able to employ multiple perspectives to consider the same situation
- Students respect different opinions and understand the reasons behind them

Materials and resources

Fake identity cards with personal information of the characters, worksheet with identikit of the characters to be completed, a printed copy of a map of Venice, a worksheet listing the points to be included in the description of the tour and some indications, a worksheet to be completed with the description of the tour, electronic devices

Duration

Two hours

Language

Instructions are given first in Italian and then in English. Students are encouraged to use Italian at least in the first part of the activity where students have to ask simple questions to their classmates and then write their day in Venice. Pairs are created by the teacher so that one student is more proficient in Italian and can help the other. During the more complicated phase of discussion and analysis students can switch to English.

Overview and description of the tasks

1. Each student receives a fake identity card with the information of their assigned character, the map, the three worksheets.
2. Each student analyzes their character by looking at the information on the ID card and makes guesses about the type of character: tourist, student or inhabitant. They are aided by the clues of the IDs (date of birth, nationality, place of birth, name).
3. Each student finds the other person or people with the same type of character by asking questions.
4. Once the partner(s) has been found, the group collaborates in filling in the identikit of their characters.
5. The group now focuses on the planning of a day tour in Venice: they decide and note down what they want to visit, where they will go, what they will do... If necessary, they may research information on the internet and make use of Google Maps.
6. Once the group is done with the planning, they move on to the detailed description of the day of exploration as if they really experienced it. When writing down their day, they must include meals, transportation, visits, shows, brief descriptions of the places, encounters, purchases but also their perceptions while visiting (what they see, hear, smell).
7. Each group prepares a brief presentation of their experience.
8. In the role-play activity the characters/students pretend to meet in a typical Venetian bar where they share their day and give their presentation.
9. Following the presentations, students debate over the perspectives and roles of the tourists, students and inhabitants in shaping the city of Venice.
10. The instructor introduces the concept of overtourism and the debate concerning the related phenomenon in Venice.
11. Students discuss and focus especially on the effects and consequences that overtourism causes in Venice.

Final product for the portfolio

Written descriptions of the different tours in Venice with perceptions

Further developments

Both the virtual tour of Venice and the analysis of the phenomenon can become a more concrete observation once students are physically in Venice. As far as the first part is concerned, students could be asked to put into practice the tour they had previously thought in class by following the plan and actually going around the city for a day. During the exploration they could take note of their real perceptions, which in this circumstance are not only imagined but actually lived and compare what they had pictured before with what they experienced. This is, indeed, a way to become familiar with the city and start a discovery of a place, a community and a culture.

The second part of the activity could also find a continuation while abroad: the phenomenon of overtourism, far from being a hidden social issue, is indeed a very visible and tangible matter even in everyday life. Students may be asked to look for the consequences it has on the city and its effects on those who live there. They can write down everything that they observe that is related to the problem, they can interview different people (for instance three individuals representing the three different characters of the role-play activity).

Since students are now enabled to experience themselves what would otherwise be only virtual and perhaps abstract, this task may lead to a more thoughtful acknowledgement and, indeed, experiential learning.

Second activity: “*Indicami la strada!*”

Introduction

The second activity of the module *L'arrivo e la città* is called “*Indicami la strada*” (show me the way). The exploration of Venice continues throughout this activity in which students walk around the city virtually and have to find their way in unknown territories. In particular, students pretend to be in Venice using Google Maps Street View: taking turns, one student at a time is on a mission to buy a specific item in a given shop in the city and after being left off in an indefinite place on the map, must navigate the *calli* to reach the shop. In this cooperative activity students are asked to collaborate and help each other. As a matter of fact, while one is trying to move on the map, two classmates will verbally guide, in Italian, the “lost” friend to the destination without having the possibility to see where this person is.

This activity has multiple purposes: first it introduces the study abroad participants to the life of Venice, second it puts students in a challenging situation where they rely on others and on communication to get out of it and third it promotes cooperation.

By using the navigation tool Google Maps and its street view option, students have the possibility to get in contact with an image of the city that is realistic. In the previous activity, students have had the chance to imagine the city and create expectations about it; expectations that are often inspired from the views of Venice belonging to the collective imagination. These are undoubtedly touristic and mainstream ideas that are limiting. For this precise reason, the street view option used in this activity is an effective tool to show the real streets, with their “normality”, everyday life, people, truthful representations. This will then be useful for a more accurate and detailed observation of what constitutes the city, which in turn can induce further analysis.

In addition, this activity proves the importance of communication and the negotiation process involved. The only way to accomplish the task of reaching the destination assigned is to communicate effectively. On the one hand, the person who is “walking around” must be accurate in describing the indicators around them (names, buildings, shapes...), thus allowing the others to help them. On the other hand, those giving instructions must be able “guides” giving precise information but also paying attention to clues. In this process of giving and receiving information, speaking and listening, helping and being helped lies the very nature of communication. The exchange required by the activity is a valuable exemplification of what communication means and by directly experiencing it, students come to realize its importance. It becomes clear that merely knowing how to give directions to a person is not enough, that asking vague questions is useless and that many factors exist in communication they had not realized before. Moreover, this acknowledgement is progressive during the task, rather than instantaneous: while no pre-activity direction is given to students about the way to communicate, students develop, exchange after the exchange, a strategy. They indeed understand and adapt their own way of communicating by testing what works and what does not and, along with this, the implications of a communicative exchange are recognized.

Consequently, a reflection of what happens during communication is required. The students who are not directly involved in the task are asked to observe the ongoing communication between their classmates interacting. By paying attention to what takes place between the interlocutors from the advantageous position of outsiders, they become aware of all those elements constituting communication. The analysis represents a cause for reflection for both those involved and not involved in the communication exchange after the activity. After having experienced the mechanics of communication during the activity, the debriefing activity focuses on the analysis of the underlying constituents and principles, thus prompting further learning and awareness.

Finally, cooperation is greatly promoted by the activity, since the roles and tasks of students are interdependent, all components of the activity are fundamental for the success of the “mission”.

Each role in “*Indicami la strada*” requires the other in a way that all participants are engaged and help each other. By doing so, besides enhancing teamwork, motivation is increased, and endurance is encouraged.

Objectives and outcomes: learning and teaching

The learning objectives of the activity “*Indicami la strada*”:

- Demonstrating willingness to cooperate with others
- Developing communicative awareness
- Understanding the processes and mechanisms of individual interaction
- Developing skills in managing breakdowns in communication
- Enhancing the ability to act as a mediator in intercultural exchanges (Barrett et al., 2014).

The teaching objectives are:

- Understanding communication styles and strategies used by students
- Observing attitudes during communication breakdowns and stressing situations

Expected outcomes:

- Students are aware of the processes and factors involved in communication
- Students are able to manage a communicative exchange
- Students can cooperate successfully with their peers

Materials and resources

Two electronic devices (with access to Google Maps), worksheet with destinations, addresses and instructions (3 different), worksheet with observation questions on communication, images with symbols of pharmacy, post office and supermarket

Duration

Two hours

Language

Instructions are given only in Italian, although slowly and with visual support. Students carry out the entire communication activity in Italian, they are only allowed to use English in their observation sheets. Discussion is then held in English.

Overview and description of the tasks

1. Students are divided into two groups: group A receives the worksheet (a different one for each student) with the destinations, the instructions to accomplish a mission (going to the pharmacy, post office or supermarket) and the name of the person to give directions to. Students in group B are told they lost their way in Venice and have no signal on their phones and need to be guided “on the phone” to their final destination by a classmate. Every student receives the observation worksheet they will use to note the communication of their classmates involved in the activity.
2. Two students who were assigned together for the same mission, one from group A, one from group B, must communicate to find student’s B way in Venice. All the others who are not directly involved answer the questions of the observation sheet about those involved in the task. Students take turn to accomplish their respective missions.
3. Student B is placed on the map (Google Maps Street View) in a random yet recognizable place. Student A cannot see student’s screen nor the position on the map.
4. Student A and B communicate until student B reaches the final destination.
5. Student B must “enter the shop” and ask for a specific item required by student A (medicine, a letter or food depending on the shop assigned). Student A helps student B to formulate the question in Italian.
6. Once the task of each couple is completed, the other students share their insights and feedbacks on the communication exchange. Students discuss the communication strategies adopted, the strong and weak points.

Final product for the portfolio

Answers to the observation questions about communication

Further developments

The activity could be, once again, proposed during the study abroad as a more realistic task. The activity is rather likely to happen spontaneously in real life given the often-difficult navigation of the city, even without the prompt of an activity. Another possibility would involve a task in which participants are sent on a “real mission” in Venice, they cannot use any navigation tool but only the guidance of the other participants over the phone.

3.3.3 The third module: *l’università*

First Activity: “*Osservare la cultura universitaria*”

Introduction

The first activity of the third module *Università* is called “*Osservare la cultura universitaria*”. In this activity, students are asked to explore their own university and especially the culture attached to it. By attentively looking at a sub-culture they are completely immersed in and familiar with, they realize the subtler factors constituting a culture and to observe critically something they already know. Students are asked to take up the role of ethnographers, rather than tourists, and carry out a small research on the field: after having identified some of the components present in all cultures and those in the university sub-culture they belong to, they focus on one specific practice and analyze it thoroughly.

As many researchers and educators in the field of intercultural communicative competence have highlighted, also in the trainings they have designed, ethnographic projects, even smaller ones, are useful means of cultural exploration. First of all, observing and analyzing one’s own culturally influenced practices, values or ideas lead to self-awareness and critical thinking. It is acknowledged that our own unconscious and hidden cultural values shape our way of thinking and seeing the world. For this reason, a first step toward the understanding of the others, their ways of thinking and perceiving, must start from recognizing one’s own lenses through which the world is seen. In the activity “*Osservare la cultura universitaria*”, by adopting an external point of view, students are asked to reconsider part of their own identity and become aware of many aspects considered by them “normal”. It is by questioning this “normality” that they come to realize that theirs is just one of the possible points of view. Raising consciousness of the hidden mechanisms of the culture one is deemed to be completely familiar with, then, is a fundamental aspect of ICC development.

An important implication for the activity is certainly choosing a culture which students are completely accustomed to and aspects involved in their everyday life, besides being interesting to them. In light of

these considerations, the focus of the observation we have opted for is the college sub-culture, in particular that of their own college, Colgate University. The reasons for such a specific choice are multiple: first, this is a culture all of them are immersed in “equally”, they all share this “membership”. They will therefore have an easy access and exposure to it, even to the daily practices. Secondly, a very strong sense of belonging to their college and so to its culture is very common among students attending this university in general. Paying attention to such a specific and bonding culture, then, is an exceptional source of motivation.

Thirdly, being the academic life and culture an important aspect of the SA experience, when in Venice and in the host university, students will be able to apply skills of interpreting and relating. Analyzing two cultures belonging to the same context, yet presenting so many different aspects will engender important comparisons and realizations, which could become a starting point for further analysis.

Finally, by taking into consideration a sub-culture such as the “Colgate culture”, students understand that the relationship between culture and country is not univocal, nor is there such a thing as a single culture. They therefore realize that infinite cultures coexist, in a country and even within a person.

Moreover, the task represents also a useful starting point in the acquisition of the tools needed for the exploration of other cultures. By doing direct observation, students are encouraged to adopt valuable instruments such as observations, interviews, interpretations that they will need during their experience abroad for the analysis of the host culture. In line with our conception of this preparatory course as a training to obtain the necessary tools for further learning, this activity is indeed an important practice for what participants will undertake abroad. We will indeed claim that, in the section related to further developments, this activity carried out in the home context will then also be performed in the host context. After having gained confidence in this type of research, its methods and tools, SA participants will be prepared to realize a similar observation in Venice, thus acquiring important knowledge of the target cultures.

Objectives and outcomes: learning and teaching

The learning objectives for the activity “*Osservare la cultura universitaria*” are:

- Observing cultural phenomena in a familiar environment
- Analyzing cultural phenomena and explaining them on the basis of underlying values
- Developing interest in cultural observation

- Understanding the complexity of cultural phenomena and cultures
- Understanding the heterogeneity and multidimensional nature of all cultural groups
- “Critically evaluating and making judgments about cultural beliefs, values, practices, discourses and products, including those associated with one’s own cultural affiliations, and being able to explain one’s views” (Barrett et al., 2014, p.20)

The teaching objectives are:

- Providing students with the necessary tools for cultural observation
- Raising self-awareness of cultural practices and values

The expected outcomes:

- Student can observe and analyze familiar cultural phenomena
- Students demonstrate interest in observation
- Students are aware of the complexity of cultures
- Students can critically evaluate beliefs, practices and values associated to their own culture

Materials and resources

Observation worksheet, ethnographic reports taken from the LARA project materials (<https://generic.wordpress.soton.ac.uk/ethnographicencounters/category/year-abroad-testimonies-how-to-ethnography/>)

Duration

3 hours + out of class observation

Language

Instructions are given first in Italian and then in English. Students are free to choose the language they want to write in. They may even decide to write a part in Italian and a part in English. This is indeed a very challenging activity that requires great linguistic competence and we do not wish to somehow limit the activity because of language. Students are considered autonomous and hence aware of their proficiency level and what they can or cannot do with the language.

Overview and description of the tasks

1. Students are asked to discuss their cultural experiences: they share their cultural affiliations and discuss what they believe constitutes their own cultural identity, they are prompted to talk about their own college culture and its characteristics.
2. They brainstorm the cultural phenomena present at Colgate University.
3. They are asked to choose one particular phenomenon of interest.
4. They read some of the observation reports of other college students that are the result of ethnographic research and debate over the instruments used for the research. Examples of these ethnographic products and SA testimonies are taken from the LARA project materials. These can be found at <https://generic.wordpress.soton.ac.uk/ethnographicencounters/category/year-abroad-testimonies-how-to-ethnography/>.
5. They plan their out-of-class research with the supervision of the instructor.
6. They undertake the observation for as long as they need throughout the week with the support of an observation grid provided by the instructor and write a short report afterwards.
7. In the next workshop they share their findings and discuss them with the class. This is a fundamental session for debriefing: not only findings but also procedures and instruments are discussed and evaluated.

Final product for the portfolio

Completed observation sheet and short report

Further developments

This activity is intended to have a second and third part to complete it: the second part is a similar observation during the stay abroad and the third is a comparison and analysis upon return. When in Venice, then, students may undertake the very same research concerning the same or similar topic/phenomenon in the foreign academic context. If, for instance, a student has decided to focus on students' parties at Colgate University, this student will observe the students' party phenomenon in Venice. Even in this development of the activity, students are asked to observe and investigate using instruments such as observation, interviews and interpretations and then to write a report.

After their period abroad, students can compare the two practices and their final products. By comparing and relating these two works, they can find the similarities and differences characterizing the two contexts. The comparison, far from being a mere listing of features or events, must mirror a profound and attentive observation, thus including the most hidden aspects and meanings of the phenomenon examined. All of these moments of the activity will surely engender an increased awareness of one's own and another culture's phenomena, allowing for extensive analysis. An additional activity upon return could engage these students to share their research findings and their insights into both cultures with the other participants and perhaps the new outgoing students. The students who will be about to leave for the study abroad experience may, in turn, greatly benefit from the in-depth analysis of the foreign culture rather than being provided only with factual information about the host country.

3.3.4 Fourth module: *gli amici*

First activity: “Facciamo una festa?”

Introduction

The first activity of the fourth module, dedicated to friends and social life, is called “*Facciamo una festa?*”. In this role-play and cooperative activity students are required to organize, in all its aspects, an international dinner party. They must meet and decide all the important aspects and details of the party. However, each of them is assigned a role, with some traits and features to respect while discussing within the group of friends: one is always enthusiastic, another one is always negative, one is organized and another one is not, one is cooperative and the other is not, one is talkative and the other is not (etc.). Moreover, they all have different ideas, also listed in their character's features, about how the party should be: one wants an early dinner, the other one wants to meet later, one wants pizza and the other wants sushi. Students are therefore asked to act out their roles and argue in favor of their positions within the group, but they must find a solution and a final proposal that suits everyone. In addition, these friends will encounter some unexpected events along the way, provided by the instructor, such as change of plans of other friends not present at the party, change of location, setbacks.

This activity requires to extensively apply communicative skills to reach common decisions and test the attitudes of students when confronted with difficult situations. Communicating effectively and respectfully is indeed the major goal of intercultural education and it is especially during the critical moments of communication that the competent intercultural speaker manages the situation successfully.

Therefore, this activity is a valuable experience in which communicative strategies are required and developed, especially those needed in breakdowns of communication.

Confronting students with difficulties, even within the sheltered space of the classroom, is then an effective practice for the real exchanges happening in the outside world.

Moreover, if negotiation is by nature a delicate and complex process demanding great competence on the part of interlocutors to deal with personal differences and varied communication styles, this is even more challenging when different cultures are involved. In order to promote an intercultural communication relevant activity, among the personal traits assigned to the students, some of these will also recall characteristics linked to cultural aspects and values. For instance, some students will be asked to lower or raise their tone of voice, some others will have to talk over their interlocutors or interrupt them, some will have to stare at someone in the eyes for a long time while others will keep their head and sight down, some will even repeat some unexpected gestures. By adding these “cultural” attitudes to communication, the intent is far from that of generalizing about one or another culture but rather to convey the idea that even a “simple” communicative situation can be influenced by one’s culture.

The reason for adding these elements is then to raise awareness of elements embedded in our way of communicating and often not considered or acknowledged by the speaker nor the interlocutors with a similar cultural background. The effect is twofold: the speakers have to modify some of their “default settings” of communication, the listeners will perhaps feel unsettled and confused by “strange signals”. The “default settings” are all those socio-pragmatic aspects, non-verbal codes and underlying values that guide our communication, even if we are not aware of them. We certainly do not think of how many seconds a person should be looked in the eye, nor do we pay attention to someone’s gestures, unless these become “strange” and “unfamiliar”. When speaking, the person will understand the difficulty of having to change something that has always been done, unconsciously, in a different way and when listening and observing, the person will discover that we do not only listen to the words pronounced by others. Students will therefore come to realize that many elements constitute communication, these are all signals for the person listening and observing and are all conveyors of meaning. These, in fact, have the power to make an exchange successful or unsuccessful.

Great reflection, however, will be necessary to reach this level of consciousness. For this reason, in the debriefing phase, students will list the difficulties or odd elements they have encountered during the process. They will be prompted to attribute these instances to specific traits and attitudes they have

noticed, thus retracing the characteristics assigned in the first place to each participant. In this occasion, then, students will be led to debate about personal or cultural factors affecting communication. With the guidance of the instructor, they will unveil the “default settings” of their communication and discover the countless types of signals and their links to culture. Moreover, attention will be paid to the emotional dimension too: it is indeed important that students express and reflect on how they felt during the activity. The effects of unclear signals and problematic instances must be addressed to be fully aware of the impact of communication on one’s perceptions and understanding.

This is indeed one of the focal points of intercultural communicative competence and one of the most important aspects to take into consideration when engaging with culturally different others.

In conclusion, this activity requires great problem solving and conflict resolution. The activity becomes the starting point for reflection on cultural conflicts, whether in minor everyday matters or major political issues. From the rather simple and ordinary situation, the activity can engender a much more profound and important discussion about the importance of meaningful and respectful conversation. By directly experiencing and then expressing the feelings they had during the activity, students come to realize that attitudes and even emotions play an important role in communication. The activity then, raises awareness of all the different dimensions involved and debunks the myth of communication as mere exchange of information between interlocutors.

Objectives and outcomes: learning and teaching

The learning objectives for the activity “*Facciamo una festa?*” are:

- Being willing to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty
- Being willing to cooperate with people who have different perspectives and opinions from one’s own
- Understanding the influence of one’s culture on communication
- Understanding the processes and elements involved in communication
- Being able to adapt one’s way of thinking, behaving and communicating according to the situation
- Developing linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse skills, including skills in managing breakdowns in communication
- Being able to mediate in situations of conflict

The teaching objectives for the activity are:

- Observing interactions between students
- Observing student's communication styles and strategies
- Assessing communication effectiveness and success

The expected outcomes are:

- Students are able to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty
- Students can cooperate to find common solutions and accomplish tasks
- Students can adapt their ways of thinking, behaving and communicating according to the situations
- Students can mediate in situations of conflict
- Students know about the cultural influence on communication

Materials and resources

Worksheet with description of each participant's characteristics

Duration

Two hours

Language

Instructions are given in Italian. Students are asked to use mainly Italian and employ English only if needed. Moreover, they can ask for help when they cannot express an idea they wish to share.

Discussion and analysis are held in English.

Overview and description of the tasks

1. Each student receives one sheet with the description of their characteristics, actions to carry out or repeat during the activity. They read it carefully and think of the ways to put them in practice.
2. Students are only told that they have to organize a party.
3. The teacher adds instructions and clarifications as the decision-making process evolves by saying "Sorry, I forgot to tell you that..." For instance, if the students have decided the party will be held

on Saturday, the instruction will say that the party must take place on Sunday. If the students have decided they will eat pizza, the consequent instruction will state that someone is intolerant to gluten. The instructions, then, must overturn and complicate the decisions made by students so that they are led to change plans.

4. The teacher observes and takes notes of the interactions and behaviors of students.
5. Students have to reach a final proposal with all the details of their party.
6. Each student thinks of and lists the problems and unusual behaviors noticed during the process.
7. The whole class discusses the findings and each person explains the reason for their actions or behaviors (the characteristics they were assigned).
8. The students, guided by the instructor, analyze and reflect on the elements constituting communication, even those that are culture dependent. They also discuss the conflicts that can arise from communication both in everyday life and in bigger social contexts.

Final product for the portfolio

Teacher's observation of interactions and behaviors

Further developments

The follow-up activity for “*Facciamo una festa?*” could be done during the stay abroad. In particular, participants could be asked to actually host the party they had organized before leaving in all its aspects, wherever possible. International friends could be invited to attend the dinner too and real intercultural interactions could be made possible. A debriefing session following the party could represent an important moment to reflect on the real communicative actions resulted unfamiliar to the students in the intercultural context. This follow-up activity, then, could be an informal, fun and bonding moment but also an important experiential opportunity.

3.3.5 Fifth module: *il ritorno*

Activity: “*Facciamo le valigie*”

Introduction

The last activity of the preparatory course is called “*facciamo le valigie*” and it constitutes the final module “*il ritorno*”. This section and therefore also the activity are designed to conclude and recapitulate the work done in the previous modules. It is, then, a way to look back at all the past activities and what these have brought to each student in terms of new knowledge, developed skills and changed attitudes. Acknowledging one’s path and learning process is indeed a fundamental source of motivation. This moment, however, must also connect these past experiences with what is coming in the future, what students have long prepared for and expected. By recognizing the competence that they have developed during these months, students may understand the tools at their disposal and what they can do with them. In this sense, acknowledging what one already owns is a way to plan for the future. Taking into account the progress that participants have made can then enable further learning and generate motivation to continue learning.

Planning for the future experience is, indeed, a delicate and essential moment of learning: setting goals, thinking of the strategies to implement, organizing the tools, deciding which aspects of the study abroad can become a source of learning.

This in-between moment, connecting previous experiences with those to come can be very well exemplified using the metaphor of the suitcase. When packing the suitcase, we think of what should be included, we pick some clothes and leave some others, based on what we think we will need in the future. Because of our previous knowledge and perhaps thanks to our researches we decide that in Venice, for example, we are likely to need rain boots and a rain jacket. This process indeed requires the acknowledgment of what we have at our disposal, what we need and planning accordingly. Just like packing our actual suitcase with clothes, we will also need to pack a more abstract suitcase: that of our previous experiences, our skills, knowledge, attitudes and expectations for the study abroad adventure.

This activity, called “*la valigia*”, besides recalling the main theme of the course, represents a reflection moment for the students/travelers. The aim is to compare the actual suitcase that the students will bring to Venice to the more abstract one, that made of what they have learnt and explored in these months and in their lifetime, of their expectations for the new experience. In the activity students are asked to decide what to include in their personal suitcase by choosing items for each given category of travel objects. While at first they are asked to think of t-shirts, shoes, pants, underwear, jackets, beauty-case, travel documents, electronic devices and chargers, these will become useful analogies for attitudes, skills, knowledge, languages, expectations, previous experiences, goals for the future, learning strategies and motivation to “pack”. By comparing something so practical as the suitcase to something that seems rather

vague, students are able to truly make practical plans and perhaps fix their goals in their memory in a more stable way. The ultimate goal of “*la valigia*” is to promote autonomy in learners: the resources that can facilitate learning and the reflection on learning processes are taken into consideration to give the students the necessary means for learning, even during their study abroad. As a matter of fact, by analyzing one’s learning process and strategies, students can become aware of their approaches and needs and come to formulate their own objectives. This can be even more helpful if students are given the possibility to compare their characteristics to those of their classmates. From this process, an even greater awareness of each person’s way of learning and experiencing can arise.

Finally, this activity is also an important assessment tool for the instructor. We have indeed explained that the first activity of the course called “*Aspettative, obiettivi, domande*” served as an initial assessment for the teacher, who was thereby able to understand the students’ expectations, goals and questions. This last activity, then, is a conclusive and summarizing moment also for the instructor: by connecting and comparing the statements at the beginning of the course to those at the end, it will be possible to notice the progress of students. The reflective action this final task allows compared to the initial analysis spotlights the transformation students have had in their learning.

Objectives and outcomes: learning and teaching

The learning objectives for the activity “*la valigia*” are:

- Reflecting on one’s strategies and approaches to learning
- Formulating objectives to be achieved during mobility
- Self-assessing one’s learning process and progress

The teaching objectives are:

- Assessing students’ progress in reflection processes and competence
- Developing autonomy in learners

The expected outcomes are:

- Students are aware of their approaches to learning and their strategies
- Students can formulate objectives for the mobility period

- Students are aware of their learning process

Materials and resources

Worksheet with suitcase to be completed and categories, list of intercultural competence objectives to include in the suitcase

Duration

One hour

Language

Instructions are given in Italian. Students are asked to use Italian throughout the whole activity and to research or ask any word they do not know. The final discussion is held in both in Italian and English depending on the student.

Overview and description of the tasks

1. Students brainstorm about the items to include in the suitcase to take on the study abroad.
2. Students receive the suitcase with the travel objects categories (t-shirts, shoes, pants, underwear, jackets, beauty-case, travel documents, electronic devices and chargers) and the abstract categories (attitudes, skills, knowledge, languages, expectations, previous experiences, goals for the future, learning strategies and motivation). They decide which travel object category represents the abstract category (ex. T-shirts are attitudes, pants are skills, shoes are languages etc.).
3. Students also receive a list with intercultural communicative competence objectives from which they can draw upon to insert items in each category. The items reflect something they have acquired, developed, experienced or plan for the future, according to the category. These items can be those written in the list or chosen by them. For skills, for example, they can include something they developed such as adapting the way of thinking according to the situation, for languages they can include expressing opinions in Italian, for goals they can include learning about an unknown culture.
4. Once students have found items for each category, they share their choices and ideas with the group. From this action, students may be inspired to add other items.

5. The teacher may share some strategies, tools, objectives that the students might benefit from while abroad too. These can then be discussed and, in case, added to the suitcase.

Final product for the portfolio

Completed sheet with suitcase

Further developments

Two follow-up activities could be envisaged for both during and after mobility. At the end of the period abroad, the very same activity could be proposed again to students. This time the suitcase will contain the experiences and the learning students have done during their study abroad. Therefore, this could be a valuable moment to reflect upon their experience and to think of what they will carry with them afterwards. Moreover, both the initial and the subsequent suitcases can become object of comparison and analysis upon return. By looking at the two works, students can understand their overall progress and the phases that have marked it, as well as decide whether their initial objectives were achieved. Once again, this activity is a useful tool for self-assessment and reflection of one's own path.

CHAPTER 4: *Destinazione Venezia*: the research

This chapter is dedicated to the description of the research conducted within the “*Destinazione Venezia*” project.

First, we will propose the methodology of the research, which has followed the preparatory course that we have carried out. We will begin by illustrating the context in which the research is set and its relation to the preparatory course. Afterwards, the aims will be stated, and the research questions will be made clear, being these the foundation of the entire work. We will come to explain in detail the design of the study, including its characteristics and phases, to then introduce the instruments adopted to collect the necessary information.

Secondly, we will explain the processes and results of data collection and analysis. After presenting the procedures for administering the research instrument and for collecting data, we will report and discuss the answers. The findings will therefore be thoroughly described and interpreted in light of the research hypotheses. In the end, an overview of the findings will be provided in order to draw the adequate conclusions.

Finally, we will describe the limitations of our work and present a possible continuation of the research. There are indeed some limitations that have affected the study, mainly because of its small size and experimental nature, that, if eliminated, could improve the research.

Moreover, in light of this acknowledgment, we will put forward a proposal for the continuation of the research representing an additional opportunity to investigate the preparation of students once abroad. After having described in detail the methods and tools envisaged for this part, we will also include other possible developments of our study.

4.1 Methodology of research

This section focuses on the research that followed the preparatory course that we have carried out.

We will begin by illustrating the context of the research, namely the “*Destinazione Venezia*” project and the relationship between the course that we have described in the previous chapter and the research.

Afterwards, the aims of the research will be stated and explained, allowing us to present the rationale behind the study that we envisaged. In particular, it is our intention to point out the research questions that have guided the investigation and that will be useful to understand our work.

We will then delve into the discussion of the research design. In this instance, the main characteristics of the study and the approach that we have decided to adopt to investigate the topic will be outlined. Moreover, the two main phases of the study will also be explained: the first, taking place before mobility, is the part that we have thoroughly covered with the study and for which we will present the results and the second, during mobility, that represents a theoretical continuation that will be proposed in the section related to the developments.

Finally, the tool that we have decided to employ in our research will be introduced. We will first explain the reasons for adopting such instrument and then outline its characteristics and design.

4.1.1 The context

The research takes place within the context of the project “*Destinazione Venezia*”. This project, as we have argued in the previous chapter, was developed during the 2019/2020 academic year at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. “*Destinazione Venezia*” is composed of a pre-mobility course aiming at preparing students going to study abroad, specifically in Venice, Italy and a follow-up research. The focus of the course is that of preparing students to become intercultural communicative speakers, thus providing the participants with the tools they will need during their mobility to communicate, interact and explore new cultures. The course targets a specific group of students, the participants of the 2020 Venice Study Group and it is centered on the experience that the students will undertake in Venice.

The research then is viewed as strictly linked to this project. As a matter of fact, it is our intent to combine the part related to the course to the research itself. The study that we propose, then, is a component of the overall project undertaken in the 2020 spring semester, during which both the course and the follow-up research occurred. The study took place in the time span ranging from before the start of the course to right after the end of the course. Unfortunately, the study does not extend to the period of the students’ mobility, thus concerning only the period before departure, planned for September 2020.

The research, then, involves the same actors that were engaged in the preparatory course. The researcher corresponds to the instructor and designer of the course while the sample is represented by the group of

students participating in the course. The seven students who attended the training will therefore not only be the target of the preparatory course but also of the study.

As far as the aims are concerned, those of the preparatory course are strictly linked to those of the study we carried out: we are interested in preparing outgoing students for their study abroad in an intercultural perspective and thus to understand their achievements as a result of the course. The research, then, is a way to measure the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of our intervention. The acknowledgment of the results will therefore lead us to argue for the implementation of intercultural support in the context of study abroad, the dismissal of such idea or perhaps a modification of the methodology applied.

4.1.2 The aims of the research

The research aims to investigate the effects of an intercultural training on the preparation of outgoing mobile students and the effectiveness of such a training in enhancing the students' intercultural communicative competence.

A common conception of the study abroad claims that students become proficient in the foreign language and gain intercultural awareness from mere exposure (Coleman, 2013). This implies that mobile students in the host country will simply learn the language and become intercultural speakers by listening to locals, perhaps interacting with them or paying attention to some cultural differences between one's own and the target culture.

While study abroad is without any doubt a great opportunity to improve one's language and develop intercultural communication, many scholars have argued that these learning processes are not so spontaneous or simple. As pointed out by Marijuan and Sanz (2018), "researchers and practitioners have consistently questioned the popular idea that the immersion experience goes indefectibly hand in hand with language development and overall learner growth" (p. 186).

Research has thus demonstrated that language instruction must be implemented before departure to allow SA participants to learn while abroad and as a result, to show progress upon return. However, as we have argued, language is not the only element requiring instruction before mobility. Intercultural learning must be promoted before SA too since competence in this field has, nonetheless, proven to be not the direct outcome of the stay abroad as expected.

Several studies focusing on intercultural development (Aba, 2015; Byram & Fleming, 1998; Kinginger, 2013; Papatsiba, 2006; Trede et al. 2009; Vande Berg, 2009) have indeed provided evidence that, in terms of ICC, mobile students do not always benefit from the time spent abroad.

Findings, in fact, outline a rather complicated and multifaceted situation in which study abroad appears advantageous to some participants in terms of intercultural and personal development but also not really influential or even detrimental to some others. As way of illustration, Coleman found that more than 30% of mobile students had a more negative view after residence compared to those who had not yet undertaken the experience. The students' unpreparedness to face the intercultural situation often lead to reinforced stereotypes and rather superficial understanding of the cultures they had come in contact with during the study abroad (Coleman, 1998).

The most common explanations ascribed the differences to personal variation, hence highlighting the importance of experiences seized by students while abroad and their previous preparation. In particular, experts such as Kinginger (2013) have shown the existence of a positive correlation between the number of opportunities seized by students while abroad and their success as intercultural speakers. Moreover, students who demonstrated being more prepared to face intercultural situations were also those who could take advantage of more possibilities and thus learnt the most.

In short, students who are prepared for their mobility and who are able to take advantage of opportunities are more successful than those who are not prepared and do not take advantage of "intercultural" opportunities. The experience abroad is indeed widely recognized as a rich source of opportunities, ranging from linguistic to intercultural, social to travel-related.

However, it is not only the fact of having more opportunities at one's disposal, but also the ability and willingness to learn from them. If participants are not ready to learn from their experiences while abroad, i.e. to observe, engage, analyze, understand the situation around them, they will not be able to truly progress in terms of intercultural competence.

While some students, perhaps those interested in the linguistic or anthropological field, may have an adequate preparation to face the challenges of the new environment and the necessary tools to make the best out of their experience, the vast majority of them are highly unprepared.

The clear consequences are that some kind of preparation and support must be given to mobile students. It has therefore been demonstrated that intervention in students' learning before, during and

after their study abroad is advantageous. Studies such as the Georgetown Consortium carried out by Vande Berg show that “most students benefit through enrolling in programs abroad that are intentionally designed to promote their intercultural learning” (2009, p.1). Similarly, Bathurst and La Brack in 2012 found that “students provided with good pre-departure training, reinforced by in-country orientations and pre-reentry training, perform better overseas” (p.278).

In light of these conclusions, by intervening in students’ learning through a preparatory course, we wish to explore the effects this may have on the participants’ experience.

Given fundamental role that access to opportunities seems to play, the goal of the training is that of allowing students to have access to as many intercultural opportunities as possible before and as a consequence also during their mobility.

Therefore, the support we envisaged to provide participants with is of intercultural nature, aimed at developing students’ intercultural communicative competence. Students often arrive unprepared to be confronted with the foreign environment because of their limited experience in intercultural situations.

We have indeed decided to draw upon the notion of intercultural communicative competence proposed by Byram and adopt it as our framework for designing the training. The research that we have envisaged, in line with the rationale behind the course, is meant to support the cause for implementing intercultural support in view of study abroad.

Our research, then, aims precisely to investigate whether study abroad participants benefit from intervention and support in their mobility.

Moreover, we did not only investigate whether support throughout mobility is useful, but specifically if intercultural support, in the form of an intercultural training, is beneficial toward the preparation of mobile students. We are indeed interested in understanding whether such intercultural training is effective in enhancing students’ intercultural communicative competence.

Our research then aims to answer the following questions:

1. Is an intercultural training in view of a study abroad beneficial towards the preparation of outgoing students?
2. Is this type of support effective in enhancing the students’ intercultural communicative competence?

4.1.3 Research design

We designed a study taking into consideration two primary goals. Firstly, we were interested in investigating the preparation of outgoing students as a result of the course taking place before mobility. Secondly, we aimed to document the development of the participants' intercultural communicative competence. Only by including in the research and thus examining both the preparation of the students and their level of competence are we able to understand the effects of our intervention. As a matter of fact, we can affirm that the support to study abroad has been effective or ineffective if we consider both the results of the course itself and the learning that this has engendered.

Therefore, we conceive the research as directed towards two directions: the first intends to evaluate the course in terms of its effectiveness in preparing students going abroad and the second wishes to assess the preparation of students in terms of their ICC. This is far from being a net division between two different matters; they are indeed interdependent, complementary and both fundamental in answering the research questions and drawing a conclusion for our study.

The research intends to explore the preparation of students for their study abroad and investigate the role that the course has played in it.

What does it mean to be prepared then? In our view, it means having acquired additional tools to make the most out of the study abroad. As we have already affirmed, it is not our intention to evaluate if students have become masters of communication or experts of language learning but if they have developed, through the course, skills, attitudes and acquired knowledge to be prepared to face intercultural challenges and opportunities abroad.

Mirroring the processual nature of learning and of developing intercultural communicative competence, we also conceive the research as a process.

The research follows a mixed methods approach, thus making use of both quantitative and qualitative data. The reasons for this choice are multiple. First, we wish to achieve a fuller understanding of the phenomenon. Second, we are convinced that the preparation of students and the assessment of intercultural communicative competence cannot be explained thoroughly by using merely quantitative data that often cannot outline a much more complex situation, nor can we rely only on qualitative data. It is indeed the combination of the two typologies that can help us in gaining a clearer understanding of the course effectiveness and the students' competence.

In conclusion, we have divided the research into two phases: the first takes place right after the course (and before departure) and the second during mobility.

In the first phase we collected both quantitative and qualitative data through a survey aimed to evaluate the course and its effectiveness in promoting intercultural communicative competence. The second phase takes place during mobility, when the competence and also the effectiveness of the course can be assessed in a natural setting. At this time, participants are assessed through structured observation during a task and a post-task self-assessment questionnaire. We will indeed have the possibility to explain in more detail the issue of assessment, hence the options and also underlying rationale existing in the field of ICC in the section dedicated to it.

However, because of the time resources at our disposal, it will not be possible to carry out practically this latter part of the research. We will not, in fact, be able to assess the students' competence during their study abroad since this is planned for the next academic year. Even though this part will not be completed, and the data will clearly be unavailable, we still wish to present the continuation of our research under a theoretical perspective. It is indeed our intention to propose the instruments and methods that could be used in this phase and still imagine it as an important part of the research. As we believe this phase to be extremely important, we will outline it as a possible continuation to our existing work in the section dedicated to the developments.

4.1.4 Research instrument

The research instrument was chosen taking into account the two main directions of our research, that of evaluating the course in terms of its effectiveness in preparing students going abroad and that of assessing the development of students' ICC. We therefore looked, on the one hand, for an instrument to evaluate the course and on the other to relate intercultural communicative competence development to the course itself.

The **instrument** that we used, with the aim of understanding the course effectiveness in preparing outgoing students, is a **questionnaire survey**. The survey data were collected by means of an ad hoc questionnaire designed specifically for this research.

The choice for not choosing an already existing instrument can be found in the peculiar nature of our research: it is indeed rather uncommon that a research investigates the relationship between training before departure and preparation for study abroad in an intercultural perspective.

Many tools, as a matter of fact, focus only and specifically on assessing intercultural communicative competence and often do not take into account the aim of developing this competence in view of a mobility or as a result of a training.

Moreover, the specificity of the context in which the research takes place makes it difficult to adopt a preexistent tool that does not take into consideration the factors embedded in our research. The intercultural training that we have proposed is, indeed, unique. Although the framework is that of the widely accepted concept of ICC, the course has its own peculiarities and goals. It seems to us, therefore, that such uniqueness of the training must result in the adoption of a similarly “unique” and, thus, ad hoc tool.

There are, in addition, other factors that have been rather influential in the choice of this instrument. A questionnaire is not too difficult to design or administer, since it needs to be completed only once, it is simple, quick and data can be collected easily.

It is then the combination of all of these factors that has led to the decision of creating a questionnaire specifically designed for this research to administer once, after the end of the course.

The instrument intends to gather data of both quantitative and qualitative type. The collection of quantitative data will indeed enable us to develop an accurate analysis and the information provided by qualitative data will serve to support the figures. This will therefore allow us to gain a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon and therefore present a more complete description of our findings. We have also decided to write the questionnaire in English, the informants’ mother tongue, because we believe that answering the questions in English will be much easier for them and will encourage them to write more accurate answers. In the closed-ended items, then, this will allow for better understanding, at least from the linguistic point of view and in the open-ended items, they will be enabled to express more freely, precisely and thoroughly their ideas.

Moreover, as far as the three types of questions yield by the questionnaire are concerned, as identified by Dörnyei (2007), factual, behavioral and attitudinal, the questionnaire does not present factual questions, but it presents behavioral and attitudinal questions. Being the respondents of the questionnaire the students who have attended the course and also given the small number, we already had the information about the respondents’ general characteristics and a more profound analysis was of no interest to our research. We were, however, interested in gaining information about what respondents are

and were doing, habits, decisions (behavioral questions) and about what they think, thus understanding attitudes, beliefs, interests (attitudinal questions).

Therefore, the questionnaire is composed of 15 items, of which 11 are closed-ended items and 4 are open-ended items. This was done to give the possibility to students to express their own thoughts into words and therefore also to have at our disposal information-rich and spontaneous answers.

Moreover, as far as the typology of the items is concerned, 8 items are structured in the form of “Likert scales” in which respondents are asked to indicate the extent they agree or disagree with the statement by marking one of the responses ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”.

Two items are then designed as semantic differential scales, in which informants have to answer the question by marking with an X a numeric continuum between two opposite adjectives; in the first case the poles are represented by “not useful at all” and “very useful” and in the second “not engaging at all” and “very engaging”. One item is then a true-false item in which the respondents are asked to answer the question with yes, no or maybe. Finally, the 4 open-ended items are structured as short-answer questions where respondents are asked to answer using their own words. This part, requiring more time and creative writing, is left to the end of the questionnaire.

4.2 Data collection and results

In this section we will describe in detail the research that we have carried out. First of all, we will explain the procedures that we have followed for administering the research instrument and for collecting data. We will therefore present the steps we have taken to ensure an accurate and successful data collection. Afterwards, the operational phase of administering the questionnaire will be illustrated, thus including also the circumstances under which the measurements were taken.

We will then move on to report the data collected and discuss the answers provided. The findings will be presented by documenting the answers gathered from the questionnaire and interpreted in light of the research hypotheses. The data collected and the corresponding interpretation will indeed shed light on the course effectiveness in terms of development of intercultural communicative competence, preparation for the experience abroad and quality of the course.

Finally, we will provide an overview of the findings in order to draw our conclusions about the study. In this part we will indeed summarize the major results gathered from the questionnaire and answer the questions we have set for the research.

4.2.1 Administering the questionnaire and collecting data

The ad hoc questionnaire was administered to the informants after the end of the course and before their departure for the mobility experience.

First of all, the students who attended the course were informed of the project that was being carried out during the first workshop that was held. In this instance, when the general aims, content and design of the of the course were put forward, the instructor also explained the project and its implications. At this time, it was made clear that the project would entail a research related to the course and it was also specified that this research would not have had repercussions on the workshops or affected the students in any way. The students were asked for permission and agreement with the project and there has not been any kind of dissent. After the course, an online meeting with all the participants took place in order to remind students of the project and inform them of the questionnaire they would be administered and asked to complete. In particular, during this short meeting, the aims of both the course and the research were stated and the reasons for the research and the course evaluation questionnaire were explained. In addition, an illustration of how data would be handled and used was provided; in this instance we also stated the anonymous nature of the questionnaire and the absence of sensitive or personal questions.

A few short instructions were given so that respondents would be aware of what they were required to do once received the questionnaire. Throughout the whole course and in this meeting, the administrator tried to show the involvement in the project and interest in the outcomes. Thanks to the meeting, the informants were notified of the questionnaire two days before receiving it. The questionnaire, designed with Google Form, was sent via email to the seven participants. The questionnaire thus required to be completed and submitted online. The choice for administering an online form after the end of the course rather than in pencil during the last workshop was imposed by the circumstances. As we have already explained the course was abruptly interrupted by the pandemic outbreak and the only way to connect with the students/informants was through the internet. Moreover, we opted for the application “Google Form” over other possible services because the institutional email that both the administrator and the informants were provided with was linked to the Google platform. This would then make the

questionnaire more accessible to the informants and would not require additional subscriptions or other obstacles.

The questionnaire was therefore sent to the informants' institutional email, which we already had at our disposal thanks to the preparatory course. In the email informants could find again the information about the project, the aims of the research and a brief explanation of the questionnaire, as well as the link to the form. Students had two weeks to submit the questionnaire.

The data resulting from the informants' answers were then collected directly from the Google Forms answers section.

The questionnaire was completed by all seven participants of the course and the data for each informant were recorded.

4.2.2 Results and discussion

The data collected from the answers to the questionnaire constitute important information about the course effectiveness. In this section we will then present and discuss the results of the survey and relate them to the research hypotheses that we have put forward.

The items of the questionnaire, then, aim to reflect what the research investigates and can indeed be grouped under three categories in order to outline all the specificities and aspects that are implied.

In particular, these three categories are:

- development of intercultural communicative competence, i.e. the development of skills, attitudes and knowledge related to interculturality and language;
- preparation for the experience abroad;
- appropriateness of teaching methods and approaches.

We will present the results and comment on these three different points. This will indeed help us in understanding the effectiveness of the course in terms of the development it has engendered, the degree of preparation resulted from it and the appropriateness of teaching methods and approaches. Although we divide the questions into these categories, it is only by taking into consideration all of them that we can delineate the effectiveness of the course.

Moreover, given the small size of the research and the limited number of participants involved, the discussion will avoid hazardous generalizations of the findings. For this reason, in order to represent data in a more precise manner, we will always refer to the number of responses (from 0 to 7) rather than to percentages.

As far as the **development of ICC** is concerned, the items wish to embrace skills, attitudes, knowledge and language so that all of the components are included and a more complete assessment of the effectiveness of the course can be possible. The first six items are then dedicated to the self-evaluation of the students' development as a result of the course. We are concerned with understanding the students' perceptions of their development after our intervention.

We therefore asked students if the course:

- helped them further develop their ability to communicate with people from other cultures;
- encouraged them to interact with people from other cultures;
- helped them make progress in their acquisition of Italian language;
- allowed them to gain knowledge of Italian culture;
- challenged their stereotypes about Italian culture;
- developed their ability to think critically about their own culture.

As for communication, students believe that the course was helpful in enhancing their ability to communicate.

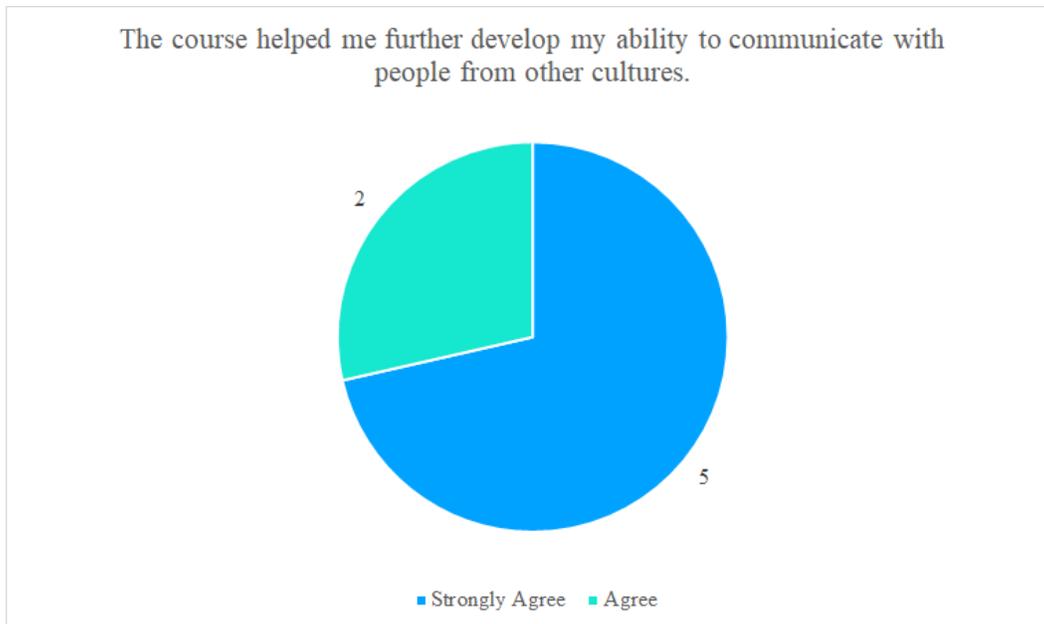


Figure 4.1 Development of ability to communicate interculturality

As we can see from the chart, all students claim that the course helped them further develop their ability to communicate with people from other cultures; considering that five informants strongly agreed and two agreed with the statement.

The positive results are important since they show the significant overall development of the students' communicative ability; being it one of the main goals of our course and of ICC in general. Not only is the students' ability to communicate developed, but also their attitude. Informants indeed agree that the workshops encouraged them to interact with people from other cultures (6 strongly agree and 1 agree). We are therefore positive in affirming that the students, after the course, feel more motivated to communicate interculturality. This is an important result, especially in the perspective of study abroad. In fact, it is the attitude and general motivation of students that can really make a difference in the way they will approach the experience abroad.

Moreover, it is also our conviction that attitudes might even be the most difficult part of ICC to promote in the classroom. Generally, while skills can be enhanced through activities and knowledge can be acquired rather easily, attitudes require a very personal change of perception. In a way, students are not just asked to learn or simply apply something, but they are asked to put themselves on the line and change their own disposition toward the others and toward specific ways of "being".

Furthermore, considering that the process of developing positive attitudes is so transformative, it also represents the engine for the development of all the other aspects. By way of illustration, it is by being open to, curious about and interested in people who have other cultural affiliations that one can gain new knowledge of other people's beliefs, values, practices. For this reason, the evidence that students are more enthusiastic, after the training, about interacting with other people is a good predictor of further developments and learning while abroad.

Several comments expressed in the open-ended part of the questionnaire seem to support this view. Some informants have indeed added important information related to the willingness to interact with people from different cultural affiliations when asked the question "Did the course inspire you to do something in Venice you had not thought about doing?". Examples of significant answers are: "the course taught me to not be shy when interacting with locals, and to engage with them as much as I can in Italian", another that "I want to engage more with locals and learn about their culture" and finally "I am more excited about engaging in conversation with other people when I will arrive in Venice". All of these future plans that students have made for when they will be in Venice show indeed positive attitudes toward interaction. The words "not to be shy when interacting", "engage more" and "more excited about engaging in conversation" recall, as a matter of fact, the same concept revolving around the attitude of being keen on interacting.

As far as language is concerned, we wanted to know if students noticed progress in their acquisition of Italian.

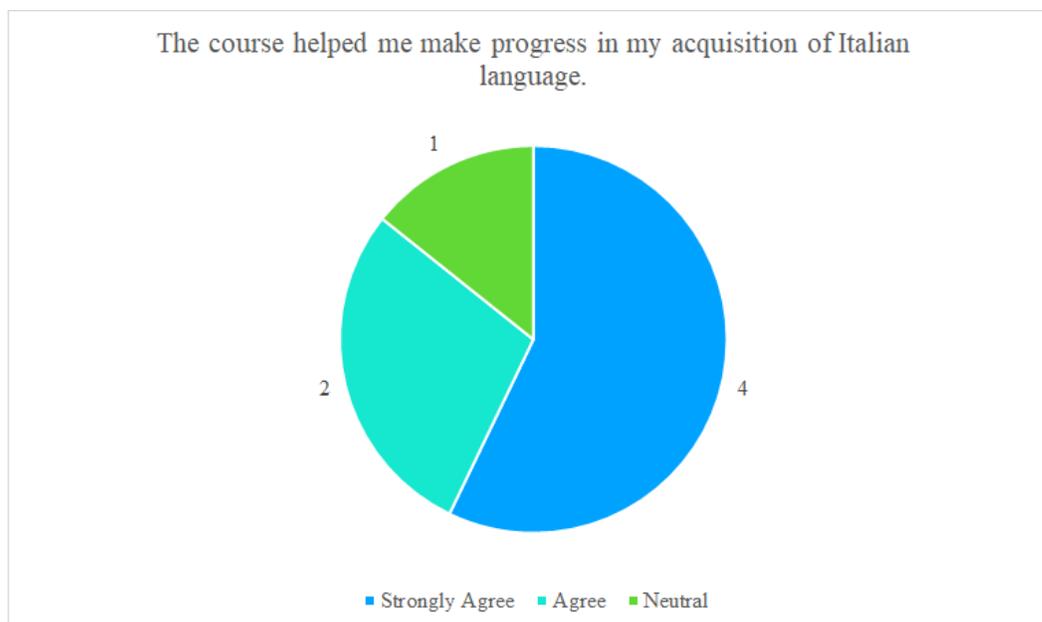


Figure 4.2 Progress in language acquisition

Six informants claimed that linguistic progress occurred (4 strongly agree, 2 agree), while one was neither positive nor negative in affirming the progress (1 neutral). These answers are an important confirmation that the approach adopted with regards to language instruction was productive. We have indeed pointed out in the previous sections that during the course we were confronted with the difficult task of promoting language learning despite the students' very heterogeneous proficiency levels. The teaching approach, then, envisaged the use of both English and Italian, depending on the moments of the tasks, as well as a particular support to beginners and an increased responsibility to advanced learners, as in peer learning.

The majority of positive responses show the effectiveness of the course in enhancing language learning despite the heterogeneity of the group. In fact, if we consider the intercultural nature of this preparatory course, rather than looking at it from a linguistic point of view, we see that this disparity between levels might have spurred even more intercultural learning. The more experienced learners were to some extent "forced" to conceive communication under a new perspective, that of a mediation between different actors. On the other hand, those who were less proficient had to rely on their classmates and were led to consider the different positions that may exist when communicating.

As far as Italian culture is concerned, students declare having both gained new knowledge (6 strongly agree, 1 agree) and challenged stereotypes (4 strongly agree, 3 agree). By considering the answers to both questions then, we can conclude that the course gave the possibility to become more knowledgeable

about the beliefs, values, practices, discourses and products related to Italian culture, but it has also enabled them to debunk the stereotypes they had. Especially this latter result can be seen as an important achievement since it represents a first step towards more awareness and deeper cultural analysis. We have indeed argued that other studies involving SA participants have shown an increase or reinforcement in stereotypes toward the host culture after the period spent abroad (Byram & Fleming, 1998). It is then our conviction that a thorough work on cultural analysis and on understanding the existing stereotypes, undertaken in the preparatory phase, can result in a better approach towards the host culture once abroad.

Finally, the data about critical thinking demonstrate a partially positive trend in the development of the ability to think critically about one's own culture, with 2 strongly agree, 2 agree and 3 neutral answers. From these results we can deduce that the course has helped in taking into consideration a different point of view regarding one's culture but has perhaps not focused sufficiently on the topic nor addressed the issue extensively. Although the course has paid attention to enhancing this ability, students might benefit from further analysis of their own cultural practices, values and beliefs and in general from more time dedicated to the development of this ability.

We were then interested in investigating the **effectiveness** of the course with respect to the study abroad experience. In particular, we wanted to understand whether students deemed the course to be useful in preparing them for the experience abroad.

We therefore asked them if:

- thanks to the course they feel more confident to start their experience in Venice;
- they believe that what they are being asked to learn in this course will be important for their everyday life in Venice;
- they would recommend this course to other students going abroad.

And also, to indicate:

- to what extent the activities were useful to prepare them for the study abroad experience.

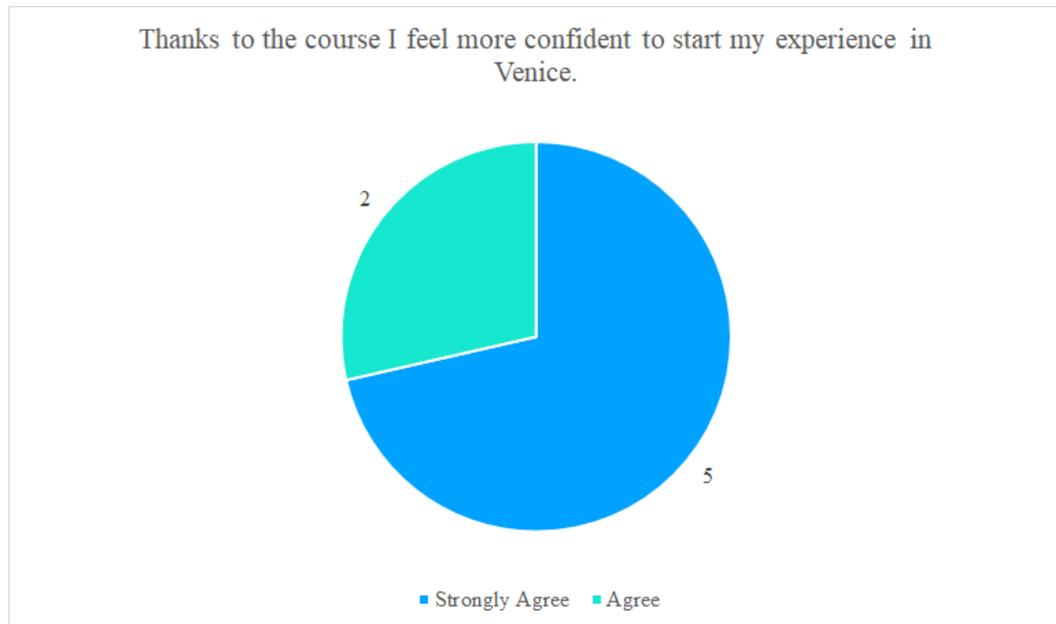


Figure 4.3 Participants' confidence in starting the mobility experience

As shown by the pie chart, respondents strongly agree (5 responses) and agree (2 responses) that they now feel more confident to start the study abroad program. The question provided, by employing the rather generic term “confidence”, intends to investigate the overall feeling of preparation of participants. We believe that enhanced competence can indeed lead to a sense of increased confidence to go abroad. The results from the development of ICC and those from the increased confidence, then, show that there is a certain correspondence between the two. Students claim having acquired more competence but also feeling more confident about undertaking their experience abroad.

In addition, by emphasizing this improvement of confidence, students also recognize that the course has proven to be useful for their preparation.

Data from other questions support this view: all informants, in fact, strongly believe that the requirements of the course are important for their everyday life during the upcoming stay abroad (7 strongly agree).

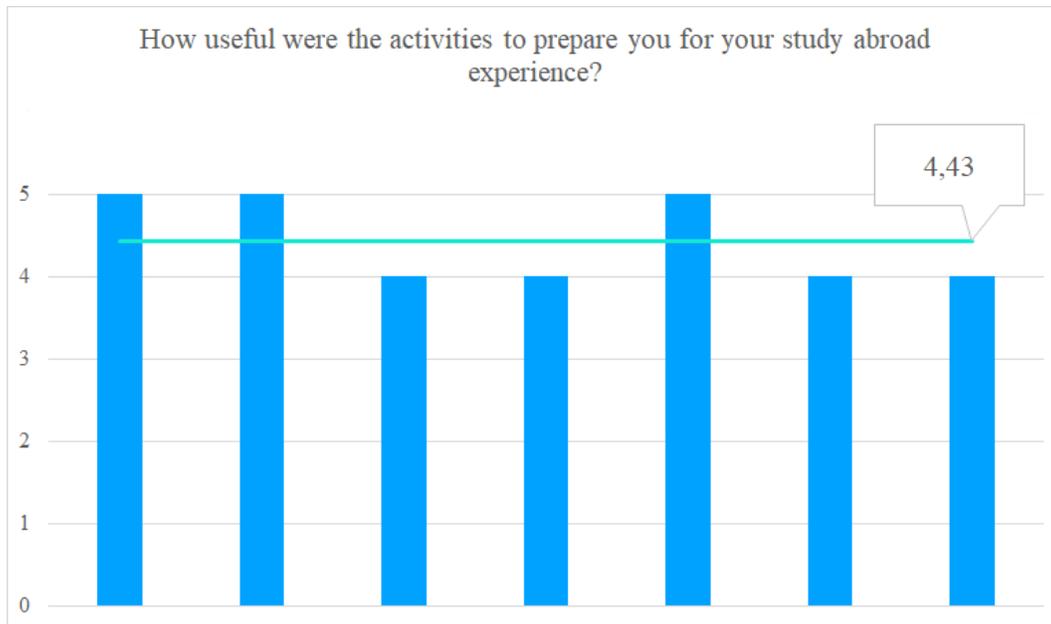


Figure 4.4 Usefulness of activities in preparation of study abroad

Even in the specific case of the activities proposed, participants think these were useful in preparing them for the study abroad experience. As it can be seen in the graph above, three informants assigned five points and other four assigned four points to the usefulness of activities over a range going from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 5 points. The average score represented by the horizontal line in the graph resulted to be 4.4 out of 5. These are significant data showing the perceived effectiveness of the training also in terms of overall preparation for the experience. Another important feedback comes from the unanimous positive response to the question: “would you recommend this course to other students going abroad?”. All participants agree on a positive answer, thus also implying an overall satisfaction with how the training has been conducted. This is an important contribution since it highlights that not only the instructor but also the students who have participated in the training are convinced that the course could be beneficial to other students. This, in turn, represents yet another indication, coming also from the students’ views, that this type of course is advantageous and useful for the preparation of outgoing students.

If we consider the totality of the answers to these questions, we can infer that, according to the participants, the course has proven to be useful toward their preparation for the study abroad.

Furthermore, our concern was also that of understanding the appropriateness of teaching methods and approaches. We believe that the perceptions regarding methods, activities, approach adopted can indeed greatly impact, positively or negatively, the course effectiveness and learning.

We asked participants to indicate:

- to what extent the activities presented were deemed engaging.

And to identify:

- strengths of the course;
- weaknesses of the course.

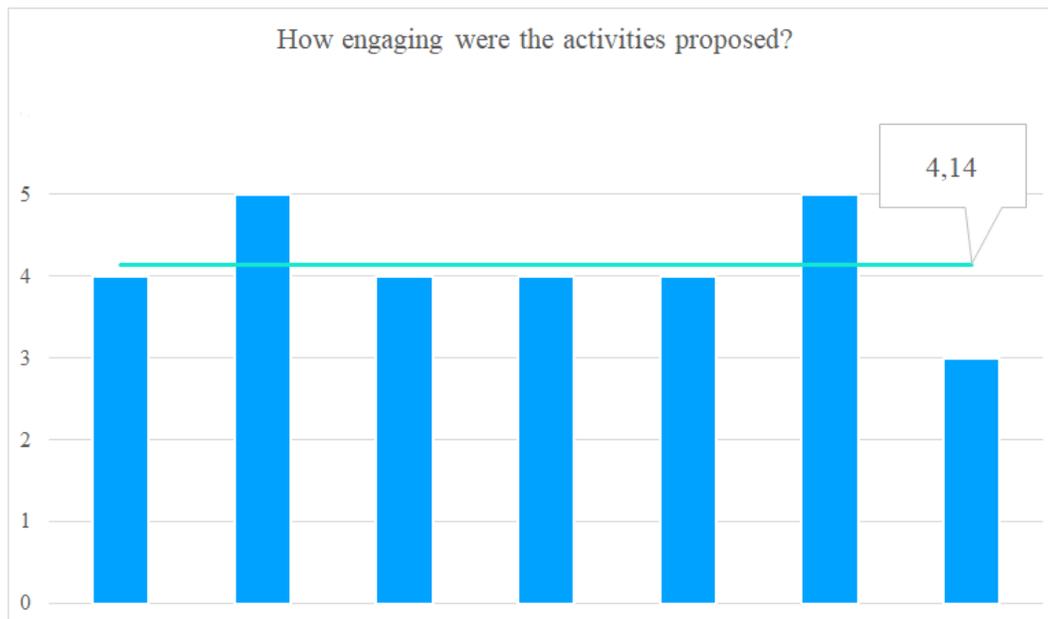


Figure 4.5 Engagement of activities proposed

First of all, we were interested in understanding the students' perception regarding the engagement of activities since we believe this is connected with the teaching rationale of the course. Engagement can indeed be a reflection of the student-centered and experiential learning approaches promoted throughout the workshops. The students' judgement on the level of engagement, then, can be also viewed as an indicator of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the approach employed.

The graph reported above portrays the score attributed to the engagement of the activities proposed. In particular, it indicates that four informants attributed 4 points out of 5, two informants attributed 5 points and one attributed 3 points. The horizontal line, then, displays an average score of 4.1 assigned by respondents. Overall, the activities carried out have proven to be engaging, from which we can deduce the effectiveness of the approaches. Nevertheless, there is also room for improvement. Activities can indeed be ameliorated and the relationship between the “theoretical” teaching approach of the course and the methods put into practice can be strengthened. However, the approaches cannot be considered ineffective in this context, hence suggesting that they can be implemented in future or similar trainings.

Some other comments in the part dedicated to the strengths of the course support the view. For instance, some answers state: “we get to do activities that are outside of textbook exercises and engage in daily life in Venice”, “the lessons were very engaging, creative, and hands-on which I enjoyed. Also, they were very relevant and taught practical things that I would use in Venice”, “the activities were practical and fun”. One response even brings up some specific activities judged meaningful: “I found the navigation activity very helpful, as well as challenging, as it forced us to give directions to each other in Italian without knowing where the other individual was exactly. I also thought it was very helpful going over each of our questions and worries regarding the trip because Beatrice addressed these with both her own experience and by relating it to our own cultures and experiences”. These comments, then, besides giving a positive feedback about the proposed activities, also point out the importance of addressing the many aspects of the experience, as for example the emotions that it may provoke. This is evidence that a preparatory course cannot merely cover information about the host place, nor can it ignore the emotional realm.

The above-mentioned observations highlight that the methods and approaches adopted during the workshops have been appreciated by participants. The authenticity of tasks, experiential learning and student-centered learning on which the course was based proved to be valued by the participants too. The results support the implementation of a course featuring the methods and approaches used.

Other strong points of the course highlighted in the comments concern the unconventional nature of the training in the way cultural activities were proposed and the topics addressed. The “different perspective” and “different insight into culture and its aspects” mentioned in the comments underline the efficacy of adopting an approach focusing on ICC.

As for the weaknesses pointed out, two main concerns arose: that of language and time management. Some observations expressed in this section stress the issue of having to deal with very different levels of proficiency in Italian, perhaps causing problems to both more and less proficient students. In the case of time management, some observed that activities could “sometimes take longer than anticipated” or that there was “not enough time to discuss in depth the activities”. We acknowledge the existence of these issues and believe that improvements can in fact be done in future trainings.

In sum, generally speaking, the course has proven to be effective with regards to the development of intercultural communicative competence, the preparation for the experience abroad and the quality of the training itself.

4.2.3 Overview of findings

The questionnaire aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the course in terms of development of intercultural communicative competence, preparation for the experience abroad and quality of the course. By means of the questionnaire, we collected data to answer the research questions. In particular, we were interested in understanding whether an intercultural training in view of a study abroad was beneficial towards the preparation of outgoing students and if the type of support implemented was effective in enhancing the students’ intercultural communicative competence.

First of all, the data concerning the participants’ intercultural communicative competence document a positive trend in their development: students affirmed that the course has enhanced their ability to communicate, improved their attitude to interact with people from other cultures and widened their knowledge about Italian culture. This has not only resulted from the analysis of direct and closed-ended items but also from the open-ended answers, which have confirmed that students valued and benefitted from the approach adopted focusing on ICC.

We therefore believe that the main aim of the course of promoting intercultural communicative competence has been achieved. However, we are also aware, as we have claimed, that the ICC and intercultural preparation of participants should be assessed further once abroad. This is why in the next section we will propose and describe in detail an additional assessment for ICC to be administered during SA. This will be able to deepen our understanding and complete our research.

Moreover, the data collected from the questionnaire have also demonstrated the effectiveness of the course in preparing outgoing students. Informants have indeed strongly agreed that thanks to the training,

they feel more confident and prepared to undertake the upcoming international experience. The informants' confidence in affirming that they would recommend the course to other outgoing students does, indeed, indicate that the course has been beneficial to their preparation. It is indeed also recognized by participants themselves, after the training, that preparing for study abroad is fundamental and that instruction is indeed necessary.

Furthermore, the responses are also evidence that the methods, approaches and teaching, along with the theoretical framework have proven to be effective. The students' responses have indeed supported the research evidence that experiential learning, student-centered learning and authenticity in activities are valid tools in intercultural instruction and should indeed represent the foundations of intercultural teaching. The perceptions about the quality and the students' satisfaction for the course have confirmed these conceptions. Although integrating the ICC framework with these approaches and methods may seem rather obvious, research has shown that intercultural development in language classrooms is still seen by teachers as transmitting cultural knowledge. Sercu (2006) indeed suggested that most teachers still perceive culture teaching in terms of teacher-centred transmission of cultural knowledge, thus not even including in their view intercultural skills and attitudes. This study, then provides more evidence that intercultural teaching should include all components of ICC and should be based on an authentic approach where learning is first of all student-centered and experiential.

If, therefore, we consider the answers in their entirety, we can conclude that the course has proven to be effective and beneficial toward the preparation of outgoing students. Moreover, after a first analysis, students have developed intercultural communicative competence and the necessary tools to succeed in their experience abroad.

4.3 Further developments

In this section we will start from describing the limitations of our work to then outline the continuation to the research and other possible improvements.

There are indeed some limitations that have affected the study, mainly depending on the few resources at our disposal and the experimental nature of the project. In particular, we will argue that the insufficient time to follow the entire mobility in all of its phases has represented an obstacle to the type of support provided and to the research. The study, however, also lacked financial resources thus impacting the

methods and tools employed for assessment but also the overall structure of the research. We will therefore come to argue that this small and experimental project could benefit from an expansion.

In particular, we will describe a proposal for the continuation of the research. This continuation could indeed constitute the second part of our research in which a thorough assessment of intercultural communicative competence takes place. This assessment during mobility can indeed provide an additional opportunity to investigate the preparation of students to deal with intercultural situations. We will therefore highlight the methods and tools envisaged for this part of the research by arguing and explaining our convictions.

After having described in detail the proposal, we will move on to present other possible developments of our research. More specifically, these are improvements and expansions to our original project both taking into account the instructional and the research part. These are indeed interrelated, and we will claim that by strengthening the first we will also be able to expand and ameliorate the latter.

4.3.1 Limitations

This research presents some limitations, mainly because of the insufficient resources at our disposal and of the experimental nature of the project.

As far as the resources are concerned, we believe that three main constraints have somehow restricted the scope of the study: time, possibilities and funds.

The period of **time** that this research covers is indeed limited, since the study could only include a part of the entire mobility in question. As we have remarked throughout our work, study abroad is divided in many parts, or phases, all necessary to the completion of the experience. We claimed that we can subdivide it in at least three phases: before departure, during the stay, after mobility. These moments of mobility have peculiar characteristics and purposes, yet all of them are fundamental in the process of growing and learning. Not only are they all essential, but they are also interdependent and sequential. We have indeed argued thus far that the course designed and carried out was preparatory, meaning that it aimed to prepare students for the following phase, that of the actual stay abroad. We have also specified that both our intervention and our research could only cover this first phase of the students' program because of the time at our disposal. That of mobility is indeed a long process, especially if we take into consideration all the phases we have mentioned. Even if in the specific case of the Venice program at Colgate University, study abroad is set to last only for one semester, by contemplating a pre and post

mobility phase, the total duration of a theoretical support project would last at least three semesters, i.e. 16 months. Such length is clearly inconceivable for our small research and would certainly require a much greater project.

We are aware, then, that our view, and hence our study, is restricted and incomplete if we wish to consider the overall phenomenon of mobility.

Moreover, each phase is inextricably linked to the other and influences its outcomes. The parts constituting the whole experience are indeed complementary, where one modifies the results of the other. It is our strong belief then, that what students acquire in one phase will be helpful in the next one and perhaps that their competence will become evident then. If we see one part as a preparation to the one that is about to come, we also acknowledge that the students' preparation can really be seen, and therefore assessed, only at this successive moment. It is also for this reason that we believe that assessment of the participants' ICC should be done during their mobility. We imagine then that the outcomes of the preparatory course would really become evident at this moment of the stay, when students are asked to employ their intercultural abilities, knowledge and attitudes in a real and authentic situation. This is why in the next section we will propose a possible continuation to our study including a second phase during the participants' stay in Venice.

Time is also an important ally of intercultural communicative competence's assessment, and therefore a lack of time is to be considered an "enemy". We have indeed claimed that ICC is to be understood as a process, where learning happens over time and thanks to accrued experiences. As a consequence, if we wish to understand the development of students' ICC, we need to assess competence not only at a single point in time but repeatedly. This implies, for instance, that ICC assessment should be done before and after the preparatory meeting, as well as during and after the study abroad. This procedure then clearly demands not only time but also possibilities that are beyond our means.

In addition, intercultural communicative competence might even require **monetary resources** that we did not have. If we take the example of the Intercultural Development Inventory, for instance, we will realize that some tools employed for ICC assessment are rather pricey. The widely accepted instrument of Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), developed by M.J. Bennett & M. Hammer on the framework of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), does not only require training and commitment but it is also expensive. If the monetary issue may be less decisive for large institutions or companies in deciding which tool should be used, it certainly is an important point for

single educators or in small researches, just like in our case. Considering that the tool would have to be administered several times to compare the results, then, this would become even more unfeasible.

Moreover, as we have explained, this is a rather **small and experimental project** that had a limited scope. As a matter of fact, both in terms of target and sample, the research is modest. The course targeted, and consequently also the study, exclusively the students attending Colgate University and going on the 2020 Study Group in Venice. This arose simply from the researcher's interest and ability in preparing students going to Italy, thus focusing on the context of the Italian language and culture. By narrowing the offer to only this group of people then, both the course and the research resulted in being limited in the amount of participants and informants. This, in turn, entailed having at our disposal only data and results for a small sample of people. Only by extending the initial scope of the study and the support for study abroad to a much larger number of students would it be possible to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon.

In addition, it is certainly also the novelty of such an offering both for the University and for the researcher that has impacted the study. Being the course and the study a first-time experience within this institution and in the researcher's experience, we are sure that further developments and ameliorations can be done. A similar but more complete study would certainly require more support from the institution and more experience in conducting such a research.

Finally, we would also like to point out that a series of obstacles have limited the possibilities and outcomes of the study. In particular, the sudden interruption of the course due to *force majeure* and the consequent need to adjust the research to these new circumstances has certainly proven challenging.

All of these factors have contributed to the limitation of our research to some extent. Nevertheless, we believe that this research, just as the course, is evidence that support for study abroad is important. Our work can therefore represent a solid foundation for further studies and applications.

4.3.2 Continuation of research: a proposal

In this section we wish to present a proposal for the second part of our research: that investigating the participants' intercultural communicative competence. We have indeed explained, when outlining the design of the research that we divided the research into two main parts, or phases: one taking into account the preparatory course and hence the results of the course itself and the other one concerning the mobility and thus the ICC assessment at a later stage. We have argued that since time and resources at our disposal

for this project were limited, we could not carry out this second part of the research but only present it as a theoretical continuation. Nevertheless, this consequent part of the research is fundamental, and we wish to illustrate our ideas about how it should be carried out as well as the contribution it could provide to research.

The first part of the study, focused on investigating the course effectiveness, consisting in gathering data and showing the outcomes related to the initial phase of mobility.

While we can affirm, thanks to the survey results, that the preparatory course for the study abroad affected positively the preparation of outgoing students, who showed having acquired knowledge and developed skills and attitudes, we wish to propose a follow-up research.

This phase then intends to investigate the preparation of the course participants in terms of ICC in the context of mobility. Consequently, we conceived an assessment of ICC that completes the research and provides even more data towards the description of the results.

The reason for proposing this assessment at a later stage of the research lies in the conviction that the students' intercultural communicative competence and their preparation for the study abroad can truly be assessed only in the actual setting and at the moment of their mobility. However, this decision is also related to the idea that the effects of a preparatory course will be measurable accurately only during the experience for which one has prepared. Therefore, it is our conviction that an additional assessment is required, and it should be done during mobility. In a way, the study abroad represents the opportunity for putting into action what has been learnt in the pre-mobility phase. Therefore, the assessment can engender more reliable results at this point of the experience.

In order to collect information about the preparation of the participants' intercultural communicative competence, we tried to find a tool for assessment that could suit the purposes and the context of our research. First, however, we must acknowledge that the issue of ICC assessment is rather complicated and still being researched. As a matter of fact, that of intercultural communication is not only a rather recent field of study but it is also rich in diverse opinions; suffice it to say that there is no agreement even on what intercultural communicative competence is. We have indeed demonstrated in the first chapter of our work that finding a widely accepted and shared definition of ICC is a difficult task. If defining the concept and the components is already complicated, then finding common ground on assessment methods and instruments seems even more unattainable.

Scholars have put forward the most disparate proposals about how intercultural communicative competence should be assessed, thus resulting in very different instruments to be used as well. For instance, Fantini (2006) identified 86 different instruments for intercultural communication assessment, ranging from inventories, scales, questionnaires to tests and indicators. This number, if we consider that the subject is not the most widespread, reflects the excess of tools employed to assess ICC. This is the result of many factors: the different ways to define ICC and multiplicity of existing models, the varied contexts of application, the diverse ideas about when or how one best shows intercultural communicative competence. If, for instance, we take two of the most used assessment tools, the Intercultural Development Inventory and the European Language Portfolio we will easily realize the different rationales behind them.

The **Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)** is a widely accepted instrument, employed in academic contexts and work settings. Developed by M.J. Bennett & M. Hammer on the framework of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), it aims to assess the extent of an individual's intercultural development. This results in identifying the degree of development on a continuum that goes from extreme ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism.

Once the 50-items questionnaire is completed, a customized profile report is generated thus providing also a structure for the individuals' further development of their intercultural competence.

The IDI is a statistically reliable, valid measure of intercultural sensitivity (<https://idiinventory.com/>). The IDI was constructed and tested over a 3-year time period by Mitch Hammer at American University and was piloted successfully by Milton Bennett in both corporate and educational settings (Fantini, 2006).

Behind the IDI, then, lies the conviction that intercultural competence can be assessed by confronting informants with questions and statements linked to intercultural situations in the form of a questionnaire. The precise nature of the results, clearly defining the individual's point of development, make IDI a very used tool in several contexts. A very long list of corporations, organizations, universities, mainly in the United States, yet not exclusively, using this tool for assessment exists (<https://idiinventory.com/generalinformation/who-uses-the-idi/>). By way of illustration, the University of the Pacific's Intercultural Training Program that we have described in detail in the second chapter of this thesis bases its results and work to a great extent on IDI. The inventory is indeed administered to all

students in their first and last year of college and in the second module of the training. By comparing the results of the assessment, then, the development of the participants' ICC is defined.

Moreover, the IDI instrument and IDI analysis services are available only to those people who have completed a qualifying seminar and bought the product. In order to administer the instrument then, the administrator needs to undergo training first and the kits for assessment have to be purchased. This implies that institutions need to invest quite a lot of money on the project. Being our research and course of limited scope, then, this instrument cannot represent a feasible option.

Another example of tool used for assessment is the **European Language Portfolio**.

This tool, developed by the Council of Europe, is constituted of three parts: a passport, a language biography and a dossier to self-assess intercultural competence.

The *Passport* section is a summary of more or less formal assessments by others, as well as guided self-assessment. The *Biography* section is intended as a personal record of intercultural experiences, where details on relevant experiences are described, and as a reflection on one's intercultural behavior. The *Dossier* part encourages learners to present personal evidence provided by themselves and testimonies by so-called witnesses, illustrating the assessment results recorded in the Passport and experiences recorded in the Biography (Lenz & Berthele, 2010).

The assessment instruments, described by the Council of Europe, are then conceived as complementary constituents of the final assessment tool in which different types of assessment and even different people are in charge of assessing. Assessment is therefore carried out by educators, peers and individuals themselves. Self-assessment does, indeed, represent an important part of the European Language Portfolio. The Portfolio assessment has a double advantage: on the one hand, it enables to collect privileged insights, for example, into reflections and attitudes that are not easy to grasp otherwise, on the other hand, it helps develop self-reflection and self-awareness, which are both considered key competences of intercultural education (Lenz & Berthele, 2010).

The totality of the tools, the typologies of assessment and the different views involved in the process certainly make the Portfolio a comprehensive and complete tool. The main problem that may arise, however, is that of the time and effort needed to carry out all the procedures. This is, indeed, a valuable tool that needs profound analysis and careful planning on the part of the educator before making use of it, but also great effort on the part of students to undertake all of the tasks. In our case, then, since the

tool needs to be administered during mobility and the participation to the project is not mandatory, the Portfolio seems to be very demanding both for the students and the researcher.

Moreover, all of these tools developed for assessment do not take into account the mobility purpose, which is clearly central to us. We are indeed convinced that the intercultural preparation that the course wishes to enhance is directly linked to the study abroad. Preparing students for their experience abroad is our number one goal and we therefore believe that ICC should be seen as complementary to the study abroad. For this reason, we wish to include in our assessment of ICC the factor of mobility as well.

Finally, and most importantly, we are convinced that assessing ICC in the context of mobility should be as connected to a real-life situation as possible. While inventories and autobiographies can be important generic tools, which can even lead to precise data and results if we wish to investigate the overall competence of students, we also think that intercultural communication preparation for mobility has to be assessed through a different method and tool. As a matter of fact, according to us, ICC can really be demonstrated at the moment of real-life interactions in the mobility situation. This is why we wish to investigate the phenomenon during the stay abroad and through structured observation.

As a consequence, we have decided to create two ad hoc instruments for assessment during mobility. The tools that we have created are an **observation scheme** (appendix C) and a follow-up **self-assessment questionnaire** (appendix D). The first part of the assessment is therefore carried out by the administrator and instructor, while the second is done by participants themselves. We also think that, given the complexity of ICC assessment, multiple points of view should be considered. Just as it is proposed by the Portfolio then, we also envisaged an assessment carried out by both the instructor and the students.

The observation must clearly take place during an intercultural relevant event in which students are enabled to demonstrate their competence. Moreover, this event should also be as authentic as possible so that more accurate results can be generated by the assessment. We therefore imagined an event taking place during mobility in which the instructor observes the students and their interactions and a follow-up self-assessment in which students themselves reflect on the event and their performance. Specifically, we have planned an authentic event in the form of an intercultural dinner party where the actors involved in the research and other international students are invited. The event is structured as a dinner where students in small groups, divided by cultural affiliation or nationality, prepare and present one or more typical dishes and share them with the rest of the students. This dinner party, then, is intended to be a fun and engaging moment for students who should not perceive it as a “testing” moment but only as an

occasion to learn and share about one's own and other culinary traditions and cultures. On the other hand, this moment represents a perfect context for the instructor to understand the participants reactions to intercultural encounters. The observation scheme becomes a useful instrument allowing the researcher to notice the knowledge, skills and attitudes applied by students in this context. Moreover, the observations made by the researcher are compared to the answers that participants themselves put forward in the self-assessment questionnaire. This latter instrument completes the observation scheme by bringing an additional point of view to the analysis, thus enriching it. Thanks to the reflective and introspective nature of this self-analysis, the questionnaire is indeed an important insight into the students perceptions. Not only, then, does it serve as a means to compare the data between external and internal observation, but it is also a rich source of information for the purposes of the research. It is the combination of the two that makes the final assessment accurate and complete.

The observation scheme is made up of systematic categories allowing the observer to record every time this event occurs by ticking it. The method that we employ to record the occurrences is indeed that of event sampling to describe the total frequency of the events observed (Dörnyei, 2007).

In particular, we divided the scheme into three parts, each representing a constituent of ICC, i.e. knowledge, attitudes, skills, for a total of twelve categories to observe. The categories are identified by taking into account the specific attitudes, knowledge and skills that we wish to focus on and that can, according to us, be assessed during such event. We thus took the ICC generic goals and applied them to the specificities of our purposes and context. In the scheme, then, both the generic statement and a specific event to observe will be included. The task of the observer will be that of marking the event occurred, specifying in which situation this happened, who is involved and, if needed, adding a note with some details describing the event.

The intercultural dinner, because of its nature and characteristics, is indeed likely to engender many situations where participants must show intercultural skills, attitudes and knowledge.

The self-assessment questionnaire will then be administered after the event and will serve both as an occasion for reflection for students and as a means of comparison for the instructor. This questionnaire takes into consideration the intercultural dinner and the performance of the participants throughout the event so that a self-analysis can be carried out by the students themselves. The questionnaire presents a total of 23 items, divided into 15 "Likert scales" and 8 short-answer questions. The items reflect the categories presented in the observation grid, thus allowing a comparison between what has been noticed

by the observer and what is pointed out by the informant. We believe that by integrating closed- and open-ended items we will be able to gather more information, perhaps more thorough descriptions, hence leading to a more complete analysis.

The combination of these two instruments, then, will allow for an accurate assessment of ICC in an authentic situation within the context of study abroad. This assessment, in turn, will give us all the necessary data to understand whether students are prepared to deal with intercultural situations and if learning occurred as a result of the preparatory course. We therefore believe that after the analysis resulted from this second part of the study, our research could be able to explain the phenomenon in a more comprehensive way and draw the final conclusions.

4.3.3 Other improvements

After having illustrated the second phase of our research, thus providing a possible continuation of the first part that we have carried out, we would like to propose other improvements that can be done. There are, indeed, some ameliorations that can be applied to the project and that we wish to highlight to contribute to future research in this field. These developments come from the realization that some factors, mentioned above, have restricted the scope of our research and that by removing or reducing these limitations, the study can be upgraded.

In particular, the study can benefit from an overall extension of the project, in terms of scope, time, resources and recognition.

As a matter of fact, our small and informal project, was somehow restricted by it being unconnected and not completely incorporated into the official program. Moreover, given the positive outcomes that the study has showed, it is our suggestion that a potential future project was better incorporated in the study abroad program. By way of illustration, the preparatory course could become mandatory for outgoing students, who could, in turn, receive credit for attending it. By doing so, more students would be willing to participate and perhaps even more motivated to undertake the project. The inclusion of the preparatory course into the official program can then be enriched by implementing support both during and after mobility. We have indeed argued throughout this work that support not only before but also during and after the experience is beneficial to the students learning and their overall growth.

As far as the study is concerned, then, this prolongation could allow for an extension of the research as well. As a matter of fact, by having more resources and access to the whole experience rather than just

to a part of it, the researcher would be enabled to follow the participants throughout all the phases of mobility. The research could also benefit from the expansion of the course offering since a bigger group of students attending the course would also mean a bigger sample in the study. We could therefore envisage a longitudinal research, which takes into consideration the selected group of students, bigger in number, and follows their progress in time. According to Menard (2002 as cited in Dörnyei, 2007, p.79), “a longitudinal investigation is research in which (a) data are collected for two or more distinct time periods; (b) the subjects or cases analysed are the same or are comparable [...] from one period to the next; and (c) the analysis involves some comparison of data between periods”.

The research would thus include assessment at different points in time: before the preparatory course, when the initial intercultural communicative competence of students is recorded, after the course, hence allowing to see the possible progress and after mobility, so that the learning resulted from the experience can be determined. The analysis and interpretation of the results is therefore based on the comparison of the data collected before, after the course and after mobility. This comparison of the results at different moments can indeed shed light on the participants’ process of learning and on the effects that the course may produce on their competence.

It is indeed the very nature of intercultural communicative competence and study abroad that requires to look at the evolution over time.

Not only would it be possible to consider more phases of the mobility and have a much wider perspective of the students’ competence, but through increased resources, the analysis could be carried out in greater depth. A longer stint and increased resources would mean also a more thorough assessment of intercultural communicative competence: this could consist of more parts and more actors involved. As a consequence, the study would be more accurate and comprehensive, given the multiple points of view taken into account (researchers, participants and peers).

We therefore believe that a development of this work could go in two parallel directions: one concerning intercultural support, with increased instruction before and additional guidance during and after the stay and the other concerning research with a strengthened study regarding the assessment of intercultural communicative competence.

CONCLUSION

This research set out to investigate the impact of an intercultural training on the preparation of outgoing mobile students. In particular, the research aimed to examine whether a course before mobility is beneficial toward the preparation of outgoing students and if this type of support is effective in enhancing the students' intercultural communicative competence.

After having presented the preparatory course, specifically designed for study abroad in an intercultural perspective, a research has been carried out to understand the effectiveness of this intervention.

In order to answer the research questions, we have administered a questionnaire to the participants of the course to evaluate the course and self-assess their learning.

First, the data collected from the questionnaire have demonstrated the effectiveness of the course in preparing outgoing students. The participants have indeed claimed that thanks to the training, they feel more confident and prepared to undertake the future experience in Venice. Moreover, they have also affirmed that they would recommend the course to other outgoing students, hence stressing the effectiveness of such a training. Studies have long pointed out the importance of supporting students in their mobility through intercultural trainings, considering that intercultural progress is not a natural nor immediate consequence of the experience abroad. By taking into consideration the informants' answers, then, the necessity of preparing for study abroad has been acknowledged not only by scholars and educators, but also by the participants themselves.

Furthermore, the data are also evidence that the methods, approaches and teaching adopted in the training have proven to be effective. The positive remarks of students on the way the course has been conducted are in line with the research evidence that experiential learning, student-centered learning and authenticity are valid tools in intercultural education.

Then, the data also indicate that there has been a development of students' intercultural communicative competence. Informants agreed that the course has enhanced their ability to communicate, improved their attitude to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds and widened their knowledge about Italian culture. These conclusions have resulted from both the analysis of closed-ended items and from open-ended answers, highlighting the gains that the training has engendered and the desirability of an approach focusing on ICC for study abroad preparation.

In conclusion, we can advance that the course has proven to be effective in preparing outgoing students for their experience abroad and that there has been a development in the participants' intercultural communicative competence.

However, it is also our conviction that the intercultural preparation of participants should be assessed further once abroad. For this reason, we have proposed a continuation of our research, including an additional assessment for ICC to be administered during SA. Moreover, we have also argued for the need to extend the project, in terms of scope, time and resources. We believe that further research can indeed shed more light on the effects of intercultural training on students' preparation and success in their experiences abroad.

Nevertheless, the implications seem clear: increased support should be given to outgoing students and intercultural preparation for study abroad should become common practice among academic institutions. As a matter of fact, if we consider interculturality as one the main aims of mobility and we acknowledge that competence is not a direct and natural consequence of the experience abroad, then we must conceive intercultural training as a fundamental part of all mobile programs.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire

Course evaluation

This questionnaire is intended to evaluate the effectiveness of the "*Destinazione Venezia*" preparatory course

1. The course helped me further develop my ability to communicate with people from other cultures.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

2. The course encouraged me to interact with people from other cultures.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

3. The course helped me make progress in my acquisition of Italian language.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

4. The course allowed me to gain knowledge of Italian culture.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

5. The course challenged my stereotypes about Italian culture.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

6. The course developed my ability to think critically about my own culture.

Strongly Agree

Agree

- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

7. Thanks to the course I feel more confident to start my experience in Venice.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

8. I believe that what I am being asked to learn in this course will be important for my everyday life in Venice.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

9. How useful were the activities to prepare you for your study abroad experience?

1 2 3 4 5

not useful at all

very useful

10. How engaging were the activities proposed?

1 2 3 4 5

not engaging at all

very engaging

11. Would you recommend this course to other students going abroad?

Yes

No

Maybe

12. Please identify what you consider to be the strengths of the course.

13. Please identify what you consider to be the weaknesses of the course.

14. Did the course inspire you to do something in Venice you had not thought about doing?

15. Do you have any other comments?

APPENDIX B

Table with questionnaire answers

1. The course helped me further develop my ability to communicate with people from other cultures.	2. The course encouraged me to interact with people from other cultures.
Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree
Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree
Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree
Agree	Strongly Agree
Strongly Agree	Agree
Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree
Agree	Strongly Agree
3. The course helped me make progress in my acquisition of Italian language.	4. The course allowed me to gain knowledge of Italian culture.
Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree
Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree
Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree
Agree	Strongly Agree
Agree	Strongly Agree
Strongly Agree	Agree
Neutral	Strongly Agree

5. The course challenged my stereotypes about Italian culture.		6. The course developed my ability to think critically about my own culture.	
Strongly Agree		Agree	
Agree		Strongly Agree	
Strongly Agree		Strongly Agree	
Agree		Agree	
Strongly Agree		Neutral	
Agree		Neutral	
Strongly Agree		Neutral	
7. Thanks to the course I feel more confident to start my experience in Venice.		8. I believe that what I am being asked to learn in this course will be important for my everyday life in Venice.	
Strongly Agree		Strongly Agree	
Strongly Agree		Strongly Agree	
Agree		Strongly Agree	
Strongly Agree		Strongly Agree	
Strongly Agree		Strongly Agree	
Strongly Agree		Strongly Agree	
Agree		Strongly Agree	
9. How useful were the activities to prepare you for your study abroad experience?	10. How engaging were the activities proposed?	11. Would you recommend this course to other students going abroad?	
5	4	Yes	
5	5	Yes	

4	4	Yes
4	4	Yes
5	4	Yes
4	5	Yes
4	3	Yes

12. Please identify what you consider to be the strengths of the course.

We get to do activities that are outside of textbook exercises and engage in daily life in Venice

The lessons were very engaging, creative, and hands-on which I enjoyed. Also, they were very relevant and taught practical things that I would use in Venice.

I found the navigation activity very helpful, as well as challenging, as it forced us to give directions to each other in Italian without knowing where the other individual was exactly. I also thought it was very helpful going over each of our questions and worries regarding the trip because Beatrice addressed these with both her own experience and by relating it to our own cultures and experiences.

The course made me think of some important aspects to consider when I speak with people from a different culture

The activities were practical and fun. The course helped me reflect on cultures and how to approach them, I can look at things from a different perspective

We learnt things about Venice and Italian culture that are not normally addressed by other courses. It gave me a different insight into culture and the aspects influenced by it.

The way this course approaches culture and study abroad is very unconventional

13. Please identify what you consider to be the weaknesses of the course.

Sometimes we would get off topic and one activity might take longer than we anticipated

I think the only weakness was that everyone was generally at a different level of understanding with the Italian language, which made some activities difficult, but I think Beatrice navigated it very well by speaking in Italian the vast majority of the time, and stopping to answer questions and help us when needed.

There was not enough time to discuss in depth the activities and what we did

It was sometimes difficult to engage in discussions and activities when they were in Italian, the problem was that we all had a very different level of proficiency

The only weakness was that we had not enough time to finish the activities, sometimes we would get off topic and discuss about other things

14. Did the course inspire you to do something in Venice you had not thought about doing?

It shows me the venice geography and cultures

The course taught me about several places that I had not known about that would be great to visit. Also, the course taught me to not be shy when interacting with locals, and to engage with them as much as I can in Italian.

Yes, I learned about a lot of places to visit that I had not considered before and was more excited about engaging in conversation with other people when I arrived in Venice.

Yes, I want to engage more with locals and learn about their culture

I would like to understand why some stereotypes exist about Italian culture and change my mind about my preconceived ideas

I want to meet many people in Venice and understand different ways of seeing things

I think I will try to look more closely at some aspects of Italian culture

15. Do you have any other comments?

I thoroughly enjoyed the weeks in which we had this course. It was truly a shame that we could not continue it due to COVID-19. I am excited to apply the knowledge acquired from this course and use it when I am able to go to Venice.

I hope I will be able to apply what I learnt and make the most of my study abroad.

I'm glad I got to attend this course before leaving

After this course I am even more enthusiastic about my experience!

APPENDIX C

OBSERVATION SCHEME used for intercultural communicative competence assessment during the international event

ATTITUDES	Situations	Observation examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> valuing cultural diversity 	Appreciates food from other cultures	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> being open to, curious about and willing to learn from and about people who have different cultural orientations and perspectives from one's own; 	Is curious about traditions from other cultures, asks questions to other participants and listens actively	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> being willing to question what is usually taken for granted as 'normal' according to one's previously acquired knowledge and experience; 	Understands what they consider typical ingredients are not popular or accepted everywhere and by everyone	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> being willing to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty 	Does not judge negatively a situation that is uncertain or ambiguous (i.e. a different cultural practice while eating, a behavior by a participant...)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> being willing to seek out opportunities to engage and co-operate with individuals who have different cultural orientations and perspectives from one's own. 	Seeks other participants, talks to them, asks questions, helps them out	
KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> awareness and understanding of one's own and other people's assumptions, preconceptions, stereotypes, prejudices, and overt and covert discrimination 	Explains the stereotypes linked to their (food) culture, tries to overcome stereotypes about other cultural (food) habits, shows sympathy rather than discrimination towards different practices, values (about food)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> knowledge of the beliefs, values, practices, discourses and products that may be used by people who have particular cultural orientations 	Knows basic practices, values and beliefs linked to other food cultures (what to eat, when to eat, how to eat)	

SKILLS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> skills in interpreting other cultural practices, beliefs and values and relating them to one's own; 	Understands cultural practices related to food, specific values and meanings associated with it	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> skills in critically evaluating and making judgments about cultural beliefs, values, practices, discourses and products, including those associated with one's own cultural affiliations, and being able to explain one's views; 	Shows awareness and critical thinking towards others' and their own cultural practices... and explains them	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> skills in adapting one's behaviour to new cultural environments – for example, avoiding verbal and non-verbal behaviours which may be viewed as impolite by people who have different cultural affiliations from one's own; 	Knows how to adapt verbal/non-verbal behaviors	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> plurilingual skills to meet the communicative demands of an intercultural encounter, such as the use of more than one language or language variety, or drawing on a known language to understand another (intercomprehension); 	Uses languages effectively, adapts language to interlocutor's needs, does not impose English	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the ability to act as a mediator in intercultural exchanges, including skills in translating, interpreting and explaining. 	Mediates in difficult situations, helps with English	

APPENDIX D

SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE following the international dinner party

1. I tried a lot of food from other cultures.
Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree
2. I asked people about their traditions.
Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree
3. I thought my food was the only normal one.
Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree
4. I thought other people's behaviors were weird and they really upset me.
Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree
5. I talked to at least four people who were not in my group.
Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree
6. I thought many dishes were disgusting and I don't understand why they were considered good by those who prepared them.
Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree
7. I did not understand why some people did not want to try specific types of meat.
Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree
8. I did not understand why some people did not try my food, it's the best!
Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree
9. I learnt at least one important value linked to food for another culture.
Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree
10. I understood that some people assign more/less importance to some meals.
Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree
11. I spoke other languages than English.
Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree
12. I spoke English with those who spoke English to me.
Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree
13. I tried to speak slower and avoid misunderstanding.
Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree
14. I noticed some differences in other people's non-verbal language.

Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree

15. I helped someone who struggled to communicate in English (or other language). Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree

16. About other people's food, I discovered that _____

17. About other people's practices linked to food, I discovered that _____

18. About a particular ingredient (_____), I discovered that some people _____

19. Something that really shocked me about other people's traditions is _____

20. Something I found really interesting is _____

21. About my own food, I discovered that _____

22. About my own values linked to food, I discovered that _____

23. I found it very difficult to _____

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Vorrei innanzitutto ringraziare il professor Serragiotto e il professor Maugeri che hanno saputo guidarmi nella realizzazione di questo progetto, anche a distanza e in un momento piuttosto critico.

Vorrei poi ringraziare Franziska per essere stata la guida perfetta in questo anno di tirocinio e una grande sostenitrice del mio lavoro, da cui imparare non solo un mestiere ma soprattutto umanità e amore.

Un ringraziamento speciale anche ai “Veneziani”, gli studenti con cui ho condiviso questo percorso di preparazione e momenti di divertimento.

To my Colgate friends and colleagues, thank you for having put up with my thesis craziness and having supported me throughout.

Grazie di cuore a chi mi ha sopportato in questi ultimi mesi di follia, a chi si è sorbita spiegazioni, capitoli, paranoie e tutto il resto.

Il vero ringraziamento va poi ai miei compagni di viaggi, a tutte le persone che ho incontrato lungo il cammino e a chi mi ha permesso di intraprendere le bellissime esperienze svolte fino ad ora.

Senza di voi non ci sarebbe questa tesi e questa laurea.

Senza tutti i momenti insieme, le chiacchierate, gli scambi di idee, il divertimento, il sostegno e la condivisione sarei povera.