Developing Intercultural Competences in the Study-Abroad Programme Semester at Sea (SAS)

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Abstract: Semester at Sea is a US-American study abroad programme during which students spend a semester on a ship studying while visiting various countries. The purpose of this article is to determine the intercultural competence development in the students during the Fall voyage through a self-assessment questionnaire. The research is anchored in a post-positivistic research paradigm, using an intercultural competence survey questionnaire to determine the intercultural competence at the beginning and at the end of the voyage in 182 participants. Results show that the intercultural competences, in terms of intercultural knowledge, awareness, and skills of the students, improved significantly during the voyage, when comparing all pre-voyage and post-voyage scores of the three components. This means that the SAS programme creates a diverse and multicultural learning space within the international educational system, promoting cultural knowledge, awareness, and skill development through the combination of an academic curriculum and hands-on intercultural experiences. The study contributes to evaluating SAS as a US study abroad programme and provides conclusions and recommendations for future research and practice.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, study abroad, contact zone, competence development, intercultural communication

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1. Introduction

Research has pointed out that linguistic and cultural plurality and heterogeneity are often marginalised in mainstream educational systems (Baker, 2011). At the same time, educational systems must cater to a heterogeneous student body, and learning about cultural diversity and linguistic plurality needs to become part of the curriculum (Freire, 1970). Therefore, a culturally inclusive, reflective, and conscious approach to global and cultural mindsets and learning is needed (Palmer et al, 2019; Mayer, 2021). Increasingly, universities have started to acknowledge the value of intercultural and international experiences at the university level (Brandenburg et al., 2014), and many students study abroad to gain new experiences and perspectives. However, so far, US students display relatively low outbound mobility (IIE, 2020), and US college and university students remain only a few who participate in study abroad programmes (Jon, 2023) in comparison to the international student mobility, where the US is one of the top destinations for international students (OECD, 2021).

The Semester at Sea (SAS) programme is a study abroad programme which aims to create a diverse and multicultural learning space, in particular since international education is one of the core pillars of US-American universities (Medora et al., 2020). Universities aim at developing students for a globalising workforce (Wang, Peyvandi & Coffey, 2014). One way to develop cultural sensitivity, global mindsets, and intercultural competencies is through study abroad programmes (Harrell et al., 2017). Study abroad programmes foster complex experiences in students by aiming at integrating global studies and international and intercultural learning into the academic curriculum (Hovland, 2009). A recent study has shown that study abroad programmes are in particularly beneficial for students who engage in longer, more than 2-month-long-term experiences (Waters, 2023). Some research in the past decades has proven that students, after they have enrolled in a study abroad programme, enhance their cultural openness, cultural sensitivity, and global competency (Luo & Jamieson-Dranke, 2016), but also increase cognitive benefits, communication skills, personal growth, and career development (Page et al., 2009).

Other research has, however, shown that study abroad programmes do not necessarily increase intercultural competence and can also create challenges and hurdles in an individual`s development (e.g., Sobkowiak, 2019). The intercultural competence development relies on various other factors – as explained further below – and study abroad programmes have also been discussed critically in terms of stereotype development, preconceived judgements, and the adequacy of analysing and

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assessing cultural and intercultural situations in a culturally adequate way (Sobkowiak, 2019). Some authors even claim that the programmes might lead to regression in intercultural competence development, as presented further below (Mu et al., 2021). Intercultural competencies have, however, not yet been assessed during the SAS programme.

In this study, the researchers focus on students developing intercultural competencies during the SAS study abroad programme. This focus was chosen because previous studies have not focused on the development of intercultural competencies during the SAS programme, but have, for example, highlighted that students experience cultural challenges when living in a new shipboard community while travelling the world and having to adjust constantly to new, complex cultures and diverse cultural situations and lifestyles (Taylor et al., 2019). The purpose of this article is to determine the intercultural competence development in the shipboard community and, in particular, in the students studying at SAS during Fall 2022. This article aims to present results on the measurement of intercultural competencies measured through a questionnaire at the beginning and the end of the voyage. Assessing intercultural competence before and after the SAS voyage and after the completion of the SAS programme provides important information and insights into the fulfilment of the programme's aims and effectiveness. The article further aims to explore the impact of SAS on the three subcategories of awareness, knowledge, and skills as part of the overall concept of intercultural competence. The present study aims to fill the void of intercultural competence development during SAS as a study abroad programme and will provide results, discussions, conclusions, and recommendations regarding intercultural development at SAS as a specific study abroad programme.

Based on using a self-assessment questionnaire, the objectives of the study are defined as follows:

1. Determining participants' awareness improvement after the voyage.

2. Determining the participants' knowledge gained after the voyage.

3. Determining the participant's skill enhancement after the voyage.

4. Examining the relationship between awareness improvement, knowledge gain, and skills enhancement.

Based on the objectives of the study, the following hypotheses are defined:

H_1: There is a significant and positive increase in participants' awareness after the voyage.

H_2: There is a significant and positive increase in participants' knowledge after the voyage.

H_3: There is a significant and positive increase in participants' skills after the voyage.

H_4: There is a positive and significant correlation between the improvement in awareness, gain in knowledge, and the enhancement of skills after the voyage.

2. Semester At Sea (SAS) As A Global And Diverse Contact Zone

Global societies have become intercultural "contact zones" (Pratt, 1991) in which cultural exchange occurs through communication between different actors. This communication is usually highly complex, dynamic, diverse, and interwoven (Pratt, 1991; Mayer, 2021). At the same time, studies have highlighted that these contact zones are experienced as unsafe and challenging (Dewilde & Skrefsrud, 2016), also at SAS (Taylor et al., 2019). This is particularly true since actors from various cultural backgrounds display differences in thought styles and communication, acting and behaving, and comprehending and interpreting various situations. In highly diverse contact zones, like at SAS, actors need certain competencies to deal competently with situations which are complex in nature and which need renegotiation at different levels (Singh & Doherty, 2012). To cope with cultural complexity, as often experienced in study abroad programmes, individuals need mechanisms to cope with interculturally challenging situations to construct homogeneity and similarity to relax and feel safe (Dewilde & Skrefsrud, 2016). Study abroad programmes further support students in developing an understanding of the complex world and what it means to be a human being (Mulvaney & Lee, 2017).

This study focuses on the shipboard community at Semester at Sea (SAS), a US-American study abroad programme. This study abroad programme takes students, as well as lifelong learners, on a ship which sails worldwide, visiting within a semester, usually 10-15 countries. The programme aims to develop a global perspective in students while travelling on board the ship. The programme is open to students from all over the world (Kang, 2018), and students encounter diverse cultural experiences during the take on the ship in the diverse shipboard community, as well as during their country stay. The ship has sailed since 1963, and McCabe (1994) has described that students visit countries and destinations to study, develop, and grow personally. At the same time, students can use the points earned during SAS at their home universities (Kang, 2018). One of the aims of this study abroad programme is to develop intercultural competencies while travelling and studying, and to create a deeper comprehensibility towards different cultural systems. Furthermore, students are expected to develop a global perspective and increase their cultural and intercultural competencies (Kang, 2018). Dukes et al. (1991, 1994) and Duke (2006) have shown that students who have attended this programme experience positive long-term effects, such as creating a purpose in life, personal growth, meaningfulness, and becoming high achievers. The curriculum at SAS caters to promoting global education (Simmons & Strenecky, 1995). Various studies on SAS have been conducted in the past on SAS, such as on global mindedness and cultural sensitivity (Medora et

al, 2020), gender and motivation (Ryan, 2015), re-entry experiences (Kammann, 2008), sexual relationships (Ryan, 2015), health care (Muleady-Mecham & Schley, 2009), and autobiographical descriptions of experiences (Pearson, 2008; Johnson, 2022). Taylor et al. (2023) have shown that study-abroad programmes have often contributed to overall positive student development. They, however, also bring along challenges for students at SAS on different levels, such as cognitive, social, academic, cultural, logistical, and emotional challenges.

3. Intercultural Competence Development In University Students And Study Abroad Programmes

Intercultural competencies have been studied, assessed, and developed for many decades, also in the higher education and study abroad context (Deardorff, 2006). Intercultural competence is defined as "a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioural skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts" (Bennett, 2011, p. 4). Furthermore, numerous studies have pointed out the specific aspects of intercultural competence. Goldstein (2022) highlights:

> "Thus, although multiple models of ICC have been proposed, there is general agreement that it foundationally involves intercultural knowledge and awareness of cultural differences (cognitive), motivation for contact with and nonjudgmental respect for unfamiliar cultures (affective), and the ability to obtain, adapt to, and sensitively apply cultural information to facilitate intercultural communication and conflict resolution (behavioral) (Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012)."

Previous students have reported a growth of intercultural competence and knowledge, attitude, and skills of students who have studied abroad (Huang, Cheung & Xuan, 2023), and it has been pointed out that intercultural competence needs to be incorporated in study abroad programmes and experiences. Paige and Vande Berg (2012) have highlighted that intercultural competence development and study abroad programmes are related in the way that they bring a change in intercultural competencies. Intercultural competence is often associated with the idea that students experience intercultural growth through immersion into local communities, discovering new cultural environments, meeting fellow students from different backgrounds, learning from each other, and fostering the experience of diversity while building culturally diverse identities. However, intercultural competence development also means challenging preconceived judgements and stereotypes, ways of thinking, valuing, and acting, and the ability to analyse and assess intercultural situations (Sobkowiak, 2019). Paige et al. (2004) point out that the study abroad generally impacts positively on intercultural competence, as do studies by Bennett (2013) and Paras et al. (2019). Often, it is discussed which factors contribute to intercultural learning and intercultural competence growth in terms of personality, individual experiences, and demographic factors. Mu et al. (2022) have found by using the Intercultural sensitivity measurement survey (IDI) that most students attending a study abroad programme did not gain significant intercultural growth and that some of the students even regressed. Studies have further shown that mere exposure to diverse contexts of different cultures does not necessarily lead to intercultural learning, growth, and increased understanding (Lantz-Deaton, 2017). The intercultural competence development may depend on individual variables, foundational and initial competence, contextual aspects, and reflection opportunities about experiences and critical incidents (Tarchi & Surian, 2021). However, it has also been pointed out that intercultural competencies are closely connected to language abilities and how individuals are prepared for their study-abroad journey (Róg et al., 2020). Language competencies, intercultural communication competencies, and strategies are closely bound to the intercultural competencies and how individuals strive in new cultural and study (abroad) environments (Sunendar et al., 2021).

Furthermore, there is a strong debate about how to assess and evaluate intercultural competence and development (Braskamp, Braskamp & Merrill, 2009; Al-Sumait et al., 2022). In this context, various intercultural competence measurements have been developed, such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer and Bennett, 2002) and the Global Perspectives Inventory (Braskamp, Braskamp & Engberg, 2013). Various research studies have emphasised that study abroad programmes contribute to the positive development of intercultural competencies (Sándorová, 2021; Chen, 2022), especially compared to the intercultural competence development of students at their home university.

4. Research Methodology

In this section, the research approach, strategy, and sampling are explained, as well as the data collection and analysis, ethics, and limitations.

4.1. Research Approach, Strategy, And Sample

This study uses a post-positivistic research paradigm, which is viewed as being part of the deconstruction of the humanist or modernist tradition by establishing new ways of thinking about humanism (Berbary, 2017). In post-positivist research, the "truth" is defined as a social construct or creation (Saliya, 2023) whereby the researcher is not an independent observer, but rather someone who influences the world and research through their own identity and views (McGlinchey, 2022). This paradigm has been adopted in this research project in the way that the results are viewed as social constructs that show the "truth" of intercultural competence development from a self-assessment perspective of the participants. Additionally, the researchers view their role as individuals who interpret the research results from their own identity and through the lens of their socio-cultural perspective. Furthermore, the study can be described as an exploratory research study (Swedberg, 2020) that investigates the issue of intercultural competence development in SAS, which has not been explored previously.

This study measures the intercultural competencies of students at Semester at Sea (SAS) on the Fall 2022 voyage by deploying a pre-post-assessment. This pre-post assessment is conducted through a self-assessment questionnaire, which participants filled in at the beginning and at the end of the voyage. In this study, the researchers aim for an approach that "consists of establishing causal relationships between variables by establishing causal laws and linking them to deductive or integrated theory" (Collis & Hussey, 2003, 53).

All students on the SAS voyage were invited to participate in the study on intercultural competence development, attending the SAS study abroad programme. Altogether, 289 students completed the questionnaire at the beginning of the voyage and again at the end of the voyage. Students were informed about the project and their right to withdraw at any point, and participated voluntarily while giving consent.

4.2. Data Collection And Data Analysis

Quantitative data on intercultural competence were collected by means of a questionnaire using the *Cultural Competence Self-Assessment Checklist,* which is a self-assessment tool, using individual cultural competence (AMVA, n.Y.). The tool is freely available online. The purpose of this questionnaire is described as assessing one`s own awareness, skills, and knowledge in interactions with others while recognising aspects which could help to become more effective in working and living in diverse environments. The questionnaire consisted of four sections. The first section is on demographic data, such as age, nationality, gender, and language. The second to fourth sections consisted of close-ended statements, and the participants were requested to respond on a 4-point Likert scale with 1 denoting "Never", 2 denoting "Sometimes/Occasionally", 3 denoting "Fairly Often/Pretty Well", and 4 denoting "Always/Very well" on cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. Cultural awareness consists of 11 statements, cultural knowledge of 13 statements, and cultural skills of 12 statements, as shown in Table 1.

Although the literature review shows that affective skills are often viewed as an important part of intercultural competencies, the questionnaire used in this study measures predominantly awareness, knowledge, and skills. In this questionnaire, the affective components are not measured as a subcategory but are included under awareness, as, for example, in the item: "I accept that in cross-cultural situations there can be uncertainty and that I might feel uncomfortable as a result. I accept that discomfort is part of my growth process." The affective aspects are therefore implicitly included in the questionnaire which was applied.

The students participated in the programme that was running over 105 days, and students had the opportunity to spend 4–6 days in 11 different countries. The statements, referred to as items, are shown in Table 1 together with the reliability scores for each cultural component. The reliability of the measuring instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient scores for the scale items for each component, namely, cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. Collis and Hussey (2003) maintain that for a measuring instrument to be reliable, it must exhibit consistency and uniformity across time and settings. Hair et al. (2007) iterated that a Cronbach's alpha coefficient between 0.7 and 0.8 is considered good, between 0.8 and 0.9 is considered very good, while a coefficient above 0.9 is considered excellent. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient scores for cultural awareness were 0.791, cultural knowledge, 0.822, and cultural skills, 0.839, and are thus regarded as being good and very good.

Out of the 289 students who completed the questionnaire, 182 were deemed usable (Table 1). This represented a 62.98% response rate, which was used for data analysis. The collected data were captured on an Excel spreadsheet, subsequently coded, cleaned, and analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26 (George & Mallery, 2019). The statistical analysis in this study included descriptive and inferential analyses. The descriptive data were presented using metrics such as frequency, percentages, means, and standard deviation.

Table 1: Measuring instrument reliability analysis.

Scale	Valid N	Items used	Cronbach's α
Awareness	182	11	0.791*
Knowledge	182	13	0.822**
Skills	182	12	0.839**

* Reliability is good, ** Reliability is very good. Source: Authors` own construction

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robust and accurate. Where one or both aforementioned parametric assumptions are violated, a non-parametric test should be used (Hair et al, 2007).

Levene's test, which checks whether various groups have significantly different variances, was used to test for homogeneity of variances (Hair et al, 2007). Moreover, the Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests, which assess for the normality of data, were used (Hair et al, 2007). Both the Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests indicated that the variables exhibited non-normality. Consequently, the non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was employed to assess significant differences in the mean scores of participants at the beginning and the end of the voyage across the three cultural components. The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test is an inferential, non-parametric statistical test used to determine if there are significant differences between paired observations, mostly when parametric test assumptions are violated, such as non-normally distributed data. The test evaluates whether the distribution of differences between the pairs of observations significantly differs from zero, making it appropriate for comparing related samples, such as pre-and post-measurements. The null hypothesis for this test states no significant difference within the paired observations. Lastly, a Spearman's Rho correlation coefficient was utilised to assess the relationship between the different components of intercultural competence (Hair et al, 2007). Similar to the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, Spearman's Rho correlation is non-parametric and does not assume a normal data distribution. The test assesses the strength and direction of a relationship between the two variables (Hair et al, 2007).

4.3. Research Ethics And Limitations

Ethical considerations were approved by the research institution DTMD in Luxembourg, Luxembourg. The ethical considerations included transparency, respect, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw from the study at any point in time, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity (Mayer 2008).

The study's limitation is anchored in the theoretical and methodological approaches used in this study. The study is based on the intercultural competence development on the SAS voyage with a limited number of respondents. This research is exploratory in nature. Despite this, other similar study abroad programmes could benefit by drawing on these research results and replicating them.

In the following section, the results are reported in a quantitative reporting style, according to the research methods used.

5. Results

The descriptive statistics will be presented in the following section. The demographic data of the respondents are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographical data

Age	Frequency	Percentage
20	60	33.0
21	53	29.1
22	23	12.6
19	22	12.1
18	14	7.7
23	6	3.3
24	3	1.6
27	1	.5
Total	**182**	**100.0**
Nationality	**Frequency**	**Percent**
US	154	84.6
German	4	2.2
Netherlands	3	1.6
Canadian	2	1.1
Colombia	2	1.1
Mexico	2	1.1
Puerto Rico	2	1.1
Brazil	1	.5
Bulgarian	1	.5
Burmese	1	.5
Danish	1	.5
Egypt	1	.5
Irish/British	1	.5
Latvian	1	.5
Lithuanian	1	.5
Norwegian	1	.5
Palestinian	1	.5
Peruvian	1	.5

Age	Frequency	Percentage
Portugese	1	.5
Slovakia	1	.5
Total	**182**	**100.0**
Gender	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
F	135	74.2
M	45	24.7
NB	2	1.1
Total	**182**	**100.0**
First Language	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
English	153	84.1
Spanish	11	6.0
German	4	2.2
Dutch	2	1.1
Portuguese	2	1.1
Arabic	1	.5
Bulgarian	1	.5
Danish	1	.5
Hakha Chin	1	.5
Japanese	1	.5
Latvian	1	.5
Lithuanian	1	.5
Norwegian	1	.5
Polish	1	.5
Slovak	1	.5
Total	**182**	**100**

Source: Authors` own construction

As shown in Table 2, the most prominent age groups were 20 (33%) and 21 (29.1%), which accounted for a combined 62.1% of the participants. Approximately 85% of the participants were US nationals. Of the 182 participants, the majority (74.2%) identified as Female, 24,7% identified as Male, and only 1.1% identified as Non-Binary. Lastly, most of the respondents were English language first speakers and accounted for 84.1%. Overall, the demographics show a relatively young sample, but one that is not highly diverse in nationality, gender, and language. Next, the descriptive statistical analysis of the cultural components will be outlined, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the cultural components

Scales	Valid N	Unscaled Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-Voyage Knowledge Score	182	41.70	5.03
Post-Voyage Knowledge Score	182	46.98	5.11
Difference in Knowledge Score	182	5.28	5.51
Pre-Voyage Awareness Score	182	34.77	4.65
Post-Voyage Awareness Score	182	39.09	4.60
Difference in Awareness Score	182	4.33	5.34
Pre-Voyage Skills Score	182	40.43	4.88
Post-Voyage Skills Score	182	42.43	5.70
Difference in Skills Score	182	1.99	4.78
Pre-Voyage Total Score	182	116.91	12.13
Post-Voyage Total Score	182	128.51	14.13
Difference in Total Score	182	11.59	12.95

Source: Authors` own construction

In Table 3, the unscaled mean and standard deviation scores of the cultural knowledge, awareness, and skills scales pre- and post-voyage are given. Additionally, the differences in the mean and standard deviation scores between the pre-and post-voyage and the overall total score pre-and post-voyage are provided. The difference in the unscaled mean difference in knowledge between pre- and post-voyage has the highest score of all three components, with an unscaled mean value of 5.28. The unscaled mean difference for awareness showed the second-highest score of 4.31, while the unscaled mean difference for skills showed the lowest score of 1.99. To compare the pre-and post-scale scores, the paired t-test using unscaled mean scores was applied. The diagnostic tests for the paired t-test showed that all pre-voyage and post-voyage scores of the three components met the assumption of homogeneity of variance, implying equal variance across all groups. The separate Levene's tests indicated homogeneity of variance at the 95% 95 percent confidence interval: Awareness (t = .254, df = 1, 362, p-value = 0.614), Knowledge (t = 2.299 df = 1, 362, p-value = 0.13), Skills (t = 3.655, df = 1, 362, p-value = 0.057), and Total (t = 1.1868, df = 1, 362, p-value = 0.173).

However, the outcomes of the normality tests revealed a significant departure from a normal distribution in

the dataset. Both the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests demonstrated p-values below 0.001 for both the pre-and post-voyage assessments of the awareness and knowledge data. Notably, the post-voyage skills assessment returned a Kolmogorov-Smirnov p-value of 0.025 and a Shapiro-Wilk p-value of 0.001, thus necessitating the rejection of the null hypothesis that the state data follow a normal distribution.

Consequently, the non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was used to determine if there were significant differences between all pre-voyage and post-voyage median scores of the three components, as well as the total scores. Table 4 summarises all the Wilcoxon signed-rank results of the component scales.

Table 4: Wilcoxon signed-rank test results

	Ranks	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Pre-Voyage Awareness - Post-Voyage Awareness	Negative Ranks	136[a]	93.44	12707.50
	Positive Ranks	33[b]	50.23	1657.50
	Ties	13[c]		
	Total	182		
Pre-Voyage Knowledge - Post-Voyage Knowledge	Negative Ranks	155[d]	91.01	14106.50
	Positive Ranks	19[e]	58.87	1118.50
	Ties	8[f]		
	Total	182		
Pre-Voyage Skills - Post-Voyage Skills	Negative Ranks	111[g]	82.55	9162.50
	Positive Ranks	44[h]	66.53	2927.50
	Ties	27[i]		
	Total	182		
Pre-Voyage Total - Post-Voyage Total	Negative Ranks	152[j]	97.81	14867.50
	Positive Ranks	29[k]	55.29	1603.50
	Ties	1[l]		
	Total	182		

Source: Authors` own construction

Table 5: Wilcoxon signed-rank test results

Test Statistics[a]	Pre-Voyage Awareness Post-Voyage Awareness	Pre-Voyage Knowledge Post-Voyage Knowledge	Pre-Voyage Skills Post -Voyage Skills	Pre-Voyage Total Post-Voyage Total
Z	-8.684[b]	-9.767[b]	-5.581[b]	-9.398[b]
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000

a. Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test, b. Based on a positive rank, Source: Authors` own construction

The Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test in relation to the study's objectives indicated significant differences in all scales. As shown in Table 4, significant differences in the median ranks of pre-voyage and post-voyage were found. Table 5 includes the Z-score, which measures the magnitude of the difference between Pre-Voyage and Post-Voyage data by indicating how many standard deviations the observed value is from the mean and the associated p-value (Asymp. Sig.), where a small p-value suggests statistically significant differences between the two datasets. From the analysis in Table 4 and Table 5, the post-voyage median rank score for Awareness was statistically significantly higher than the pre-voyage median rank score ($Z = -8.648$, $p < 0.000$). Hypothesis H_1 is thus supported. Secondly, the post-voyage median rank score for Knowledge was statistically significantly higher than the pre-voyage median rank score ($Z = -9.767$, $p < 0.000$). Hypothesis H_2 is thus supported. Thirdly, the post-voyage median rank score for Skills was statistically significantly higher than the pre-voyage median rank score ($Z = -5.851$, $p < 0.000$). Hypothesis H_3 is thus supported. Lastly, the post-voyage median rank score for the aggregate total was statistically significantly higher than the pre-voyage median rank score ($Z = -9.398$, $p < 0.000$). Equally, H_3 is supported.

To establish the relationship between Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills, a Spearman's Rho correlation analysis was performed as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Spearman's Rho correlation (r) and significance probability (p) scales

			Post-Voyage Awareness	Post-Voyage Knowledge	Post-Voyage Skills	Post-Voyage Total
Spearman's rho	Post-Voyage Awareness	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.756***	.779**	.908***
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.	.000	.000	.000
		N	182	182	182	182
	Post-Voyage Knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	.756***	1.000	.814***	.914***

	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.000
	N	182	182	182	182
Post-Voyage Skills	Correlation Coefficient	.779***	.814***	1.000	.942***
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000	.	.000
	N	182	182	182	182
Post-Voyage Total	Correlation Coefficient	.908***	.914**	.942***	1.000
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.
	N	182	182	182	182

*** Correlation is significant at the $p < 0.01$ level (1-tailed). Source: Authors` own construction

6. Discussion

The purpose of this article is to determine the intercultural competence development in the shipboard community based on self-assessment results and, in particular, in students studying at Semester at Sea (SAS) during Fall 2022, aiming at presenting results on the measurements of intercultural competencies measured through a self-assessment questionnaire at the beginning and the end of the voyage. Assessing intercultural competence before and after the SAS voyage and after the completion of the SAS programme further aimed at providing important information and insights into the fulfilment of the programme's aims and effectiveness.

The literature has shown that often linguistic and cultural plurality is not valued in mainstream educational systems (Baker, 2011), however, in study abroad programmes, the development of intercultural competence is often seen as a priority in key development and therefore study abroad programmes often cater for a heterogenous student body – as SAS – to use, beside others, the diverse and linguistic plurality to increase intercultural learning and development in learners. Although the majority of students on SAS - and in this sample specifically - are of US-American descent, the student body caters to many diverse experiences, because students, life-long learners, staff members, and gap year students cover a range of diversity criteria in terms of age, social strata, first language, gender, and socio-cultural backgrounds. This diversity is not necessarily covered in the sample that participated voluntarily in this research study. Further, it can be highlighted that the intercultural experiences students have during SAS are not limited to the experiences on the ship but are significantly influenced during the experiences when visiting 10-15 different countries. During their stays on land, students attend excursions in the countries, visit certain institutions, have discussions with members of specific groups (majority and minority groups) within the country, and attend specific intercultural curricula to learn about the country`s history, contemporary issues, politics, and social, economic, and environmental issues.

Results show that SAS is responding to the request by researchers (Palmer et al, 2019; Mayer, 2021) to have culturally inclusive, reflective, and conscious approaches to global and cultural mindsets and learning. The results highlight that during the voyage, intercultural knowledge increases most significantly, followed by intercultural awareness and scores for intercultural skill development. Surely, the results show self-assessment scores and therefore reflect the perception of intercultural awareness, skills, and knowledge of the participants.

Furthermore, the results show that all pre-voyage and post-voyage scores of the three components met the assumption of homogeneity of variances, implying equal variance across all groups. All hypotheses (H_1- H_4) were therefore supported. It is assumed that, based on the increase of all three scores from pre-voage to post-voyage that the SAS programme creates a diverse and multicultural learning space within the international educational system as described by Medora et al. (2020). The multicultural learning space is thereby not only limited to the time the participants spend on the ship but also includes the time they spend within the 11 different countries, attending the SAS curricula and intercultural programmes which are offered during the field stays within the countries.

The results lead to the interpretation that participants experience the growth and development of their intercultural competence, as shown in the results of the two self-assessment scores. This can be seen as critical, since the results are self-reported and therefore represent the perception of the participants regarding their own intercultural competence increase. In this research study, the researchers have not measured any other aspects of intercultural development in terms of, for example, conflict experiences, emotional components, or prejudices and stereotypes. Based on recent research, intercultural interactions in study abroad programmes might also lead to increased prejudices and stereotypes (e.g., Sobkowiak, 2019). However, the researchers cannot refer to stereotype development in this study abroad programme for the SAS Fall 2022 voyage in this article, since these data have not been explored in the context of this research project.

The results show that this intercultural programme helps to develop cultural sensitivity, global mindsets, and intercultural competencies and fosters a complex approach to understanding culture and intercultural aspects in students through the combination of an academic curriculum (Hovland, 2009) and hands-on intercultural

experiences. This study thereby supports different previous researchers who speak for increasing intercultural openness and competencies, cultural sensitivity, and global competency, as well as cognitive benefits, communication skills, career development, and personal growth (Luo & Jamieson-Dranke, 2016; Page et al., 2009). Although students might have challenges traveling on a ship during the SAS programme (Taylor et al., 2019), they still significantly develop their competence on all three researched levels, according to the self-assessment. It, therefore, can be assumed that SAS prepares students for a globalising workforce, as requested by Wang, Peyvandi, and Coffey (2014). The study programme further seems to be particularly beneficial since it is longer than 2 months (as highlighted by Waters, 2023) and therefore seems to have a better effect than shorter study abroad programmes. Clearly, the SAS programme supports students to gain the competencies they need to cope with intercultural experiences, as described by Singh and Doherty (2012). The programme contributes to understanding the complexities of intercultural situations and a complex world by significantly impacting knowledge, awareness, and skill development. The study supports Kang (2018), pointing out that the SAS programme aims at developing intercultural competencies and promoting global education (Simmons & Strenecky, 1995). It can further be assumed that the increase in intercultural competencies has a positive effect in general on student development, as highlighted by different previous researchers (Paige et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2023).

7. Limitations

Like every research study, this study - focusing on intercultural competencies - comes with limitations (Vu & Dinh, 2021). The study only used one survey at the beginning and at the end of the SAS 2022 voyage. Only 182 individuals responded to the study, showing results regarding the development of intercultural knowledge, awareness, and skills. That means that the study did not capture all individuals participating in the study, but only the ones who agreed to participate voluntarily. These were mainly American female students. The study, therefore, does not necessarily reflect the diversity in terms of culture, gender, and age within the ship`s community.

The study may not capture the complexity of why and where exactly the students gained their self-reported increase in knowledge, awareness, and skills, and how they gained it. The results do not show whether students gained intercultural competence growth during their time on the ship or during their stays on land. It is also not reported through which activities or reflection sessions the participants increased their intercultural competencies.

The data do not show the diversity and richness of how the students acquired the increase in intercultural competencies. The study also does not show the students´ motivations, their emotions, or their engagement in the curriculum and country activities. More biographical and demographical information could have helped to explore more in-depth where students have gained their intercultural competencies before they got into the SAS programme, and to investigate further how preexisting experiences and conditions have supported intercultural learning during SAS Fall 2022. A mixed-methods study could have helped to better understand the context of the students, their backgrounds, and what exactly contributed to their learning and competence increase regarding the curriculum, relationships with the ship, country programmes, and excursions to the selected countries.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

At the end of this study, it can be concluded that the SAS increased the intercultural competencies of students in general, but also regarding their intercultural knowledge, awareness, and skills. Thereby, the knowledge increased the most, followed by awareness and finally skills. It might be assumed that knowledge and awareness were anticipated to help develop the skills strongly. Since the study did not focus on exploring what factors exactly impacted intercultural competence development, these factors should be explored in future research. Future research should focus on the underlying factors contributing to intercultural competence development through curriculum, travelling, the voyage itself, relationships, and country visits. At the same time, other aspects should be researched, such as the increase and/or decrease of stereotypes and prejudices, knowledge, awareness, and skills regarding specific cultures and countries during the voyage. Finally, in terms of research methodology, mixed methods should be used to explore the quantitative and qualitative sides of intercultural competence development to critically assess the development of intercultural competencies. Based on the results of the study, training could be offered to students to increase their intercultural competencies even more during the voyages, with regard to increasing the awareness and skill scores of intercultural competencies.

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