

# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: ENGAGING INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC STUDENTS IN SMALL GROUP INTERACTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*Effective relationships in classrooms are important for all students to learn together, and in a small study we sought perceptions about group work between international and domestic students, using Martin and Rose's appraisal (2007) and Gee's (2011) discourse analysis. Questions: How do domestic students and international students perceive interactions with classmates when tasked to form a group? What are the thematic contours of the students' responses? Results reveal differing perspectives on interactions which contribute to understanding learning dynamics in groups where both international and domestic students work and uncover needs to cultivate intercultural skills. We found there were positive interpersonal discussions when students informally went "off script" as evidenced in their interview recordings. Pre-planned field outings, audiotaped interview exchanges, and discussions around particular topics allowed students to relax, connect, and enjoy the interchanges, building significant intercultural skills/understanding.*

Promoting and endorsing positive intercultural exchanges has become increasingly important in today's classrooms. Between 2018 and 2019 there were 1,095,299 international students on U.S. campuses (Open Doors Report, 2019), and there are thousands of refugee

students crossing borders needing education in many countries worldwide (Brewis, 2015). To welcome and support all learners, faculty are encouraged to engage and connect domestic and international students to help develop communication skills and to build understanding and awareness of students' cultural backgrounds. Ideas for classroom assignments have included ways to pair international students and native speakers and suggestions for developing opportunities for writing and speaking as a way for students to move between cultures (Min, n.d., Garcia-Murillo, 2016). Instructors are encouraged to design lessons which allow students to sustain academic conversations (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011) promoting learners' engagement with the discipline-specific content learning pertinent to individual courses. But what does this actually look like with particular assignments designed to engage international and domestic students in meaningful dialogic cross-cultural ways? For this project, domestic students referred to learners who have lived for more than two years in the home country and includes non-refugee immigrants; international students were those who recently arrived in the host country. We share insights gained from student participants in our research study which was developed to understand varying characteristics of small group work with undergraduate domestic and international students in intercultural communications and English language classes. These insights are framed as brief suggestions for introducing and sustaining intercultural interactions which can be adapted in any classroom.

We know from research that student perceptions about meaningful discussions between international students and domestic students are rare for a variety of reasons (Lehto, Cai, Fu & Chen, 2014), such as absence of opportunities for exchanges with others, student perceptions of not possessing "sufficient interactional skills to comfortably engage in intercultural interactions" leading to anxiety or uncertainty, and not "initiating nonacademic initiatives on their own" due to

personal values (p. 850-851). It was suggested that institutions help promote these intercultural interactions by intentionally providing structured opportunities where possible (Lehto, Cai, Fu & Chen, 2014) as we have done.

To better understand student perspectives, we examined student discourse using the concept of appraisal (Martin & Rose, 2007) to inspect student attitudes via a questionnaire and oral and written undergraduate student-to-student interviews used as assignment projects. To build community, instructors designed out-of-class activities for students to participate in such as a game day, a field trip to a local museum, and an outing to a historic site. We feel that the assignments, activities, and outings gave students a positive framework and context for relating and interacting, thus increasing international and domestic student relationships and communications. If outings or field trips are not possible, meaningful online synchronous or asynchronous activities may be planned with similar impact such as utilizing cultural institution or museum websites, parks, virtual field trip offerings or photo sharing sites to elicit student engagement and “intergroup contact and interactions” (Lehto, Cai, Fu & Chen, 2014, p. 852).

## **WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED**

By means of Martin and Rose’s (2003) analytic structure, we focused on using appraisal to examine “interpersonal meanings” (p. 22) within the data, which is helpful in determining attitudes in relationships. The framework offers a way to analyze attitudes in a simple positive to negative context as defined by Martin and Rose (2003). From the analysis we learned that domestic students had positive attitudes about working with international students in small learning groups whereas international students had contrasting perceptions of their own interactions, possibly because of the challenges of understanding idiomatic English and responding to “fast-spoken” English (Rosa, 2002, p. 65) used by domestic students in exchanges.

Domestic students tended to strive for adoption of their newly learned values such as acceptance, influenced by ideas from their studies in the intercultural course. This uncovered an unexpected dynamic. Ishihara (2005) implied that international students may resist unfamiliar ways of doing things, which could impinge on their interactions and satisfaction of interactions. They tended to choose comfortable routines for social survival over uncertain rewards in unfamiliar situations. In other words, students may favor security over uncertainty in new social situations. This is in agreement with Brown and Hewstone (2005) who also theorized differences along with some similarities in intercultural interactions. In our analysis we found that both international and domestic students were comfortable with each other when they went “off script” allowing them to engage in positive interpersonal interactions as evidenced in their interview recordings. Topics around family, relationships, pets, photos, work, fashions, and food allowed students to relax, connect, and enjoy the interchanges, though we learned that domestic students often interrupted respondents or rushed to the next question without wait time during exchanges. What are the classroom implications of these perceptions?

## **CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

We suggest that educators allow groups of international and domestic students time to interact socially at the beginning of the semester and to build into the syllabus some credit for these interaction experiences via small structured assignments. The social interaction can consist of visiting a museum, park, or even a location on campus (library, gallery) with pre-designed interview questions provided for groups of three or four to complete and upload for credit. Questions can be designed around course content if desired, and interactions can take place during class time at the locales. Students can share a photo or memento, which leads to discussing preferences of such things as where to eat, places to visit, or recreational activities or

outings. These experiences can then be shared out in a whole group after the initial, short episode of interaction to encourage whole group discussions; an instructor can suggest that groups again meet outside of class for further interactions, maybe even for bonus points garnered for photos of the encounters posted. In our project, students met during a planned “game day” on campus, at a local museum, and a historic site with instructors and graduate students. Student interviews from these excursions were uploaded to the class website and questionnaires were completed for further data analysis to help elucidate student perceptions and interactions. The written and audio taped posted assignments allowed a record of exchanges and interactions, giving participants and the instructors a tool for continued dialogue.

Meaningful interactions build a spirit of engagement and cross-cultural understandings, increasing the likelihood of better communication because there are more ‘affective’ connections (Martin & Rose, 2007) which can then help build relevant academic conversations (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). In addition, time management benchmarks help such as required reporting dates of how group coordination and completion of tasks is progressing, as does reminding domestic students of appropriate dialogic practices, good listening skills, pacing of conversations, wait time, and constructive feedback tips.

Thus, from our examination of student perceptions we note that instructors can be intentional about arranging brief yet evocative initial exercises for international and domestic students to engage in meaningful activities. While this research was carried out in higher education, the ideas to elicit and support interactions in diverse settings can also be utilized in elementary, middle, and high schools. If positive affect is cultivated, students will be motivated to communicate effectively and work together to complete projects and maybe extend their

relationships further, deepening their new associations while developing lasting cross-cultural understanding.

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