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"To be the person who is not the natíve speaker". Interculturality as empathy in cross-cultural experiences abroad

"Ser la persona que no es el hablante nativo". La interculturalidad como empatía en las experiencias interculturales en el extranjero

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ABSTRACT

While inter/cross-cultural learning continues as a paramount and central topic of discussion in the foreign language teaching, the current debate on intercultural communicative competence as a goal for cross-cultural experiences has gained complexity as a result of critical considerations on interculturality and language learning. Although the literature on intercultural learning is long and verbose within the scope of study-abroad, there is still much to see and explore in the lived experience of sojourners to comprehend intercultural experiences and language learning/teaching practices abroad. This qualitative case study examined 32 students' reflective essays with Atlas.ti for text mining and codification. Results suggest that empathy was the most salient feature to understand language, people, and culture. The lived experience of the person who is not a native speaker helped Lee University students to put themselves in someone else's position. In this vein, the role of language was pivotal to engage in the resignification of differences/similarities between cultures. This study contributes to the growing literature on the power of cross-cultural experiences for internationalization and decolonization.

Keywords: Cross-cultural experience; study-abroad; cultural empathy; interculturality; communicative competence.

RESUMEN

Si bien el aprendizaje intercultural continúa siendo un tema de discusión primordial en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, el debate actual sobre la competencia comunicativa intercultural como objetivo de estas experiencias ha ganado complejidad a raíz de consideraciones críticas sobre la interculturalidad y el aprendizaje de los idiomas. Aunque la literatura sobre el aprendizaje intercultural es extensa en el ámbito de los estudios en el extranjero y las estancias interculturales, todavía hay mucho que explorar en la experiencia vivida por los viajeros para comprender los espacios interculturales y las prácticas de aprendizaje y enseñanza de una lengua extranjera. Este estudio de caso cualitativo examinó los ensayos reflexivos de 32 estudiantes con Atlas.ti para la minería de textos y la codificación. Los resultados sugieren que la empatía fue la característica más destacada para comprender la lengua, las personas y la cultura. La experiencia de quienes no son hablantes nativos del idioma español ayudó a los estudiantes norteamericanos de la Lee University a posicionarse en el lugar del otro. En este sentido, el papel de la lengua fue fundamental para comprometerse en la resignificación de las diferencias/similitudes entre ambas culturas. Este estudio contribuye a la creciente literatura sobre el poder de las experiencias interculturales para la internacionalización y la descolonización.

Palabras clave: experiencia intercultural; estudios en el extranjero; empatía cultural; interculturalidad; Competencia comunicativa.

Introduction

Cross-cultural sojourns in higher education provide a multidimensional scenario to explore how mobility and transitions across borders inform the political and educational framework in curricula decisions for professional education as well as the ideological load, attributed to otherness, intercultural relations, language, and identity. Although much information about the benefits of cross-cultural experiences and study-abroad sojourns is available to correlate institutional efforts for internationalization (Kinginger and Zhuang (2023), intercultural competence (Chédru and Delhoume, 2023, Qinhui et al., 2023, Coleman et al., 2019), global citizenship (Reiter, 2023; Birindelli, 2023; Appe et al., 2016), language learning and practice (Steele et al., 2017), not much has been studied from a bottom–up perspective. The bottom-up perspective demonstrates the lived experiences of the sojourners and provides elements to contest curricular ideological loads and the real impact of cross-cultural experiences on students. Some critical studies have noticed that mainstream curricular approaches towards these sojourns are openly depoliticized. Some of them continue reproducing a vision of otherness and interculturality as exotic objects to be recognized to affirm colonial representations (Stein and McCartney, 2021; Smolcic and Martin, 2019; Soto and Méndez, 2019). In recognition of this serious criticism, we must ensure that universities and programs that have included these sojourns as part of their curriculum understand what they offer and what the students bring in order to make curricula- informed decisions.

This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of 32 Lee University (a Christian affiliated institution located in Cleveland, TN) students who have travelled to Colombia, South America as part of the Global Perspective Program organized by the Spanish Department. This study analysed the views and perceptions of Spanish majors and minors on their short-term cultural experience in Latin America to discuss interculturality as empathy among other relations to language usage and learning that emerged from data analysis. In doing so, researchers examined students' personal and critical narratives of the experience of being a non-native Spanish speaker; as well as the role of social interaction and communication to develop a sense of mutual cultural understanding.

Based on the review of similar research works, in which short-term trips have been ascribed to the most general scope of study abroad research domains (Barkhuizen, 2022; Nelson et al., 2021; Dutkiewicz et al., 2020), it is important to clarify that this Short-Term Cross-Cultural Experience (STCCE henceforth) in Colombia grants 7 academic credits. The

cross-cultural experience under examination on this paper is not arranged into a formal study format. By the same token, there are study-abroad experiences openly designed to embrace empathy and engagement (Cooper, Dellicarpini et al., 2021; Mapes, 2020; Andawi et al., 2020) to foster intercultural competence but little has been said about the lived-experience of American students to inform changes in attitudes in relation to the Other.

This study was launched through the initiative of the first author, who has organized this cross-cultural experience for over ten years at Lee University. The second author of this article has closely accompanied some of the cross-cultural experiences through teaching and proficiency-led activities. Both authors as language professors considered the importance of bringing to the surface answers to questions such as these: What do Lee University Students' lived experience demonstrate about the benefits of the program? How do their views of themselves and others inform interculturality? How does the STCCE affect them as English speakers and Spanish learners? Or more precisely, does their position as native English speakers reinforce the mainstream vision of interculturality?

Trends on multi/inter/cross culturalism in study abroad for language learning

When it comes to short-term abroad experiences in higher education, the meanings and senses given to multi-inter-cross prefixes continue to enlarge the debate on differential values to include the treatment of other cultures and languages. While many researchers have investigated cross-cultural, intercultural, and multicultural communication, it seems that there have been numerous conflicts understanding the terms as the conceptualization of trends advances quickly, leaving mere room for curriculum and policy updating contrasting theory and practice on the matter. In fact, the appropriation of multi/inter/cross terms in short-term abroad experiences in the US without critical elaborations causes a mare magnum of poor and weak definitions. We consider that the remaking of the concepts informed by sojourners' real lived experiences would inform better contact between cultures.

Trends on short-term abroad experiences for language learning, on one hand, highlight usage-based approaches to cast light upon exposure to and interaction with the target language McCormick (2018) and the paths of acquisition and language change (Geeslin and Garrett, 2018). Furthermore, positive impact on phonetics and phonology, intonation, fluency, lexical and vocabulary acquisition (Sanz and Morales-Front, 2018), among other aspects, contribute to the influential development of the applied linguistic perspective. Although studies exploring returning students' intercultural competence are scarce (Peckenpaugh, 2018), some of them provide positive insight how the students perceived host and own culture, cultural differences, and personal growth (Maharaja, 2018). Others claim that although these programs are beneficial to students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills, they do not necessarily help to develop deeper levels of intercultural competence (Terzuolo, 2016; Root & Ngampornchai, 2013). Trends on study-abroad also notice identity-related challenges for sojourners while being exposed to other languages and cultures, bringing to the surface topics related to struggles, agency, and identity work to position themselves in the host culture (Tullock, 2018).

Although the previous research about the benefits and the challenges of being abroad in immersive cross-cultural experiences is extensive, there is still a need for more research contesting the alleged privilege position of all American students while being abroad to relate to other cultures, other languages, and other people. By the same token, more discussion about the implications of embracing inter/multi/cross-culturalism is needed to better understand the epistemological and conceptual opinions on the matter. It is an occasion for inquiring or

investigating whether colonial takes on cross-cultural experiences are still perpetuating culturally imperialistic practices in which hierarchies and the white saviour complex prevail (Ashdown and Buck, 2018; Nordmeyer, Bedera and Teig, 2016; Aronson, 2017).

Regarding cross-cultural experiences, the discussion begins by describing the organization of multi-cross-intercultural experiences abroad and the views on language and culture. This reveals the kind of problematization that the experience of being abroad renders to categories such as culture, race, politics, language, and history in the definition of one's identity as a native or a foreigner (Anderson-Levitt, 2012; Lentz, 2017; McIntosh et al, 2002). As stated by Hoff (2020), the problematization of culture and identity are pivotal to connect and correct the practices of "misrepresenting contemporary patterns of life and restricting the roles multicultural and [intercultural] individuals are allowed to adopt in the language learning experience" (p.58).

In the case of multicultural experiences abroad, one of the key terms for advertisement is diversity. The promotion of multicultural cities in which hundreds of languages are spoken and people from different backgrounds create a multicultural society are some elements used to invite US students to experience different cultures. Nevertheless, knowing the many cultures are integrated does not mean that interactions occur. The fact that we recognize the presence of many cultures in one place does not define interaction as such, much less linking and contextual situations where the shared knowledge is in place. This prevents multicultural communication in learning from one another. The interactions that inhibit a deep learning among them. Even though the multiculturalism theory expresses itself as a diversity and emphasizes multicultural alignments such as equal rights, different perceptions on others and among others, it is not always the intention to overcome racial and cultural conflicts daily.

Due to the latter criticism, other higher education programs have adopted terms like cross-cultural and intercultural experiences. The first implies the recognition and the coexistence of cultural production on other peoples and the importance of the community-based side that shares a common language that has different worldviews. Thus, there is still a lack of full cultural immersion in the target culture (Doerr, 2022). Individuals are deeply aware of the others and sense the potential learning among them (Bican, 2021; Aski et. al., 2020; Diaconu et al., 2018; Hull, 2018). On the contrary, what we intentionally do in the Lee University Spanish Program promotes interculturality as a useful analytic concept because both cultures (US culture and target culture) intermingle potentially with one another. By acquiring this close relationship, both cultural worldviews neglect prejudice, cultural misunderstandings, and provoke stability yet a coherent embrace -beyond tolerance- of social behaviour and full acknowledgement of the other as a result of the interculturality as empathy in what we state as cross-cultural competencies.

While in the multicultural and cross-cultural research one can find exposure to culture, comparative analysis and anchored changes are not necessarily observed as in interculturality as empathy. Consequently, in the interculturality as empathy the culture concept is central and carefully tied to beliefs, deep meaning and transformative power over misconceptions based on upbringing, ideology, and history. As such, interculturality as empathy is defined by the full immersion in the target culture, embodying the flesh and operational system of languages, and a mission mindset translated in educational and personal reforms for the students to become global citizens.

Interculturality as empathy

Short-term study abroad has identified cultural empathy as a key component of intercultural communication skills (Cooper, Dellicarpini et al., 2021; Mapes, 2020; Andawi et al., 2020; Honglin Zhu, 2011). As it is shown in figure 1, between 2023 and 2013 a significant number of works focusing on different aspects such as internationalization, effective short-term abroad programs, and interaction in language showed empathy as an emergent feature of students' lived experiences. In so doing, empathy is connected to sensitivity, awareness of sojourners' own identity, and intensity/quality of interactions with L2 speakers (Hernández, 2018). When it comes to the senses given to empathy, little conceptualization is found.

Figure 1. Connected Papers on Study Abroad and Empathy
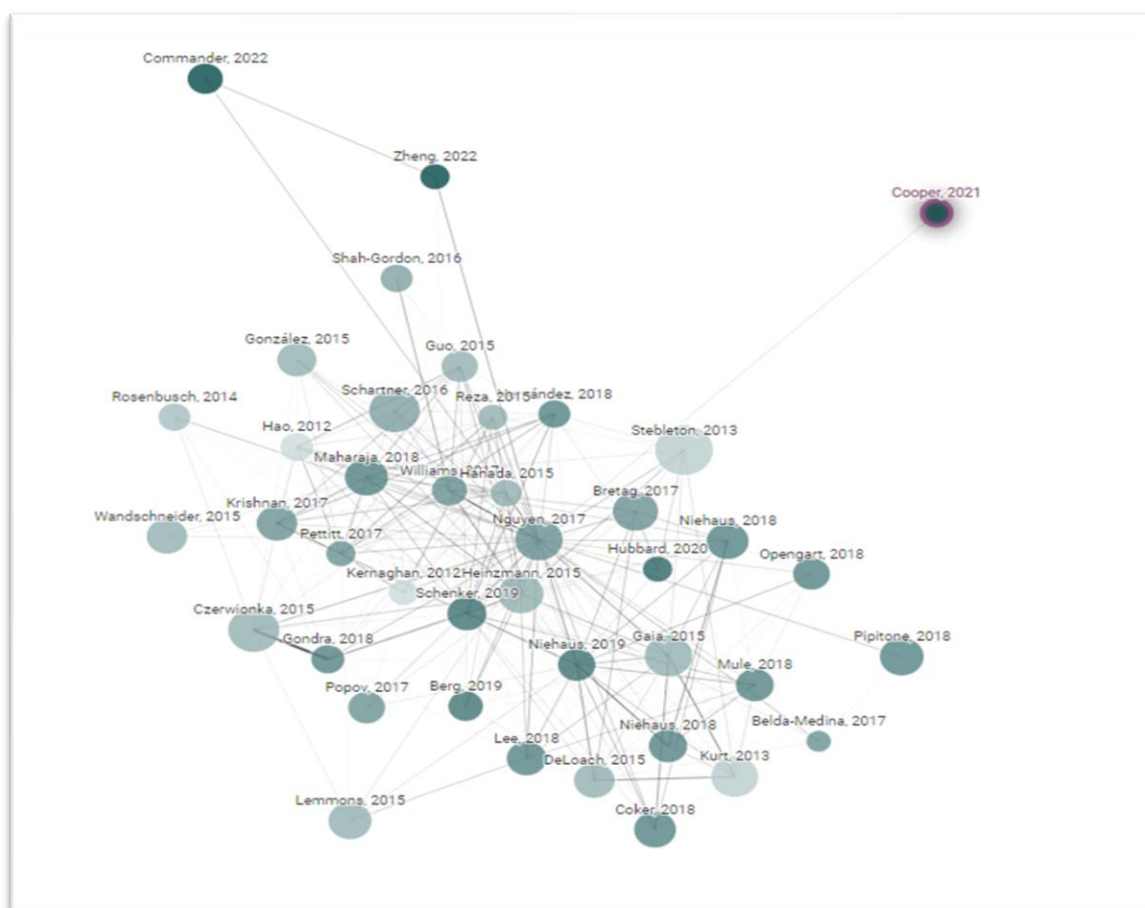
According to the literature, there is a difference between cultural awareness and cultural empathy (Zhu, 2011, Cooper, 2021). Intercultural awareness involves the ability to stand back from our point and become aware of not only our own cultural values, beliefs, and perceptions but also those of other cultures. The fact one observes our own world through others' eyes is significant as a primary data source. Zhu continues arguing that intercultural awareness lacks a more in-depth approach, primarily because it does not touch base on the most unfamiliar issues of other cultures and how the political and societal attitudes influence each other's culture.

From our understanding, and Zhu's interests, intercultural empathy conveys "the prerequisite and assurance for effective cultural communication" (p. 117). In this sense, there is a considerable ethical and political importance to how we depict the target culture with values that do not belong to ours and therefore making it possible to understand the downfalls and

struggles of the studied culture (Soto and Méndez, 2022). In other words, the shift consists in moving from an "ego-logical (individualistic)" to an "eco-logical (contextual and distributed)" position of oneself. One in which empathy is not 'in' the individual but is a product of the quality of social interaction, and therefore is 'in' the social exchange (Eichbaum et al. 2022)

Cross-cultural experience project background

The Lee University Spanish program requires cultural knowledge to acquire a language and an intercultural approach. Students studying for a major in Spanish are required to have six credits in the target language from a Spanish-speaking country. The program not only comprises Spanish majors, but also a substantial number of Spanish minors or students who are interested in pursuing electives after the eligibility process, which is currently at the intermediate level. The first Colombia trip was organized in 2011. Activities for interaction and attendance at academic and cultural events, among others, are organized to guarantee exposure to the Spanish language. Moreover, students are hosted by families whose English skills are below zero, which has helped them better understand the similarities and differences between the target culture and language and their system of beliefs.

A set of assignments (SPAN 311, SPAN 312, and GNST 215) are conducted in Colombia for 7 credits. Classes are not structured exactly as they would be on the Lee University campus or in a regular semester, but rather are based on daily learning experiences of interacting with the culture of the target language that are brought to attention for a month. One of the Spanish Program's pillars is to embrace cultural differences that foster a new understanding of the academic and what is wrongly called "academic tourism" (Bakir, et al., 2017). The program reports that some of these students have an active agenda for changing the job and study environments in which they are currently developing. Some of them have pursued master's degrees or doctoral programs on Latin America-related issues; others are currently Spanish teachers who have done cross-cultural trips in Colombia and other countries, and the feeling of lifelong connection with the then-host families is an ongoing fellowship.

Among the objectives of the program, we would like to make noticeable these: 1) guide students in an understanding of their Christian values to demonstrate respect for culturally diverse points of view; 2) encourage students to develop the knowledge, understanding, and respect needed to function effectively in a culturally and ethnically diverse nation and world. And, especially, 3) cultivate in students an empathetic understanding of cultures apart from their own.

Methodology

This is a qualitative case study that examined the academic, personal, and social experience of 32 Lee University students' experiences abroad on a short-term cross-cultural trip to Colombia to practice Spanish language. This case study sample as a method "allows researchers to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" in particular "when how and why questions are posed" (Yin, R. K. 2018, p.1). As the research questions sought to explain the perceptions gathered by a group of sojourners after living the cross-cultural experience in direct connection to culture and language. The particularity of this approach was oriented to making sense of or interpreting phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3; Conner, 2017). The academic, personal, and social experiences of the 32 participants were retrieved from reflexive essays, compiled over the last eight years. The essays were catalogued by years, and random samples of those essays from each year were collected to carry out the thematic analysis last year.

Participants

Participants in this case study were 32 Lee University Students enrolled in Spanish learning as a major or as a minor. Of the students, 21 were female and 11 were male. These students decided to select the alternative to travel to Colombia among other Global perspectives options. The vast majority of students from Lee University pay for their own studies with part-time jobs. The youth who participated in this study decided to come to Latin America mainly for budgetary reasons. Others were motivated to come to this South American country by the Colombian nationality of their Spanish professors. All of them were Americans who enrolled at Lee University to study different professions, such as foreign languages, nursing, social work, law, among others. A significant number of students work part-time to earn money to pay for these courses, many of whom live with low to middle class income families.

Instruments

Reflection papers were the main instrument to obtain students' views on the Global Perspective trip as lived experience. These narratives revealed students' views and perceptions, as well as the role of culture and language during and after the trip. These reflective papers were one to two pages in length, clear and easy to read. The longest paper did not exceed 1200 words. Conditions for the writing of this paper were frankness, a high degree of reflectiveness, and personal involvement. We asked students for permission to use their reflective writing for the purposes of this investigation.

Data Collection

Reflective papers were collected over a period of 10 years as part of the final assignment of the cross-cultural experience at the end of terms in years 2011 (3 samples), 2013 (8 samples), 2016 (1 sample), 2017 (4 samples), 2019 (7 samples), 2021 (6 samples), 2022 (3 samples). Paper samples were chosen randomly from a fairly long number of reflective papers, taking into account their length and depth, although this varied significantly from student to student. All this together gathered 32 reflective essays, 67 pages and 22,245 words that were organized in separate files under pseudonyms for ethical reasons and personal privacy.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed following the six-stage data collection and thematic analysis process suggested by Peel (2017). In doing so, *Atlas.ti* as a tool for commenting, labelling, memoing, and coding was useful to consolidate codes and quotations. As a first step, reflective papers were organized in separate files, read, re-read in the light of the main questions being asked in this research, using color-coding to notice recurrent patterns and make sense of data. This facilitated the identification of initial codes that were dispersed throughout the consolidated file. As a second step, once the file was uploaded to *Atlas.ti* as the hermeneutic unit to be analysed, extracts from data were coded, making meaning units visible. In some cases, these codes overlapped with the initial review, and in others these complemented or added new ones. As a fourth step more recurrent and reiterative codes were categorized according to the semantic content of the data project. Based on the codes that reached more density, ground and structure, codes were filtered (step 5) and themes were inferred to build a framework (Peel, 2020) that made the manifestation of interculturality as empathy and as a lived experience visible (see Table 1).

Table 1. Density of Defined Codes for Interculturality as Empathy

Code	Grounded	Density	Code groups
Christian values, vocation and callings	21	2	
cultural shock	8	1	
Empathy for interaction	22	3	Interculturality as empathy
Empathy_host homes	10	3	Interculturality as empathy
Interculturality as Empathy	30	3	Interculturality as empathy
Overcoming stereotypes	6	2	
Spanish Use and Learning	34	1	
Students' views on CCE	30	1	

Note. In Atlas.ti the number behind a code shows the frequency of how many times the code has been applied to the data. The values corresponding to density highlight the extent to which codes are linked to each other.

Due to limited space, our findings and discussion will focus and detail the code group devoted to the theme of interculturality as empathy, in which the Spanish language plays an important role. Figure 2 illustrates the interconnections we established along with a hierarchical view of the scheme.

**Figure 2.** Mapping of Atlas.ti on Interculturality Interconnections
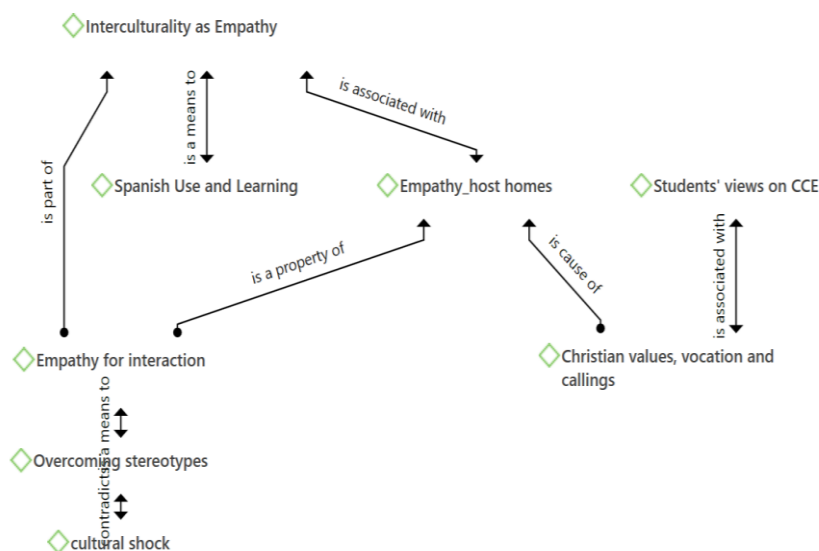
Note. This figure is instrumental to understand the nuances that the theme interculturality as Empathy encompasses. It illustrates, for instance, how learning and using Spanish can be a medium to raise an empathic attitude towards a foreign culture and language. At the same time, it portrays data related to students' personal experiences to overcome stereotypes and cultural shock while interacting with others.

Findings

This case study identified 8 codes to cast light on emerging themes whose density, ground and co-occurrence nurtured and uplifted interculturality (62 quotes) and the role of Spanish learning and Spanish use (34 quotes). In a nutshell: i. Experience of interacting with other countries and cultures (which prompts empathy for interaction as a theme), ii. Living with others (which prompts empathy-host homes) and iii. Putting themselves in others' shoes (which prompts interculturality as empathy as a theme). According to Peel, K. (2020) analysing thematically allows researchers to "create the rich descriptions that emanate from the data extracts, using the participants' own words" (p.4). One of the salient themes was interculturality as empathy, in which being the person who is not the native speaker confronted participants with the sense of being in other shoes. Participants were able to connect with people and situations lived in Colombia. Findings will be discussed in detail, noticing the role of Spanish usage and learning (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Spanish Usage Relations
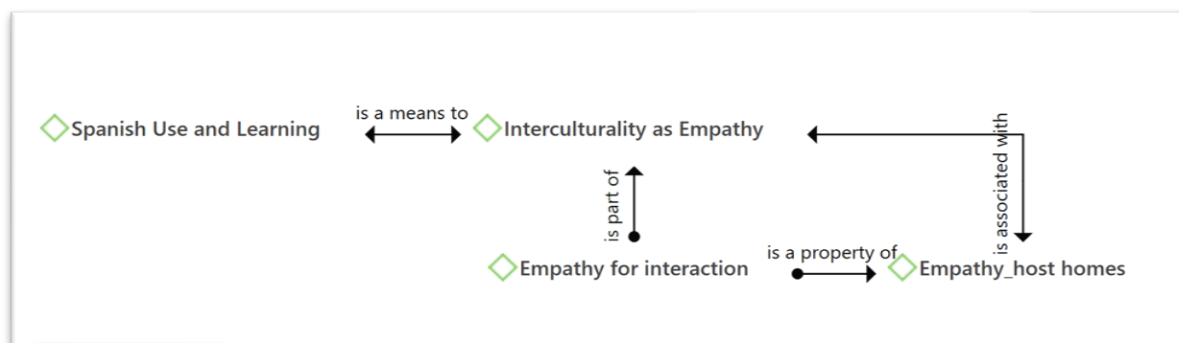
Discussion

In this section, we will discuss main themes, making participants' voices visible when unpacking interculturality as empathy and its different manifestations. As part of the analysis, some participants' quotes are brought to light in relation to lived experiences in which the sense of oneself and one's own culture are confronted to express comparisons, new perspectives, and ways to cope with difference and language proficiency. From a more scientific and epistemological perspective, we learn that the capacity of human beings is shaped by empathy and education (Bell, 2013; Bleakley et al., 2011; Bleakley et al., 2020). In our research, the findings show a solid respect and sensitivity toward other cultures and languages. This indicates that institutional policies for internationalization are not exclusively cemented in economical or extractivism terms. In this way, the experience of travelling from the North to the South seeks to show the potentialities of interculturality for students' views on language learning and practice.

Participants improved their language proficiency by assuming strong global citizenship and responsibility for others, taking down the wall of superiority as a Northern Hemisphere nation, and giving in to new experiences. Thus, the intercultural experience defines the relevance of cultural sensitivity and understanding linguistic encounters with the host culture. By eliminating the "comfort zone" (where the individuals do not practice or improve their language) and the cultural inequities, the students were able to expand on their intercultural empathy by creating a safe zone of growing recognition and cultural safety. The students licensed themselves to let blocking barriers go away and therefore achieve a more in-depth dimension of foreign language acquisition with quality and accuracy.

Interculturality as empathy

> Excerpt 1: Developing my proficiency in Spanish has been another impactful experience during this trip. Not only is it an amazing opportunity to be able to put to use what I've studied for the past several years, speaking Spanish has also provided insight into a culture that is obviously different from mine. Moreover, <u>it is exceptionally humbling to be the person who is not a native speaker</u>. I have lived in the States my whole life where people are almost always expected to know English, even if it is not their first language. I appreciated experiencing the other side of that, because when learning a language, you always need others' assistance, patience, and corrections (Esther, RE008).

The above underlined sentence shows the power of one's words. It is important to note that this quote from Esther inspired the researcher's title for this article. Her capacity to understand the experience of not being a native speaker explains how important is to be immersed in the target culture. As Esther explains, "experiencing the other side"; the side of a minority language speaking group, helped her to appreciate the role of interactants in assisting learners in the activities of daily living with patience and feedback. Here, it is interesting to notice how Esther positioning as a non-native Spanish speaker took her to subvert the colonial representation of English people as native speakers. The way she confronted it made her feel vulnerable and humble. And more importantly, to decide how to act and fight against this colonial mechanism of domination.

The following excerpt (2) also illustrates how empathy implies a full understanding of the other as one who is walking in someone else's shoes. In this regard, "empathy is the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions' (Krznaric, 2014, p. X). In Melissa's case, the sense of empathy for immigrants and their language struggles is visible. Assertively, she took on the humbling role of a simple learner and listener. She linguistically and culturally observes people from the other side, from a perspective of white privilege, positioning herself on the humility and transformation spectrum.

> Excerpt 2: As an over-achieving, straight A student, it was jarring to suddenly find myself as one of the least competent Spanish speakers on the trip. It was beyond frustrating to have a desire to engage and have meaningful conversations with the Cota people we encountered and not be able to due to my own lack of Spanish proficiency. This frustration made me extremely empathetic to those who travel/immigrate to America without being able to speak much, if any, English. (Melissa, RE009)

When it comes to confronting one's sense of belonging, Boris (E3) and Duvis (E4) establish strong political and cultural comparisons between Colombia and their own American places. They bring cultural bridges and their locus to Colombia, observing their land through Colombia's eyes. They definitely identify through language and cultural immersion with a resilient and hopeful life in the middle of conflicts, expanding on their own social problems back home. In Duvis' narrative, particularly, she recognizes that in her country there also exists another kind of poverty; not only economic poverty, like in Latin America, but also emotional and internal poverty, over and above the typical power that the United States stands for. It is wrongly observed that those living in the United States are solely full of privileges; this needs to be emphasized at a crucial time when totalizing theories are incapable of seeing North American people's struggles. That is why Duvis sees her country as poor as many areas in

Colombia. By taking this viewpoint, she clearly understands, compares, and assimilates both cultures, as well as intermingles and overlaps concepts, thoughts, sentiments, and emotions.

> Excerpt 3: I hope to be able to better address intercultural issues that seem to be in a certain state of conflict, especially in regard to the conflicts between the Hispanic communities and Irish/German communities that have been intermingling these past several decades in my hometown. This experience has shown me that there will be cultural tensions in every place where there is more than one culture, but that there *is* a way to resolve these conflicts. (Boris, RE003)

> Excerpt 4: I found myself reflecting on the type of community I live in at home and how my local church could help to improve the quality of life around us. In Colombia, I saw many people begging on the sides of the streets or doing their best to sell us souvenirs so they could make enough money for the day to feed their family. My heart went out to those struggling, to   those who not only needed their spiritual and emotional and mental aspects tended to, but their physical needs too. It reminded me of the brokenness and desperation of certain sections of my hometown. Where I live, there are many low-income families. They struggle to even just have enough for their next meal, (DUVIS, RE005)

One of the concepts is eyeing the "other" as part of the learning process. During the Colombia trip, it is crucial to improve not only the Spanish language, but also the understanding of embracing cultures rather than tolerating them. Embracing means accepting and fully comprehending the differences and similarities without trying to change what they perceive as different. Tolerance implies that one has to accept, but one is not concerned about the other people who are slightly or very different from us. It's about developing empathy instead of sympathy for others by recognizing their feelings, discovering new ways to build a welcoming community, and exploring and discovering ideas that provoke thought. This latter idea is strongly connected to Duvis' narrative (E4) but is reassured in Jules' (E5). Jules exemplifies a true embrace of the culture without questioning what he does not understand.

> Excerpt 5: Studying at and working with schools in Colombia showed me how even people on the other side of the world without the things we take for granted in the US can be incredibly bright and deserve just as much from the world as we do back home, and even reminded me that often back home there are those who can't get what they need even though they could do incredible things. I saw needs, and many kinds of them. But something else that I find people need is community. To build these people up, show them a friendly face and just talk for a while was an incredible way to show love. To show them that yes, I was from a different place in the world but that it didn't mean I didn't want to understand them. (Jules, RE012)

Many of the essays reflect differences by comparing cultures. Beth (E6) and Susan (E7) clearly state some main characteristics of the so-called "white saviour complex". Their reviews manifest an empathy that contradicts this syndrome (Ashdown and Buck, 2018; Nordmeyer, Bedera and Teig, 2016; Aronson, 2017). In fact, the way Beth (E6) and Susan (E7) tackle the North American superiority mindset contributes to dealing with it in a different and more positive manner. For instance, ways to achieve progress that differ from the dominant one.

> Excerpt 6: This trip taught me that we can learn from other cultures/other countries. I think there is this mindset in North America that because we are a developed country, other countries need our help to make them better…or good. We think that because there are not shiny, silver skyscrapers all over Ecuador or Colombia that

their lifestyle must be lacking and in need of help and improvement. But this is not always the right mindset. Their lifestyle/culture being different from ours does not indicate that it is necessarily lacking. (Beth, RE015)

Excerpt 7: It was interesting to live with Americans in another culture and see the differences before my eyes. No culture is better than another; each culture has value and validity. I think there are a lot of Americans that could learn something from Colombians. Colombian culture is very different than American culture in many ways, but it stretched me in such a good way. For example, something as minimal as slamming a car door has taught me that I take my things for granted. Having a car is so normal to me that I always slam the door, forgetting that my car is a precious gift and that having one is not a necessity. (Susan, RE025)

The significance of Beth and Susan's take on interculturality stresses empathy as a close relationship with someone whose culture and language are different from theirs. But this does not obscure the fact that, irrespective of our cultural background, we as human beings, share a human condition and a broader territory, making us global citizens of the Oikumene ("the inhabited earth that belongs to all"). In this cross-cultural experience, teachers encourage their students to perceive others horizontally and not in a hierarchical way, which has the potential to enhance their social and language skills and impact their views.

Empathy for Interaction

In this section, we would like to draw attention to interaction for communication, in which students' development of intercultural communicative competence (Chédru and Delhoume, 2023, Qinhui et al., 2023; Hoff, 2020; Coleman et al., 2019) is nurtured by empathy and the desire to connect with others to see themselves with new eyes. In doing so, relational connectivity with others is paramount during our trip, as stated by the students below. For them, the process of connectivity causes social interaction, which strongly reduces physical distance and increases not only their language performance, but also the challenges of becoming unique and embracing differences. As Shyla states: "It allowed me to discover parts of myself that I didn't know that I had" (E8). This is only found by reducing the negative effects of cultural shock and turning to alleviate the stress of being known by the Other, helping herself find part of her identity in a foreign land. Something similar is experienced by Maya (E9), whose sense of herself was nurtured by the interaction with people, language, and culture.

Excerpt 8: I feel that my capacity for understanding other people has become bigger. All of this to say, even in a foreign country surrounded by people who did not speak the same language as me or look like me (…) it was a game changer for me. It allowed me to discover parts of myself that I didn't know that I had. (Shyla, RE030)

Excerpt 9: I have now been in Colombia for almost two whole months and could not be happier; the people, the lifestyle, the food, the language, and the experiences have helped shape me into a better person. I also had the opportunity to teach high school English classes for the first 4 weeks I was in Colombia, sing on the worship team, go to prayer nights, and minister to the people here. (Maya, RE017)

As it was previously explained, exposure to and interaction with the target language (McCormick; 2018) and the paths of acquisition and language change (Geeslin and Garrett, 2018) are meaningful components for the positive evaluation of cross-cultural study abroad programs. However, the importance of interaction here relies on the possibilities for identity work beyond language usage. A better understanding of who we are is nurtured by an empathetic relationship with the people of the target language. This reinforces the idea that a sense of internalization in language and culture is mediated by a sense of global citizenship in which differences are welcome.

Spanish use and learning as a means for intercultural empathy

Although previous excerpts are also connected to Spanish use and learning, in this section we want to emphasize the students' self-appraisal of their experience speaking Spanish and the value given to their learning process before, during, and after the trip. Positive impact on Spanish learning validated what McCormick (2018), Sanz and Morales-Front (2018) and Maharaja (2018) have said in relation to language acquisition and personal growth. One salient aspect of this category is the way students refer to their identity work as Spanish learners and the will to speak and connect to unpack what agency in language acquisition entails (Tullock, 2018). In the case of Dylan (RE006) and Pao (RE010) the importance of conversing with Colombian people was the leitmotif to continue pushing themselves to speak no matter difficulties or mistakes.

> My ability to speak Spanish allowed me to communicate bilingually with my students. I could effectively converse with others in the language they spoke best, building relationships and lasting friendships with all those around me. And even if I could not say everything perfectly or if I made frequent mistakes, it meant the world to them that I was at least trying. (Dylan, RE006)

> Although it needed a lot of work, and still does, my Spanish was definitely sufficient not only to order food and understand class lectures, but to have thoughtful and personal and even substantially long conversations with people. I talked to everyone - street vendors, my host families, students, my professors - with much less difficulty   than I expected. (Pao, RE010)

When students were exposed to Colombians, they realized that sometimes it is not as important what people say, but to understand what they mean. The language counterparts infer information, mediate meaning when students stumble in their own foreign language. This linguistic and cultural game creates a deep bonding and effective communication between the individuals, greatly encouraging communication. As Sojourn activities are thought and planned to immerse students in real interactions the sense of joy and excitement to witness their own skills and competences to speak Spanish and improve it while interacting with locals are aspects that fulfill their expectations (See Lola (RE013) and Santos' excerpts (RE023).

> I was pleasantly surprised and overly excited when I learned that I was able to have conversations with natives. Whether it be in their store, on the streets or in the host homes, for the most part, I not only understood them but was able to engage in conversation with them. (Lola, RE013)

> Another part that helps with my learning was the interaction with the people of Columbia. Talking to Spanish native speakers help me improve my Spanish. Each day we were put in situations where in which speaking Spanish was necessary. For

example, I remember one day in which my assignment was to look for a Columbian and ask him or her to share some story about the Columbian culture. This meant finding a person that was unknown and start a conversation. The assignment wasn't easy, but it was very helpful in improving my communication skills. Assignments like this one help improve my communication skills in Spanish. (Santo, RE023)

Students' struggles for communication in Spanish are part of the learning process in situ. Although leisure activities are provided, a high percentage of events during the trip have been carefully planned by organizers to enhance students' communication and participation. By the same token, it is also worth noticing the previous excerpts as examples of empathy with the role of English native speakers now assigned to Spanish native speakers. As can be inferred, the use of "nativeness" is positioned in linguistic terms without an emphasis on hierarchies. Yet, the lack of Spanish proficiency was something that some of them experienced, as in Melissa's case (RE009), being themselves positioned as non-native Spanish speakers gave them a new comprehension of immigrants' struggles to speak English in the United States and of their own struggles in the Spanish speaking framework.

Conclusions

The comprehension of interculturality as empathy should be a must in all cross-cultural experiences in US higher education. It is essential that trip directors and faculty participating in cross-cultural journeys provide and expand knowledge beyond content-based classes. In this case, students participate in cultural research associated with numerous activities charged with meaning and ongoing change.

It is a fact that one cannot measure cultural proficiency and explain exactly how much an individual knows about a certain culture. However, we can speak about the intersection of cultures to develop in learners an exchange of knowledge, a certain cultural dimension, and the capacity to understand perspectives comparing theirs and ours when we are exposed to other cultures. To do so, in this research, we intended to address conceptual categories that foster language learning to improve proficiency and culture awareness more aligned to an ethical and relational agenda. That is why one of our main goals in this article is to promote the idea of separating culture and tourism as a top priority. Avoiding the fine and dangerous line caused by other study abroad trips in which Native-Speakerism ideology is politically laden to mark superiority or to embrace the white saviour syndrome.

As shown in this paper, narratives provided by Lee University students summarized acts of empathy and love for the people who continuously struggle to survive in other places. But in doing so, they were able to connect with these situations and cultural differences to narrate similar ones, making explicit nuances and senses that bring meaning to culture and their sense of themselves as global citizens when learning Spanish. For these students, at the end "being a person who is not a native speaker" (with supremacy and privileges) gives them a sense of empathy with the experiences of those who have struggled to learn English. In this respect, empathy invigorates a perception of the self in which there is no place for determinism but for valorising the interaction with Other, the one whom difference makes us a better human being.

The analysis clearly indicated that language carries social and cultural messages that go beyond borders. These boundaries are not only geographical but ideological in the sense of contributing to the construction of a better understanding of (inter)cultural meanings. The bottom-up perspective in this study demonstrates that the lived experiences of the sojourners provided elements to break down curricular ideological loads and evaluate the real impact of

cross-cultural experiences on American students. As it was shown, a more balanced treatment between cultures is a key element to reconsider internationalization practices when it deals with foreign language teaching and learning. The implications of this study will benefit those who design, guide, and promote these programs by decreasing institutional biases in comprehending what these programs entail when a foreign language and culture are closely related to students' life projects.

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