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Spring 2022

Interpersonal Communication From Student to Host Family

To enhance the in-home communication between international students
and their host families

Abstract

This research project aims to improve interpersonal communication between international students and their host families. Existing research and data shows that students can have a difficult time adjusting to their life abroad, whether it be within their host home or within the institution they are studying at. This can greatly affect their overall studying abroad experience and can affect the way they communicate with the members of their host family. Factors like the student's academic performance in school and behavior in school may be affected as well. Identifying the issues that contribute to a negative experience in a host family's home will provide study abroad programs, institutions connected with study abroad programs, host families and the international students themselves with the tools they need that are necessary to improve the overall communication within a host family and international student home. I will collect data from students in the California State University system studying abroad in three different locations: Spain, Japan and Costa Rica. I will also present a proposed questionnaire that would need to get approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if I actually went through with this plan, I will include the link to the website to get that done below. My initial research showed that these are the most popular study abroad destinations among college students in California. I will dig in deep to track and identify the positive and negative elements of the study abroad experience that affect the behavior and communication between the international students and their host family. I will look into the students that returned from the program as well. This method will provide a deeper, more personable understanding of what aspects of the program, from the student's perspective, and can be improved to increase the communication between these two parties. This collection of data, with recommendations, will be given to the California State University system, the international programs, and the participating host families in hopes of improving the quality of the travel abroad experience for international CSU students, and more specifically the communication they have with their host family.

<https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/register-irbs-and-obtain-fwais/irb-registration/index.html>

Terms

Sojourner: A person who resides temporarily in a place.

Imagined Community: Imaginary group of individuals to which a language learner aspires when learning a new language.

Organizational Competence: The result of gaining knowledge, applying the knowledge, and excelling with the knowledge of organizational performances aimed to improve a role, function, task or duty.

Pragmatic Competence: The ability to use and comprehend discourse that is appropriate to the surrounding cultural context.

Schema Theory: A branch of cognitive science concerned with the structural knowledge of a brain which eventually aims to organize that knowledge based on experience. It also uses that organization to guide a future understanding or action.

The goal of this hypothetical research project is to figure out how to improve interpersonal communication between international students and their host families. If I achieve this goal then institutions connected with study abroad programs will be able to help create a more welcoming and/or comfortable environment for the traveling students and host families will be able to refer to tested suggestions that may improve their relationship with the international student they're house. I plan to use tools within both the **positivist** and **interpretivist** paradigms as I execute research on the question, how can interpersonal communication between international students and their host families, across several home experiences, be improved? I plan to use a proposed questionnaire that would need the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval if I actually went through with this questionnaire.

The key idea of my hypothetical research is to identify the problems that contribute to negative, or unfavorable, in-home communication experiences between international students and their host families. After creating a problem tree I was able to decipher four main potential affects: a lack of communication consistency, inability of clear communication, conflicting morals, and socioeconomic status. I will focus on American students in the California State University system studying abroad for one school semester in Spain, Japan and Costa Rica.

I plan to use this data that we gather as an outline or list of suggestions for institutions, study abroad programs, and host families to use for an increased quality of interpersonal communication and overall study abroad experience when they welcome sojourner students. Traveling to a foreign place by yourself can be a chilling experience. I thought about the negative experiences study abroad students have had. I came to the conclusion that it is important to acknowledge and potentially improve their study abroad experience, especially with the communication in the home that they reside in during that time away. After reviewing previous research studies on similar subject matters, I found that students have high expectations of their imagined temporary community before they travel and go through the program. These higher expectations are established through provided facts and images by the host institutions and host families. Whether or not these expectations are met can greatly affect the students overall experience in the study abroad program and the relationship with their host family.

The limits I foresee throughout my research would be me not being able to understand the logic of the students and their host families, me not being able to understand where they are coming from because I am not in their shoes. Another limit I might come across is the number of students and host families that may be unwilling to release their information to me for the purpose of this study, the amount of information I will be able to come up with to back up everything I am talking about.

To obtain a better understanding of the international student and host family association, I have reviewed previous studies related to this topic. This review covers a wide range of material related to the experiences and emotions of students studying abroad. The participants involved in these studies are diverse in their age, culture and location (differing study abroad programs).

One of the most important conditions that need to exist for the success of a study abroad experience is a sense of belonging. Finding a feeling of comfort for the students studying abroad can open or maintain a window for better communication with the different groups of people they interact with during their experience. This idea is

explored by Chris R. Glass's "International Students' Sense of Belonging - Locality, Relationships, and Power." What does it mean for international students to belong? The answer to this question is explored in Glass's peer reviewed article as he looks at three elements that foster both positive and negative feelings of belonging in a foreign atmosphere. The first element is locality, having an identity in the location one is staying in can either make a student feel comfortable in their new environment or make them feel isolated which could result in ineffective communication. The second element is relationships, the relationship that the student builds with the community around them can have a great effect on the overall study abroad experience, as well as the quality of communication they have with groups like their host family, community members, and institution program instructors. The third element is power, the differences in culture between the student and their new community can create power structures that may be difficult to navigate appropriately. This can lead to mis-cues of how a student feels they are being treated by their host family, peers and/or instructors.

Miscommunication does not only stem from differences in cultural practices or emotion, but the identified differences can also be as simple as a language proficiency. Nick Shackelford explains this communication hurdle of language proficiency in his study, "Japanese Students In A New Zealand Homestay Programme: Issues Of Linguistic And Intercultural Competence" which explores the homestay experience of Japanese students studying in Australia. One of the methods that students use to prepare themselves before studying abroad is becoming familiar with the language of the country they are studying in. Shackelford defines two different levels of competence that students can experience when learning a new language. The first method is organizational competence, which is essentially "the result of gaining knowledge of grammatical and discourse rules." This results in having a basic understanding of the spoken language, but when it comes to the understanding of context within the language it falls short. Pragmatic competence essentially means having the "ability to use language appropriately according to the context." Experiencing and gaining knowledge from this type of competence level, stemming from the education within the language of the study abroad location, allows the student to navigate their

communication effectively which can lead to a better overall experience and enhance the communication they hold with their host family.

Psychological distress has also shown to have an effect on the ability of students adjusting to their new environment. In Toshiaki Furukawa's article, "Cultural Distance And Its Relationship To Psychological Adjustment Of International Exchange Students," Furukawa discusses a study he did with Japanese high school and college students traveling abroad to countries all over the world. The students were asked to fill out three questionnaires in total that were distributed throughout their months abroad. Before departure, students were asked to fill out a Cultural Distance Questionnaire (CDQ) which measures the distance between two cultures based on social and physical attributes. Halfway through their program the students filled out a General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) to assess emotional distress within their host society. They then filled out a final CDQ after their return to Japan. A total of 272 students participated and out of that 211 agreed to partake in the study by filling out the questionnaires.

Being able to identify facilitating and constraining factors that lead to the success, or failure of a relationship, assists in a better understanding of why differing natures may help or hurt a relationship. That is exactly what Stephanie Rollie Rodriguez and Daniel Chornet-Roses examined in their article, "How 'Family' Is Your Host Family? An examination of student-host relationships during study abroad?" Their sample size consisted of 42 American students studying abroad in Luxembourg. The students were asked to write in a journal as they answered 25 open-ended interview questions that were designed to retain information on the positives and negatives of the student-host relationship. More specifically, the study aimed to understand what aspects of a host family made a student feel like they were a part of a family and/or what aspects of a host family made a student feel that their host parent was more of a friendship. Rodriguez and Chornet-Roses used the schema theory as a theoretical framework to compare and contrast the expectations of the student's host family experience versus what kind of relationships were actually developed in the student's host family homes. They found that a numerous number of factors played into the developing relationship

between a host family and/or parent and the student including: perceptions of interest, living arrangements, rituals and routines, language barriers, etc.

Several of my own research questions transpired over the analysis of these different peer reviewed articles but many already established questions within these articles stood out to me. Some of these questions include: How do students describe their relationships with host family members? What factors facilitate and constrain student-host relationship development? What cultural shock experiences led to emotional disarrangement of the students studying abroad? Does future knowledge of a country create a more adaptable experience while temporarily living in that country?

If I would have come up with a method or plan for this, I would have distributed three separate surveys at three different time marks of the study abroad trip, to the students and the host family they will be staying with. In hopes of retaining as much information as possible, I also would have provided the students with the three surveys during their last meeting with the study abroad program director as well as sending them out digitally through email three days before each submission date. As for the host families, the three surveys would've been mailed with the last informational package sent to them before the program begins as well as sending them out digitally through email three days before each submission date. The first survey would've been due two days before the students begin their travels out of the country, the second survey would've been due two days before the halfway mark of the program and the final survey would've been due two days after the students return home from the program. I would've also conducted interviews with the students that were traveling internationally. I would've rounded up a definite number of interview (either in-person, over the phone or video interview) participants before the students took off for the program and two weeks before they return home, I would have reminded them of their interview date and time once they return home.

The materials I would've needed to conduct this research are the email addresses and home addresses of both the host families and traveling students. I would obtain their contact information by requesting the study abroad programs to send out an

email to participants to release their contact information to us if they want to participate in this study. As for the interviews, I would have been contacting them through email as I remind them of their interview date and time but I would also request from the study abroad programs, the students phone numbers in case I did not receive responses via email while they are still studying abroad.

The population being noted will be American students within the California State University system that choose to travel abroad. More specifically, the subjects being examined are the American students within the CSU system that are spending a semester abroad in Spain, Japan and Costa Rica; as well as their designated host families. My ideal sample size would be 250 students and their host families, in hopes that none of them dropout along the way. While I would plan to ask everyone who is spending a semester abroad in Spain, Japan or Costa Rica to participate in our study, I would realistically need 250 participants. I would reach out to 300 potential participants to increase my chance of actually hearing back from at least 250 of them.

If I would conduct a questionnaire I have chosen to ask only nominal, ordinal and interval type questions. I will be administering. I hope to obtain more precise information from the two groups by having questions that are specifically designed to gather information from their perspectives. I would ask similar types of nominal questions in order to categorize our participants into categories like gender and study abroad program. Ordinal questions will be used to identify their preferences on different aspects of the program and homestay. Finally, I would use interval questions to measure different experiences throughout the overall experience.

I have put together questions designed to hit on specific aspects of the participant's experience with the program and with their host family. I would only be asking these questions to the students after they return from their study abroad semester.

1. Thinking back to what your expectations were as you got on the plane to travel out of the country for education, would you say that your experience was all that you thought it was going to be? Was it less or was it more and why or why not?
2. In terms of the foreign institution in which you studied, what was favorable about the learning atmosphere and what wasn't? In other words, what were the negatives and positives of learning at a completely new and potentially different institution?
3. Was the connection and/or relationship between you and your host family one to remember in a positive way? Why or why not? Please elaborate.
4. Did you find it difficult to communicate (spoken, written and/or gesturally) with those that you were around the most? If yes, what made it difficult? If not, why do you think it was not difficult?
5. Take a minute to think about this one. What behaviors of your peers and/or host family siblings encouraged you to join in or participate in similar behaviors?
6. If you were the director of a study abroad program what changes would you make, based on your experience, that might enhance the experience for students looking to participate in the same program over the next five years?
7. What was the most inspiring or positive thing that you took away from living with your host family, if there was one? And what was the most negative thing, if there was one?

I would have categorized my sample group by location and will identify the areas for improvement. This would be done by analyzing the responses of both my groups, those being the students and the host families. I would then use the responses from the questions to determine where improvements need to be made in the communication with the programs and where things need to be removed entirely for the betterment of the students overall experience and more specifically the relationship with their host families. By using both qualitative and quantitative forms of analysis I will be able to get a large number of general responses complimented by an in depth look into those experiences through those questions.

I would base my criteria on whether or not my research question is supported by looking at how similar responses are to my questions. This will be used to let me know what things are working in certain areas and what aren't. If I would have got overwhelmingly positive feedback on one of the questions I would want to be able to take that and use it to improve the other categories. This is a process that would be repeated for negative feedback. It would all be analyzed to see why that is not working well and what needs to change to make it on par with the things that are working very well.

This data will then be compiled and distributed to those involved in these programs minus the students. It will be given out to host institutions, study abroad programs themselves as well as host families. They will then be able to use my data to make recommended changes in their own way. I would not give the data to the students because I determined it would be unlikely that they would be spending another semester abroad in the same location.

Concluding my information, my research would be compiled in a way that highlighted my question, "how can interpersonal communication amongst several homes with international students and their host families be improved?". My research will focus on students from the CSU system traveling abroad for one semester to Spain, Japan and Costa Rica. The data will be compiled from a questionnaire that I would have sent to host families and international students, followed by interviews with the students after their return home. This information would be presented to host families, international institutions and study abroad programs. Students will not be receiving the information because I determined it was unlikely that a student would return to study abroad in the same location thus rendering any information we could give them useless because it would most likely be specific to one location or program. I found my research to have a few limits but determined that we could work through them.

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LOC #6 : Demonstrate the ability to accomplish communicative goals (self-efficacy)

LOC #8 : Utilize communication to embrace difference