

# U.S. College Students' Development of Intercultural Competence During Short-Term Study Abroad

Peter Ecke

Department of German Studies, Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Program in Second Language Acquisition & Teaching,  
Center for Educational Resources in Language, Culture, & Literacy, University of Arizona

## Abstract

This study compares U.S. students' attitudes and assumptions about their own culture and the foreign culture, as well as their predisposition to develop intercultural competence before a study abroad program in Germany with corresponding measures at the end of the program.

Findings suggest that the attitudes and assumptions about members of the target culture remained stable during study abroad whereas the attitudes and assumptions about members of participants' own culture changed significantly from pre-program to post-program survey: Participants revalued and appreciated certain attributes of their own culture more at the end of the program. Personality traits, suggested to facilitate intercultural competence development, showed almost no change during the short-term stay abroad.

## Introduction

### The Issue

Study abroad does not automatically lead to gains in language proficiency and intercultural competence (e.g. Badstübner & Ecke, 2009). Lack of language proficiency and contact can lead to **cultural misunderstandings, disappointment or frustration, negative attitudes** towards the members of the other culture, and a **decrease in motivation** (Coleman, 1998; Canacher, 2008; Wilkinson, 2000).

### The Arizona Summer-Study-in-Leipzig-Germany Program

The program is a **one-month** summer study program in Germany. Eligible are students with 2 semesters of college German. There are 2 courses: GER 211 (2<sup>nd</sup> year German) and GER 392 (3<sup>rd</sup> year German). Students have **4 hours of language instruction**, 5 days a week, and some **excursions**. They live in **student dorms** and are assigned a **tandem partner** from Leipzig University.

### Research Questions

1. How do participants **perceive and rate members of their own culture and members of the other culture** before the beginning of the program compared to the end of the program?
2. How do they **rate themselves regarding personality traits that have been suggested to foster intercultural competence** development before the beginning of the program compared to the end of the program?

## Methods and Materials

### Participants

59 undergraduate students (with different majors and minors) participated in the 2010 and 2011 summer study programs.  
30 students were in 2<sup>nd</sup> year German, and 29 in 3<sup>rd</sup> year + German.  
42 were female and 17 were male.

### Instruments (used in pre-program and post-program survey)

1. Questionnaire **"My own and the other culture"** (semantic differential technique), 22 adjectives, and a rating scale from 1 to 4, adapted from Pickett (1993).
2. Self-rating of 22 **personality traits potentially relevant to intercultural competence** or "Cultural Intelligence" on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 6 (very much), based on Peterson (2004).

## Results

Table 1 illustrates the attributes that participants preferably assigned to members of their **own culture**, to members of **the target culture**, and to **both** in the pre-program survey. These Mean scores were later compared with the scores obtained from the post-program survey through paired t-tests.

### Confirmation of pre-program perceptions of Germans

The perceptions of Germans were confirmed and substantiated in the post-program survey. Germans were rated even more often *calm* ( $p = 0.000$ ) and *shy* ( $p = 0.017$ ), and less often *loud* ( $p = 0.000$ ). They were rated more frequently *lazy* ( $p = 0.002$ ) than before (but still much less often than U.S. Americans).

**Table 1.** Mean scores of adjectives that best describe members of own, other, and both cultures (from 1 = not at all to 4 = frequently) in the pre-program survey.

US Americans > Germans	Germans > US Americans	Both (US & Germans)
emotional (3.3 > 2.5)	logical (3.5 > 2.5)	friendly (3.0 & 3.3)
lazy (3.3 > 1.8)	hard-working (3.6 > 3.0)	confident (3.6 & 3.4)
impatient (3.4 > 2.8)	patient (2.9 > 2.4)	generous (2.6 & 3.0)
loud (3.6 > 2.8)	honorable (3.4 > 2.8)	helpful (2.8 & 3.2)
arrogant (3.3 > 2.5)	serious (3.5 > 2.7)	stubborn (3.3 & 3.0)
	competent (3.5 > 2.8)	calm (2.5 & 2.9)
	efficient (3.7 > 2.6)	good-humored (3.2 & 3.1)
	generous (3 > 2.5)	shy (2.3 & 2.4)
	honest (3.4 > 2.7)	thrifty (2.7 & 3.0)

### Changes in the perception of U.S. Americans

There were significant increases of already high ratings of Americans for the attributes *loud* ( $p = 0.002$ ), *emotional* ( $p = 0.002$ ), and a significant decrease for *calm* ( $p = 0.000$ ) which **substantiated pre-program perceptions and preconceptions**. There were significant increases of other ratings for the attributes *generous* ( $p = 0.000$ ), *friendly* ( $p = 0.01$ ), *good humored* ( $p = 0.01$ ), *logical* ( $p = 0.01$ ), *patient* ( $p = 0.014$ ), and *helpful* ( $p = 0.029$ ), all positively weighted adjectives which suggest that **participants valorized/appreciated aspects of their own culture more in the post-program survey**.

### Self-assessment of personality traits related to intercultural competence

There was only one significant increase: Participants rated themselves to be more **"comfortable with uncertainty"** at the end of the study abroad program.

Self-ratings of the following attributes did not change significantly: *respect for others, willingness to change, empathy, flexibility with attitudes/behavior, ability to adapt, tactfulness, sense of humor, open-mindedness, appreciation of differences, patience when you are not in control, see the familiar from unfamiliar vantage points, willingness to have own views challenged, being invigorated by differences, ability to deal with stress of new situations, creativity, win-win attitude, humility, ability to make independent decisions far from home, sensitivity to nuances of differences, extroversion, ability to trust when dealing with the unfamiliar*.



Leipzig, Germany. The site of the study abroad program

## Discussion

### Perception of Germans (members of the other culture)

Pre-program and post-program ratings are very similar for the Germans. **Preconceptions are frequently reinforced/substantiated**. They mostly reflect **positive views** of the target culture (perhaps even an idealization). There is no indication for less positive attitudes towards the target culture, a decrease in integrative orientation, or higher levels of anxiety at the end of the program (as e.g. in Conacher, 2008; Coleman, 1998; Masgoret et al., 2000; Wilkinson, 2000).

### Perception of U.S. Americans (members of own culture)

Significant differences between scores from pre-program survey and post-program survey for members of the U.S. culture suggest an increased awareness with respect to participants' own culture. "Learning about oneself" and one's own culture was an important learning outcome, rated 5 by participants on a scale of 1 (nothing) to 6 (very much) in another survey. On the one hand, this learning includes the **reinforcement/substantiation of perceived preconceptions**. (*Americans are often loud and emotional*.) On the other hand, it reflects an **increased awareness, acceptance and appreciation of aspects of participants' own culture** (*Americans are generous, friendly, and good humored*) without the depreciation of the other culture. Both imply the development of intercultural competence/cultural intelligence.

## Conclusions

Personality traits that have been assumed to facilitate the development of intercultural competence appear to be very stable. The relevance of some of the traits for ICC development (e.g. extroversion) may be questionable.

Short-term study abroad does not necessarily change participants' perceptions and attitudes towards the other culture. Stability of overall positive attitudes and preconceptions about the target culture may be a good thing.

Learning about oneself, accepting, and appreciating traits of one's own culture (without depreciating the other) can and should be an important learning outcome of study abroad.

## Contact

Peter Ecke  
eckep@email.arizona.edu  
<http://www.u.arizona.edu/~eckep/>  
<http://www.cercl.arizona.edu/projects/studyabroad>  
Phone: (520) 621-3202



## References

1. Badstübner, T., & Ecke, P. (2009). Students' expectations, target language use, and perceived learning progress in a summer study abroad program in Germany. *Die Unterrichtspraxis: Teaching German*, 42(1), 41-49.
2. Coleman, J. A. (1998). Evolving intercultural perceptions among university language learners in Europe. In M. Byram, M. Fleming (Eds.), *Language learning in intercultural perspective: Approaches through drama and ethnography* (pp. 45-75). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Conacher, J. E. (2008). Home Thoughts on Abroad: Zur Identität und Integration in der ERASMUS-Studienreise in Deutschland. *German as a Foreign Language*, 2, 1-20.
4. Gardner, R. C., Kirby, D. M., Gossop, F. H., & Williams, A. C. (1972). Ethnic stereotypes: An alternative assessment technique, the stereotype differential. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 87, 259-267.
5. Masgoret, A.-M., Berman, M., & Gardner, R. C. (2000). A study of cross-cultural adaptation by English-speaking sojourners in Spain. *Foreign Language Annals*, 33, 548-555.
6. Osgood, C., Suci, G., & Tannenbaum, P. H. (1957). *The measurement of meaning*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
7. Peterson, B. (2004). *Cultural intelligence: A guide to working with people from other cultures*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press.
8. Pickett, L. (1993). *The effect of cultural distancing on attitudes and motivation in foreign language learning*. MA thesis, University of Portsmouth.
9. Wilkinson, S. (2000). Emerging questions about study abroad. *ADFL Bulletin*, 32, 36-41.