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Engagement across the Cultural Divide: Accommodative Communication in the Study Abroad Context



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Abstract

Study abroad contexts can generate apprehension and reluctance to communicate across cultural difference, constraining opportunities for meaningful intercultural engagement. This qualitative study examines how students described intercultural willingness to communicate and intercultural competence during study abroad. Using Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as an interpretive framework, semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically, yielding four interrelated themes: intercultural apprehension as it relates to a willingness to communicate, intergroup dynamics, accommodation, and intercultural communication competence. Participants described how apprehension and perceived group boundaries shaped whether interaction felt possible or worthwhile, while accommodation (both behavioral and psychological) helped them remain engaged, manage perceived distance, and navigate uncertainty. They also described intercultural communication competence less as an automatic outcome of exposure and more as something experienced in practice through repeated interaction, reflection, and reciprocal adjustment. This study contributes to intercultural communication and study abroad research by showing how willingness to communicate and participants' perceived changes in competence are linked to interactional conditions, intergroup interpretations, and accommodative effort, shifting attention from exposure to the communicative processes that make intercultural engagement possible, sustained, and meaningful over time.

Keywords: Apprehension, willingness to communicate, intergroup, accommodation, intercultural communication competence, study abroad

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Introduction

Increased international mobility and contact between cultural groups have heightened the urgency of preparing individuals to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries (Sarwari, 2024). As societies become more interconnected, intercultural communication education has become an important means of fostering the capacities needed to engage across differing beliefs, values, and traditions. Beyond exposure to cultural diversity, effective participation in intercultural encounters requires an understanding of the communicative processes that shape these interactions (Hoffman & Zhang, 2022). Study abroad programs play a distinctive role by providing sustained opportunities for students to encounter alternative cultural frameworks, and function as educational settings in which students actively negotiate cultural identities, adjust communicative practices, and cultivate intercultural competence (Gibson et al., 2022).

Research shows that students who participate in study abroad programs often report stronger intercultural adaptability than those who do not (Williams, 2005). Such experiences can foster a deeper appreciation for diversity as well as greater personal resilience. However, simply participating in a study abroad program does not necessarily lead to improved intercultural understanding (Schartner, 2015). Prior studies indicate that only certain conditions and experiences support this development (Shuang, 2014), and outcomes vary widely across participants. These patterns suggest that the educational value of study abroad depends significantly on how students engage communicatively within the intercultural context (Pastena, 2025).

This study examines how students make sense of their intercultural interactions during study abroad and how their efforts to adapt their communication during these encounters relate to perceived changes in intercultural competence. Sustained intercultural interaction often depends on students' willingness to adjust to cultural difference (Hammer, 2012). In practice, however, many students gravitate toward co-nationals because shared values and communicative norms feel more familiar (Beech, 2018). This tendency can limit opportunities for meaningful connection and growth and reduce the kinds of exchanges that support intercultural development. As a result, more research is needed to examine the conditions that shape students' willingness to communicate across cultures and the communicative processes that support or constrain participation in intercultural exchanges.

To address this gap, the present study employs Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as an analytical framework for examining how students manage similarity and difference in intercultural encounters. CAT provides a useful lens to understanding how communicative behaviors are shaped by context and adjusted in interaction. By highlighting the accommodative processes and the intergroup dynamics that shape them, this study explores how students' communicative choices relate to intercultural willingness to communicate and how intercultural competence is enacted. This contributes to study abroad and intercultural communication research by shifting attention from competence as a presumed outcome of exposure to the interactional processes through which students sustain engagement across cultural difference.

Literature Review

Communication Accommodation Theory

Maximizing the opportunities presented while studying abroad necessitates adaptation and a willingness to engage in effective communication (Toma, 2014). CAT describes the process where interactants regulate their communication styles to appear more like the individual and/or the group with whom they are interacting (Dragojevic et al., 2016; Giles et al., 1991). A key outcome of intercultural accommodation

is that the stranger becomes more similar to the members of the host culture by adopting the norms and values of the given context (Hsu, 2010). Accommodative communication may be evaluated positively when interactants perceive it as responsive to relational and contextual expectations, including efforts to reduce social distance or improve mutual understanding (Gasiorek et al., 2015).

CAT also explains why people adjust their communication behaviors during social interactions. The theory proposes that an intergroup dynamic exists within intercultural encounters, and that success depends in part on how individuals navigate the boundaries of the social structure in which the interaction occurs. The theory is built on the premise that people categorize the social world through an “us versus them” lens (i.e., intergroup). Individuals belonging to the “us” category are perceived as ingroup members while those belonging to the “them” category are perceived as outgroup members (Stets & Burke, 2000). People feel emotionally close to ingroup members and the identity security it provides, while feeling distant and distrusting towards outgroup members (Hogg, 2006).

These intergroup encounters spur a person to be more favorable toward those who are similar over those that are dissimilar. Relatedly, there is a tendency to prioritize the cultural values and behaviors of those in the ingroup, and to separate oneself from affiliation and contact with the outgroup. The theory describes a range of upward through downward movements in communication, as it pertains to valence (Sachdev et al., 2012), and these include both behavioral and psychological adjustments.

Convergence, divergence, and maintenance represent core accommodation strategies in CAT that serve different interactional goals. Convergence involves adjusting one’s communicative behavior to reduce perceived difference, often to gain approval, build rapport, or coordinate more smoothly with a partner (Toma, 2014). When these adjustments include both verbal and nonverbal alignment, convergence can reduce social distance and is often perceived positively through increased similarity and relational appeal (Dragojevic et al., 2016). In some contexts, convergence also takes the form of code switching or related adjustments, particularly when marginalized speakers navigate dominant communicative norms (Gasiorek, et al., 2015).

Divergence or strategic maintenance, by contrast, refers to emphasizing communicative differences to maintain distinctiveness, mark boundaries, or signal distance (Giles et al., 2023). Divergence can also serve an important function, especially when individuals seek to preserve identity, resist pressure to assimilate, or communicate interpersonal or intergroup boundaries in intercultural encounters (Gasiorek, 2016).

From a CAT perspective, these are not simply “good” or “bad” behaviors. Rather, they are context-shaped strategies through which speakers manage identity, relationships, and social meaning in interaction. In intercultural encounters, communicative flexibility may support engagement, but CAT suggests that accommodation is not only about becoming more similar to others. Rather, accommodation involves managing similarity and difference in response to context, identity concerns, and relational goals. From this perspective, convergence, divergence, and strategic maintenance help explain how intercultural communication is negotiated in practice (Hsu, 2010).

Beyond these observable communication strategies, CAT also helps explain how non-linguistic or psychological accommodation plays a critical role in intercultural encounters. Accommodation can involve shifts in motivation and intention as speakers orient themselves to the interaction and seek better alignment with the social context (Dragojevic et al., 2015). This may include perspective taking that supports smoother communication and greater mutual understanding between interlocutors. In this sense, flexibility and adaptability can strengthen a person’s ability to adjust and remain engaged across difference. For example, Pitts (2009) illustrates how students studying abroad modified their

expectations, resulting in heightened functional fitness, psychological well-being, and the cultivation of an intercultural identity.

Taken together, CAT research provides a strong foundation for understanding intercultural communication as an interactional process shaped by context and identity (Fowler et al., 2025). The attention given to the intergroup nature of communication is especially important for understanding how intercultural encounters unfold (Gallois et al., 2018). Viewed this way, accommodation helps explain why students may differ in their readiness to engage across cultural difference and provides a useful lens to research on intercultural willingness to communicate.

Intercultural Willingness to Communicate

At the center of any interaction, the interlocutors must possess a willingness to communicate (WTC), and the contextual variables play a prominent role for the prevalence of communication behavior (Neulip, 2012). Willingness to communicate is not a fixed trait but varies across situations and relational contexts. In general, individuals tend to report greater willingness to communicate with familiar others, particularly when prior interactions have fostered connection through shared experiences and verbal exchange (McCroskey, 1992). In contrast, interactions with unfamiliar others are often accompanied by heightened uncertainty, which may be experienced as increased apprehension.

Intercultural willingness to communicate (IWTC) extends this concept to cross-cultural contexts (Kassing, 1997). It refers to the likelihood of initiating intercultural communication in situations where an individual perceives cultural or linguistic differences (MacIntyre et al., 2003). The research on this concept highlights a range of personal orientations that may influence intercultural engagement, including social anxiety, confidence, comfort with uncertainty, and prior intercultural contact. For example, individuals with higher social anxiety or a more reserved interpersonal style may experience intercultural interactions as more effortful (Lu & Hsu, 2008; Wilson et al., 2019).

Prior work also suggests that ethnocentrism and openness can influence intercultural engagement (Neulip, 2012). Students who report higher ethnocentrism show less willingness in contexts they perceive as unnecessary or threatening, while students who express curiosity about other cultures and international engagement may demonstrate greater readiness to initiate intercultural contact (Yashima et al., 2004). Over time, repeated exposure to intercultural interaction, including study abroad experiences, may coincide with increased openness, particularly when programs provide sustained opportunities for meaningful contact (Tarchi & Surian, 2021).

However, the present study approaches IWTC somewhat differently by treating cultural difference as dynamic rather than as a fixed background condition. Much IWTC research treats culture as a stable background characteristic (Croucher, 2013), where intercultural difference is assumed to exist prior to interaction. In contrast, cultural difference is treated here as interactional, meaning perceived difference reflects how participants interpret what is happening with a particular person in a particular setting. This shift also reframes uncertainty. Rather than viewing uncertainty primarily as risk or potential failure, it can be seen as a normal feature of intercultural encounters that creates opportunities for learning, relationship building, and mutual adaptation (Nolan & Hickman, 2024).

An interpretive and interactional approach helps clarify how students manage intercultural encounters in relation to contextual conditions such as perceived receptivity of interaction partners and group composition. Because cultural difference is understood as emerging through participants' interpretations, these conditions can influence whether engagement feels possible or worthwhile in a given moment, particularly in study abroad contexts where contact opportunities may be constrained (Mu et al., 2022).

These contextual conditions may also shape how students make sense of an encounter and how they respond, including converging to reduce distance and facilitate rapport, maintaining preferred communicative styles to preserve identity or manage strain, or diverging when they perceive pressure, exclusion, or misunderstanding (Hoffman & Zhang, 2022).

Taken together, this approach shifts IWTC from a primarily individual predisposition to a more interactional process shaped by context and interpretation. Rather than treating willingness as a stable personal trait that individuals bring into an encounter, this perspective considers how students' willingness emerges through interaction itself. In this framing, willingness can expand or remain limited depending on how students interpret the encounter and the responses they receive from others within a given setting. In this way, willingness becomes contingent on how the interaction unfolds rather than something determined before it begins.

This interactional perspective also provides a stronger bridge to intercultural competence. If willingness is shaped through interaction rather than fixed beforehand, then repeated encounters become an important site of development. Across intercultural interactions, individuals interpret unfamiliar cues, make small communicative adjustments, and evaluate the responses they receive from others. These choices accumulate over time and influence how individuals approach subsequent encounters. In this sense, willingness is not simply a prerequisite for intercultural communication but part of the process through which competence develops. When willingness is shaped through the interpretations of interactional experiences, ongoing engagement becomes one of the ways intercultural competence develops over time.

Intercultural Communication Competence

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is commonly defined as the ability to interact across cultural difference in ways that are both effective and appropriate. Barker (2016) describes effectiveness as accomplishing interaction goals, and appropriateness as meeting relevant norms and expectations. In this study, competence is treated less as an outcome that appears after time abroad and more as an interactional practice that becomes visible as communicators interpret one another and adjust their behavior in context (Mayer et al., 2024). From this perspective, intercultural competence fosters more relational perspectives and greater openness toward others, including new insight into one's own assumptions and more positive orientations toward interaction partners.

Much of the ICC literature organizes competence into three interrelated components: knowledge, motivation, and skill (Dai & Chen, 2014). These components provide a useful language for describing what communicators draw upon in intercultural situations, but they also point toward an important limitation in the research base. Specifically, a lack of empirical support for the process of intercultural growth (Pitts, 2009). While existing scholarship offers considerable insight into intercultural outcomes, it often provides less clarity regarding the social psychological features and interactional dynamics that drive competence in everyday encounters (D'Orazzi & Marangell, 2025). An interactional focus therefore shifts attention away from competence as a static trait or distant endpoint, and toward competence as something enacted through repeated communicative adjustment.

The knowledge component includes the ability to perceive and interpret verbal and nonverbal messages in ways that fit a given context, drawing on understanding of cultural practices and social interaction norms (Bagwe & Haskollar, 2020; Chen, 2010). Yet this knowledge operates most powerfully in interaction when communicators remain attentive to contextual cues and to the meanings their actions take on for others. In this sense, knowledge supports engagement by helping sojourners interpret difference more accurately and recognize that interactional norms are not universal. These interpretive shifts can

support openness by reducing the tendency to evaluate others primarily through the expectations of one's own group.

Motivation also shapes intercultural engagement because they require sustained willingness to remain engaged when interaction becomes uncertain or demanding. Motivation has been conceptualized as an orientation grounded in respect for human dignity and a desire to understand another's language, customs, and values (Chen & Starosta, 1996, 2000). This open posture reflects a willingness to learn from difference and remain receptive when confronted with unfamiliar perspectives (Zhang & Noels, 2024). Because intercultural differences can become sites of misunderstanding or conflict, open-mindedness can support relationship development by increasing a person's willingness to consider the other person's behaviors, fostering more respectful and constructive interaction (Albrecht et al., 2014). Importantly, this motivation does not operate only within the individual. It becomes enacted through communicative choices that signal respect, reduce distance, and invite reciprocity.

Finally, the skills component of ICC is often described in terms of cognitive flexibility, including awareness of alternatives, willingness to adapt, and self-efficacy (Deardorff, 2009). Cognitively flexible communicators are willing to try new ways of communicating, encounter unfamiliar situations, and adapt their behavior to meet contextual needs (Martin & Anderson, 1998). This flexibility supports intercultural effectiveness by enabling communicators to shift strategies when familiar approaches do not work (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002). Over time, repeated intercultural engagement can expand a person's interactional skills, strengthen relational perspective taking, and encourage communicators to interpret difference as contextual rather than a sign of deficiency.

Taken together, the knowledge, motivation, and skills framework identify core resources associated with ICC, but it does not fully explain how competent practices emerge through intercultural interaction. If willingness and engagement develop through communicative experience, then competence must also be understood in relation to the interactional process. CAT offers a useful lens for examining these processes by focusing on how communicative behaviors is shaped by context and adjusted reciprocally in interaction. In particular, CAT helps clarify how accommodative communication enables interlocutors to negotiate identity and build relational connection through ongoing interaction.

Research Questions

As discussed above, students abroad may experience anxiety or reluctance when encountering cultural difference, and these responses are shaped by ethnocentrism, intergroup perceptions, and the social context of the encounter (Goldstein, 2022). CAT examines these dynamics uniquely because it draws attention to how communication is shaped in interaction, including how people respond to perceived similarity or difference (Choi, 2025). When intercultural communication is treated simply as an interpersonal exchange, the influence of social identities, group boundaries, and relative positioning can be overlooked. In this sense, CAT helps clarify how intergroup sentiments (Gasiorek, 2016), the influence of group-based biases (Hajek & Giles, 2003), and psychological and communicative adjustments (Gasiorek et al., 2015) shape students' readiness to engage across difference. Framing the encounter in this way positions intercultural willingness to communicate as an interactional process shaped by how students interpret the social context, rather than simply by individual disposition or linguistic ability. To examine these interactional characteristics, the following research question was developed:

RQ1: How do students describe the influence of an intergroup social context on their intercultural willingness to communicate?

The study also examines participant reflections on intercultural communication during study abroad to better understand the challenges of engagement and the accommodative behaviors students describe

in these encounters. In this way, accommodative communication is not treated simply as a set of strategies, but as a lens for understanding how students interpret interaction and describe changes in how they engage across difference.

By centering the intergroup dynamics and interactional adjustments that shape these encounters, the study addresses a gap in existing research by focusing less on ICC as a presumed outcome of exposure and more on the communicative processes through which engagement is negotiated and sustained (Pitts & Harwood, 2015). This perspective allows the analysis to examine how students interpret competence through repeated encounters and how accommodative communication relates to their willingness to remain engaged across cultural difference. Accordingly, the following research question was developed:

RQ2: How do students describe the role of accommodative communication in their intercultural engagement and their perceived changes in ICC?

Methods

This study used an interpretive qualitative approach to examine how students understood and described intercultural engagement in a specific study abroad contexts. This approach was appropriate because the study aimed to analyze how participants described communication challenges and facilitators and how they interpreted changes in their engagement over time. The study was informed by a phenomenological orientation in the sense that the analysis prioritized participants lived accounts of interaction as they experienced them. This approach refers to a focus on the meaning and significance participants assigned to their experiences, rather than a strict procedural application (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The analysis also combined inductive and theory informed reasoning (Miles et al., 2020). Inductively, the researcher remained open to patterns and themes that emerged from participants' language across interviews through close reading of the transcripts. At the same time, CAT was used as an analytic lens to guide attention to communicative processes relevant to the research questions, such as convergence, maintenance, and moments of divergence or resistance. In this study, using CAT as a guiding framework helped to examine how participants described communicative adjustments in relation to context and relational goals, while still allowing themes not fully captured by CAT to remain part of the findings. In practice, the analysis followed an abductive approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) by moving back and forth between empirically grounded themes and CAT concepts to clarify how accommodative communication operated in participants' accounts of intercultural engagement.

Participants

A total of 15 undergraduate students participated in this study. All participants were United States citizens enrolled in a study abroad program located in the French-speaking region of Western Switzerland. The host city and surrounding region are characterized by a strong international presence and cultural norms that emphasize tolerance, diversity, and political neutrality (Kieser & Spillmann, 1996). Students reported experiencing cultural and linguistic differences that made intercultural communication feel effortful and, at times, inhibiting.

Participants varied in their prior international experience; several reported previous short-term travel abroad, while none had lived or studied abroad for an extended period. This background information provides important context for interpreting students' intercultural engagement during the program. The students lived and studied together in a residential dormitory for one academic year (approximately eight months). The study abroad program functioned as an international branch campus of a West Coast

university in the United States, with all participants enrolled in shared academic courses and program-sponsored activities.

In addition to coursework, the program offered several structured opportunities for engagement designed to facilitate interaction with the local community. These included formally coordinated intercultural gatherings with other college students, as well as organized travel to neighboring cities where participants learned about regional history, local government structures, and cultural practices. Despite these organized activities, participants reported that intercultural communication most frequently occurred in everyday contexts such as travel, local businesses, and casual social settings within the surrounding area.

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling and received monetary compensation for participating in individual semi-structured interviews. A subset of these participants took part in a focus group and received additional compensation. Individual interviews were conducted within one year following the conclusion of the abroad experience, allowing participants to reflect on their intercultural interactions after extended immersion and reentry.

The full sample consisted of seven male and eight female students, ranging in age from 19 to 25 years ($M = 20.13$). With respect to ethnic and racial identification, two participants identified as Asian American and thirteen students identified as White. Participants reported coming largely from hometowns with limited cultural and ethnic diversity, and many described having minimal prior experience with sustained intercultural communication in their everyday lives. As a result, navigating intercultural interactions during the study abroad experience was novel for most participants and represented a significant shift from their previous social environments. All participant names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews for this study were conducted by a trained confederate using semi-structured protocol. Interviews are a useful methodological tool for gathering specific, descriptive accounts of participants (Robinson, 2023), and these conversations allow participants to discursively construct meaning and understanding. The interview content centered around intercultural communication during the study abroad program as related to their willingness to communicate, their communication choices, and their adjustment over time.

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to collect accounts about the participants' study abroad experience. The interviewer used the interview instrument (Appendix) to organize and guide the interview and asked follow-up questions within and across interviews to clarify details and pursue other lines of inquiry. Participants were encouraged to respond to the interviewer in dynamic conversations that unfolded naturally and extended beyond direct prompts. Each session lasted approximately two hours, and with participant permission, the researcher video-recorded (Zoom) and transcribed all interviews.

The primary researcher conducted a thematic analysis to identify and refine patterns in participants' accounts. Thematic analysis involves identifying and articulating themes that emerge through evolving meanings and lived significance expressed in the text (van Manen, 1997). Upon completing the interviews and the transcription process, each transcript was read in its entirety, and the researcher generated a list of initial themes. Second, the researcher compared codes across interviews, grouped them into preliminary categories, and wrote analytic memos to document emerging interpretations and linkages to the research questions. Third, the researcher returned to the transcripts to refine category

boundaries and to confirm that each theme remained grounded in multiple accounts, noting counter examples when participants experiences did not fit the identified theme.

Analysis yielded four interrelated thematic categories that captured how participants described intercultural engagement over time: intercultural apprehension as it relates to a willingness to communicate, intergroup dynamics, accommodation, and intercultural communication competence. Intercultural apprehension reflected the uncertainty and self-consciousness participants reported when initiating interaction across perceived difference. Intergroup dynamics captured how group boundaries, belonging, and perceived receptivity shaped access to contact and comfort in interaction. Accommodation referred to the adjustments participants described making, including moments of convergence, maintenance, or divergence. Finally, intercultural competence reflected participants accounts of learning and increased effectiveness in navigating intercultural situations through continued engagement and reflection.

Results

Participants described intercultural engagement as shaped by both opportunity and uncertainty. Across accounts, the source and intensity of uncertainty influenced how manageable intercultural interaction felt.

Intercultural Apprehension and Willingness to Communicate

Participants were asked about their experience during their time abroad, and it was both the source and the amount of uncertainty that impacted the overall discomfort in these intercultural encounters. These encounters broadly refer to interactions with host-nation individuals in everyday settings, including conversations with local residents, merchants, and occasional interactions with local students or officials during program activities. Students frequently described their intercultural encounters in ways that reflected communication apprehension, characterizing these interactions as anxiety inducing, effortful, and emotionally taxing. Several participants spoke about feeling nervous or fearful when anticipating or engaging in intercultural communication, particularly in situations involving uncertainty about language use or appropriate behavior.

These feelings were often most pronounced at the beginning of the program, when students were first adjusting to the unfamiliar cultural environment. Early interactions were described as intimidating because students were unsure how to interpret or respond to local norms. At the same time, participants indicated that the apprehension did not fully disappear as the program progressed. Some level of uncertainty remained present across many encounters throughout their time abroad. Jackie (21) described her experience interacting with people in the community, explaining, "It was kind of scary at some points. It was definitely nerve-racking." Across accounts, this apprehension appeared to extend beyond isolated interactions and shaped how students approached many intercultural engagements.

Participants often linked these feelings of apprehension to concerns about competence and perceived effort. Many described heightened awareness of potential mistakes or social missteps, which contributed to hesitation to initiate interaction. Intercultural communication was frequently framed as requiring sustained cognitive and emotional investment, making avoidance of engagement more preferred.

David (20) explained, "I didn't really feel like I had to make a huge effort, and I was really more there for the experience of seeing the world... rather than interacting with them." This perspective suggests that apprehension may have been managed by redefining the purpose of the study abroad experience in ways that reduced the interpersonal risk associated with intercultural interaction. Rather than avoiding

communication outright, interaction itself became less central to the experience. Engagement with local inhabitants was not viewed as necessary to fulfill the broader goals of being abroad, reflecting a lower willingness to initiate intercultural communication. David's comments illustrate how apprehension did not always result in explicit avoidance but instead appeared as a gradual withdrawal from intercultural interaction. Taken together, these accounts suggest that communication apprehension influenced not only individual encounters but also broader judgments about whether intercultural engagement was necessary or worthwhile.

Intergroup Differences and Distinction

Participants consistently described their intercultural encounters as shaped by a strong sense of group difference, often approaching interactions with local members as intergroup rather than interpersonal. These perceptions influenced how students evaluated the risk of engagement. Danny (20) reflected this orientation when he stated, "There is no reason for me to go and approach someone, a stranger, and talk to them. And there's also no reason for them to approach me." His account suggests that intercultural interaction across perceived group boundaries was framed as socially unnecessary, reinforcing distance rather than connection.

Several participants described feeling visibly marked as outsiders within the intercultural context, which appeared to heighten apprehension and discourage communicative risk. These impressions often emerged through cues in everyday interaction, such as differences in language use, accent, or behavior norms. In these moments, students often interpreted the encounter not simply as exchanges between individuals, but as an interaction between socially distinct groups. This sense of being outside the local social environment shaped how students interpreted the interaction and their place in it. Jacob (19) explained, "It just made me feel out of place. I was a little apprehensive. Just because I could tell I didn't fit in... It made me feel very small." From an interpretive standpoint, this sense of diminished belonging suggests that perceived group positioning shaped emotional responses and constrained willingness to engage.

Some participants acknowledged that their initial interpretations of cultural behaviors were filtered through culturally grounded expectations. Carrie (20) reflected, "I think initially I can feel a bit uncomfortable because... I'm almost seeing it from a perspective of, well, where I'm from, people don't say that or people don't do that. So why are they doing that?" Her account suggests that early interactions were evaluated in relation to familiar norms, which may have heightened perceptions of difference and reinforced intergroup distinctions.

At the same time, several participants described shifts in how they understood cultural difference over the course of the program. Nancy (20) reflected on this change, stating, "Before going abroad, it was easy to be blinded by [thinking] that because it's not America their culture is automatically lesser... but studying abroad, it was really eye-opening." This reflection suggests that sustained interaction prompted some participants to reconsider initial assumptions and move toward a more open orientation.

An Accommodation Approach

The students described accommodative communication as an intentional posture toward intercultural interaction, involving both behavioral adjustment and a shift in mindset. Several students emphasized the importance of approaching others with openness and a willingness to see similarity rather than difference. Viewing others as fundamentally relatable appeared to make engagement feel more accessible and less intimidating.

Jackie (21): You realize they're not... really different. They're just from a different place.

And, you know, maybe through the process of living in a different place or being raised in a different place, the societal norms and cultural norms, they might be a little bit different...I think my willingness to engage in those conversations and at least try it out, is something that helps me build those friendships and it's beneficial.

Jackie described how recognizing shared humanity, despite differing social or cultural norms, increased her willingness to engage and helped her form relationships over time.

Participants also framed accommodation as an individual responsibility, emphasizing the role of conscious effort in navigating intercultural encounters. Rather than expecting interactions to unfold naturally, students described actively adjusting how they listened, responded, and positioned themselves in conversation.

Jacob (19): It involves a lot of active listening...a lot of empathy. And not being so quick to speak gives me an opportunity to listen and understand somebody else better; even if I may not be able to fully understand them at that time. And showing empathy addresses the fact that however much I may know or not know about Party X and their culture, I can still appreciate them. I can still value them and value their difference, value their culture.

The account suggests that accommodation involved slowing down interaction and prioritizing understanding, even when full comprehension felt difficult. Valuing difference, rather than minimizing it, appeared central to this approach.

Participants also described making conscious behavioral adjustments as they grew more comfortable within the local culture. These adjustments included demonstrating respect for local norms, being mindful of one's own behavior, and acknowledging difference without disengaging. Students suggested that recognizing cultural differences, rather than ignoring them, helped facilitate smoother interactions. Over time, these practices appeared to increase confidence and willingness to engage across cultural boundaries.

Some participants also noted that accommodative behaviors were reciprocal. Within the intercultural encounters, there were instances when others would adjust their communication or demonstrated openness, and students reported feeling more comfortable and willing to engage. Benjamin (20) described how perceived warmth and mutual interest influenced his participation, stating, "When that welcome is established...I am very comfortable to begin to ask questions." His reflection suggests that the accommodative efforts of others reduced uncertainty and legitimized his role as a learner within the intercultural interaction, making engagement feel safer and more appropriate.

Several students reflected on the role of challenge and discomfort in shaping accommodative behavior. Rather than viewing stress as purely negative, participants described situations in which heightened awareness prompted greater care and attentiveness in communication. Lana (19) reflected on how being placed in unfamiliar situations encouraged openness, stating, "You don't want to be rude; you don't want to be closed-minded... so you force yourself to be very open and receptive." Her account suggests that accommodation sometimes emerged through sustained effort in uncomfortable contexts, leading to increased empathy and shifts in perspective over time.

Perceptions of Intercultural Communication Competence

Participants perceived the growth of ICC as a gradual process shaped by increased familiarity, reflection, and sustained engagement with cultural difference. As students became more exposed to the communicative norms of the local context, they reported feeling more capable of navigating interactions that initially felt uncertain or intimidating. Rather than describing competence as an endpoint, participants framed it as an evolving capacity that emerged through experience and adjustment. Several participants emphasized the importance of slowing down and observing before responding in unfamiliar situations.

Greg (20): [It] requires of me a patience to take time to understand what's happening around me...to challenge my own assumptions about things, which is why I feel patient is a very good word because it means a slower tendency to act or slower tendency to make a decision or assume something in the situations where there is a lot of difference.

Greg's reflection highlights patience as a communicative orientation that involves deliberately slowing one's interpretations of the unfamiliar situation. Rather than responding immediately to difference, he describes the importance of pausing long enough to observe what is happening and to reconsider his assumptions. This reflective pause appeared to reduce uncertainty and support more thoughtful engagement.

Several participants reflected on changes in their motivation and orientation toward intercultural interaction. Sarah (20) described adopting what she characterized as a posture of humility and learning, stating, "Like asking questions; being interested in trying to understand; not coming in with a harsh stance." Her account suggests that competence was associated with curiosity, rather than certainty or mastery. This shift in mindset appeared to support greater sensitivity toward cultural difference.

Other participants described how their experiences abroad changed the way they interpreted unfamiliar communicative situations, particularly after personally navigating language difficulty. Rather than viewing communication barriers only from the position of a fluent speaker, they began to interpret these moments through their own experiences of vulnerability.

Andrea (20): I remember working in food service [at home] and being annoyed if someone was not speaking in good English, but now I like know, because I was that person who couldn't say anything. There's an element of more patience, but also knowing that it's not as scary as I think it is.

Andrea's account indicates that experiencing communicative vulnerability firsthand contributed to a more empathetic and patient orientation toward others. Her experience abroad appears to have reduced anxiety in future interactions while also supporting a more relational and less judgmental approach to communication across difference.

Importantly, participants emphasized that developing ICC did not require abandoning one's own values or fully assimilating into the local culture. Instead, students described learning how to balance a respect for difference with maintaining personal beliefs. Ellie (20) articulated this tension, noting, "It's like respecting it but not necessarily compromising my own beliefs." This balance appeared central to participants' understanding of competent intercultural engagement.

Several students reflected on how these experiences influenced their broader outlook on relationships and cultural difference. In these accounts, intercultural learning was described as extending beyond communication technique and into a more enduring relational orientation.

Kirk (19): I would say, I learned to be more intentional in relationship with others...I learned to invest and be knowledgeable about human history...and to be considerate of other people's stories or other people's histories...I learned how important it is to continually invest in building bridges between cultures and building bridges between people. I was shown the value of that by being on the receiving end of that; by being someone who people reached out to.

Kirk's account points to a broader form of competence marked by intentionality, attentiveness to others' stories, and a commitment to building connection. He also ties this shift to reciprocity, noting that being on the receiving end of others' outreach helped him recognize the value of that kind of engagement.

Finally, participants described ICC as a gradual and uneven process that emerged through repeated encounters with unfamiliar practices and perspectives. These moments were sometimes experienced as uncomfortable, but participants often framed that discomfort as part of learning how to stay engaged without rushing to judgment or withdrawing from interaction.

Esther (21): I think just being open on both sides...if both parties are coming into it with an open mindset...and I'm coming from a place where I want to learn about their culture. So, I'm just going to sit back and listen to them talk and not judge; not, you know, give off my own opinion until like I know more on the subject, and it helps when the other person is like that too; like you have to have both people coming from the same place.

Esther's account captures this orientation by linking competence to openness, listening, and restraint in the early stages of intercultural exchange, as well as to the relational conditions that make those efforts sustainable. Her emphasis on "both sides" also suggests that participants did not understand ICC as something achieved through one-sided adjustment alone.

Discussion

This study investigated how students navigate the challenges and opportunities for engagement during study abroad, drawing on CAT as an interpretive framework to understand how communicative adaptation shaped their intercultural experiences.

Intercultural Willingness to Communicate within the Intergroup Context

Across accounts, students did not describe willingness as a stable personal trait. Instead, they described it as something that depended on how they read the encounter: who belonged, what the boundaries were, and whether engagement felt socially workable in the moment.

Intergroup framing shaped whether interaction felt even appropriate. Participants often approached host nationals as members of an outgroup rather than as individuals. Danny's comment that there was "no reason" for either party to initiate conversation captures this understanding. Interaction across group lines felt unnecessary, and in some cases unrealistic. Jacob's description of feeling "very small" and out of place illustrates how perceived belonging and positioning influenced willingness before any conversation began. These accounts align with the importance of social identity and group boundaries in intercultural encounters (Giles, 2016), and with research on ingroup preference and outgroup distance (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Hogg, 2006).

Within this intergroup frame, apprehension became a practical barrier to engagement. Participants described a tendency to seek familiarity and comfort within their own peer group, often prioritizing

interactions with other American students. These choices were frequently framed as practical or natural rather than avoidance-driven. However, reflections suggest that remaining within familiar social circles reduced access to intercultural interaction and reinforced perceived boundaries between groups. Engagement with others was often described as requiring greater effort and carrying higher social risk, particularly when students anticipated misunderstanding or rejection.

Students frequently described nervousness and emotional strain when they anticipated uncertainty about language use or appropriate behavior (Wilson et al., 2019). Jackie's description of these interactions as "scary" and "nerve racking" shows how apprehension extended beyond isolated episodes and shaped her overall orientation toward engagement. Prior work links communication apprehension to reduced willingness to communicate (Neulip, 2012), and stress responses that constrain interaction (Ma & Hample, 2018). The present findings add a clearer interactional layer: participants often located that apprehension in the perceived social distance and evaluative risk of speaking across group boundaries, not only in linguistic difficulty.

Over time, apprehension shaped patterned forms of withdrawal and limited engagement. Esther's observation that intercultural communication can "slip into the background" suggests a gradual reduction in effort rather than deliberate avoidance. This fits prior research connecting apprehension to reduced willingness and avoidance cycles (Lu & Hsu, 2008). David's emphasis on observation rather than interaction similarly suggests a way of managing discomfort by redefining the purpose of the experience. In both cases, students described willingness as shaped by ongoing judgments about effort, risk, and payoff, especially when engagement with co-nationals remained easier and more predictable (Beech, 2018). Taken together, these accounts show that apprehension operated as more than a feeling. It informed communication decisions about how to approach intercultural interaction.

Importantly, participants described moments when willingness increased as their interpretation of difference shifted. Several accounts suggest that boundaries were not fixed. Carrie's reflection on initially judging behavior through her home norms highlights how early encounters could amplify difference. However, Nancy's account of having "eye opening" experiences that forced her to reconsider her cultural assumptions demonstrates this change. These shifts align with scholarship on how engagement and contact can support changes in openness and orientation toward difference (MacIntyre et al., 2011). In this study, willingness increased when students stopped treating difference as a rigid divide and began reading the encounter as more relational and workable.

Unlike previous research that primarily frames anxiety and uncertainty as barriers to willingness (Neulip, 2012; Lu & Hsu, 2008), the findings here suggest that willingness emerged through students' evolving interpretations of the social context. Early encounters were often understood through clear group distinctions, which made communication feel evaluative. As some students began to reinterpret these interactions as more relational exchanges rather than between fixed groups, engagement began to feel more manageable. From a practical standpoint, this suggests that study abroad programs may need to address how students interpret social boundaries and perceived receptivity, rather than simply increasing opportunities for contact. Early contextual preparation, combined with repeated and low-pressure interaction formats, may make engagement feel socially permissible and less risky.

Accommodative Communication and the Practice of Intercultural Communication Competence

Across participants' accounts, accommodation emerged as a central communicative process through which engagement was sustained, even when students experienced apprehension and perceived inter-group distance. Rather than treating ICC as something that simply appeared because of time abroad, the findings suggest that accommodation provided the means by which students managed anxiety and

negotiated social boundaries. More specifically, participants described both behavioral and psychological accommodation as important to how they stayed engaged across difference and how they came to understand themselves as communicating more competently in intercultural encounters. Although ICC is often described through the interrelated characteristics of knowledge, motivation, and skill, participants' accounts suggest that these characteristics were not experienced as fixed traits or separate capacities. Instead, they became visible in interaction as students interpreted contexts and adjusted their communication in response to others. In this sense, the findings do not reject the knowledge, motivation, and skills framework, but they suggest a more interactional account of how those characteristics are enacted.

Participants first described accommodation as an intentional orientation toward engagement that involved adjusting both mindset and behavior in response to intercultural difference. These adjustments were often described in terms of approaching interaction with less defensiveness. Jackie's realization that others in the encounter were "not really different" reflects a psychological shift that reduced the perceived distance and made intercultural interaction feel less threatening. From a CAT perspective, this kind of psychological accommodation may reduce identity threat and make behavioral adjustment, including convergence, more feasible in the moment (Dragojevic et al., 2016). In this way, accommodation functioned as a way of remaining present in interaction rather than withdrawing when communication felt uncertain.

Beyond reducing initial apprehension, participants also described accommodation as a practice that promoted sustained engagement over time. Sarah's emphasis on approaching interaction with "humility and learning," and Andrea's reflection on becoming more patient after experiencing what it felt like to "be that person who couldn't say anything," suggest that accommodation supported perspective taking and greater understanding of how intercultural interaction may feel from the other person's position. These accounts align with research showing that study abroad can support communicative sensitivity (Schartner, 2015), while also clarifying that participants experienced this less as passive exposure and more as repeated efforts to remain open and responsive within specific encounters. In relation to the traditional ICC framework, these accounts speak especially to motivation and knowledge, with motivation appearing as a willingness to stay engaged across difference and knowledge appearing as a more situated understanding of how communication is experienced by others.

At the same time, participants did not describe accommodation as requiring complete convergence, or an abandonment of personal values. Ellie's description of finding "a fine balance" between respecting difference and maintaining her own beliefs points to an understanding of competence that includes openness without assimilation. In this sense, accommodation supported a relational posture toward difference while allowing students to preserve a coherent sense of self, reflecting an ethnorelative orientation toward intercultural engagement rather than a conformity-based model of success (Bennett, 1993). This also adds nuance to the skills dimension by suggesting that competence involves not only adapting but making context sensitive judgments about how and when to adapt.

Participants also described accommodation as relational and reciprocal rather than one sided. While students emphasized their own responsibility to adjust, they also noted that engagement was shaped by how others responded. Jacob's focus on "active listening" and empathy highlights accommodation as an individual commitment, while Benjamin's account illustrates the importance of reciprocity. Feeling "welcomed" and sensing "mutual interest" reduced uncertainty and legitimized his participation in the interaction, helping sustain cycles of mutual adaptation (Barker, 2016). In other words, accommodation became meaningful not only in what students attempted to do, but in how those efforts were reciprocated within the interaction. This point is especially important for interpreting competence in this study, because it suggests that what counted as effective engagement was co-constructed in interaction rather than determined by the student alone.

These relational accounts also help clarify how participants themselves described intercultural competence. Students often described competence in terms of learning how to tolerate uncertainty and the interpretation of unfamiliar situations through repeated engagement. Benjamin's statement that "when that mutual interest is established, I am very comfortable to begin to ask questions" illustrates how accommodation created the conditions for learning by helping students remain engaged in interaction long enough for understanding to develop. This pattern aligns with work linking familiarity to reduced uncertainty (Hsu & Chen, 2020), while extending it by showing that familiarity and confidence emerged through ongoing interaction rather than abstract knowledge alone. In this way, participants' accounts suggest that knowledge, motivation, and skill were not separate outcomes, but interrelated resources practiced together through accommodative engagement.

Limitations

The study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the findings are drawn from a small, context-specific sample of U.S. undergraduate students in one study abroad program in Western Switzerland, and most participants identified as White. However, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable to all study abroad contexts, and the study still contributes by allowing closer analysis of how students interpreted intercultural encounters.

Second, the analysis relies on retrospective self-reports from semi-structured interviews conducted after the abroad experience. These accounts reflect participants' remembered and interpreted experiences rather than direct observation of interaction in real time. However, because the study examines how students made sense of intercultural willingness, accommodation, and competence over time, reflecting on this experience after the fact may have allowed participants to articulate deeper insights.

Third, the study did not examine linguistic proficiency or language barriers in depth, even though language likely shaped some encounters. This analytic choice helped keep the focus on the intergroup, relational, and psychological dimensions of engagement, but future research could extend this work by examining how linguistic and nonlinguistic accommodation operate together in shaping intercultural engagement and participants' accounts of competence.

Conclusion

This study examined how students described intercultural willingness to communicate and intercultural competence during study abroad, with particular attention to how these experiences unfolded in interaction. Participants' accounts suggested that engagement often began with apprehension and an awareness of intergroup boundaries, which made contact feel uncertain and effortful. Interpreting these accounts through CAT helps clarify that students' readiness to communicate was shaped by how they understood the situation and assessed identity risks in the moment.

Students described accommodation in both behavioral terms, such as adjusting how they spoke, listened, and coordinated, as well as psychological terms, such as shifts in mindset, reduced defensiveness, and increased perspective taking. These adjustments emerged as a central interactional process that helped students manage perceived distance and navigate group boundaries. In this way, CAT helps illuminate the multiple layers of intercultural communication students were negotiating at the same time, including interpersonal goals and intergroup positioning.

Finally, the study reframes ICC as something participants experienced in practice rather than a fixed outcome they reached. The accounts suggest that competence became visible through repeated interaction, especially when accommodation was reciprocated or supported by the interaction partner.

Students described perceived changes that align with traditional competence characteristics (knowledge, motivation, and skill), but they described these resources as developing and becoming meaningful within specific encounters: knowledge as better interpretation of cues, motivation as sustained willingness to remain engaged, and skill as flexible adjustment under uncertainty. Overall, this study offers an interpretive account of how willingness to communicate and intercultural competence are co-constructed through accommodative effort and interactional conditions.

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Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol:

The following questions were designed to guide an open-ended, semi-structured conversation about participants lived experiences during their study abroad program. The questions were intended to explore how students interpreted intercultural encounters, navigated moments of difference, and reflected on personal growth over time. Follow-up prompts were used as needed to clarify meaning and deepen reflection.

Program Context and Intercultural Experiences

These questions were intended to elicit descriptions of everyday intercultural encounters and how participants made sense of them within the broader program context.

1. What interactions did you have with people from other cultures?
2. How would you describe your experience communicating with fellow students or staff from other cultures?
3. What intercultural experiences, if any, surprised or shocked you?
4. During your year abroad, can you describe moments when you felt out of your comfort zone in cross-cultural situations?

Experiences of Challenge and Engagement

This section sought to explore emotional responses, perceived barriers, and contextual influences shaping willingness to communicate.

5. How do you feel engaging in conversation with people from different cultures?
6. How do you react in situations when you are the minority member?
7. How would you describe your motivation to engage in intercultural interactions while abroad?
8. What factors either helped or hindered your efforts to engage with local residents?

Sensitivity and Awareness

These questions were designed to encourage reflection on perception, empathy, and relational awareness.

9. How do you understand the contextual cues within an intercultural encounter?
10. What, if anything, has happened to your sense of cultural empathy during your time abroad?
11. How would you describe your awareness in social situations?
12. What characteristics of yours do you think influence your ability to form intercultural friendships?

Adaptability and Communication Practices

This section explored how participants understood adaptation, reciprocity, and communicative adjustment in their own words.

13. How do you typically adapt to change and new situations?
14. In your experience, how is intercultural communication about give and take?
15. Can you describe a time when you felt an intercultural interaction did not go as expected? How did you interpret that experience, and what did you take away from it?
16. How would you describe your intercultural communication skills?

Perspective and Growth

These questions invited participants to reflect on shifts in perspective, identity, and worldview over time.

17. In what ways, if any, have your personal values and beliefs regarding other cultures been impacted?
18. How do you currently view your own culture in comparison to others?
19. How has your knowledge of cultures, languages and global issues changed, if at all?
20. What new skills or insights did you develop abroad, and how do you see yourself incorporating them in the future?
21. How has your overall view of the world been influenced by your experience?