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Exploring, questioning and instrumentalising culture**

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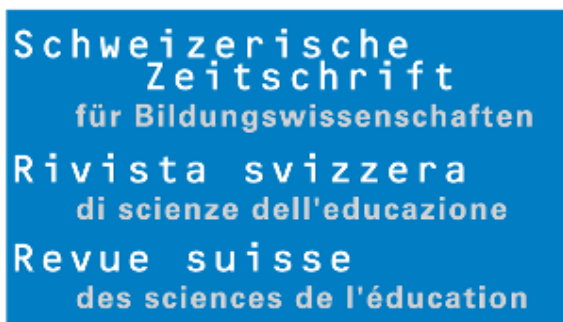
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Swiss adolescents' cultural positioning in English secondary schools: Exploring, questioning and instrumentalising culture

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This study examines the cultural positioning of five Swiss adolescents in English secondary schools, focusing on their cultural exploration and understanding. Using intercultural communication and competence theories, it explores how these students navigate the English educational system and perceive their peers' attitudes. By analysing their narratives, the study assesses their intercultural sensitivity and identity negotiation. Additionally, it evaluates the impact of a support programme on fostering intercultural sensitivity and easing transitions. Findings show that students often maintained an ethnocentric stance and occasionally used culture to distance themselves from uncomfortable situations, but discussing culture prompted them to question cultural differences and identities.

1. Introduction

The movement of students across international borders for educational purposes has become a prevalent phenomenon in today's globalised world. This mobility is believed to bring about significant cultural exchanges and adaptation challenges, particularly for adolescents, but their experiences remain underrepresented in research. This study examines the cultural positioning of five Swiss secondary school students who spent seven months in an English secondary school as part of a bilingual programme organised by the canton of Vaud. The primary focus lies in understanding how these students navigate the cultural landscape of the English educational system and how they perceive and interpret the attitudes of their English peers toward them. This study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how these five adolescents construct their cultural identities in a new environment, and how these identities are negotiated and reshaped through daily interactions with their English counterparts. Additionally, the study addresses the potential impact of a support programme designed to foster intercultural sensitivity among students and facilitate smoother transitions between different cultural values and practices.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Intercultural Competence and Study Abroad

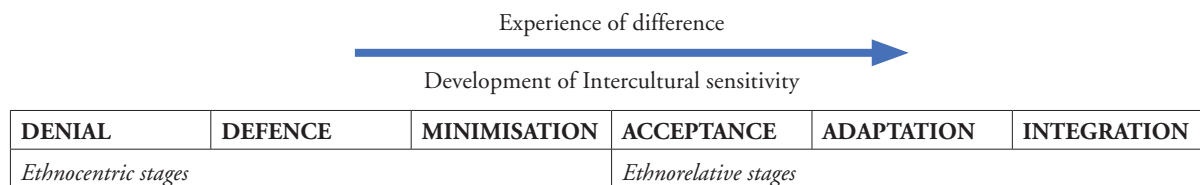
Intercultural competence (IC), a pivotal concept in sociolinguistics and language education, encompasses the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds. Three key frameworks are widely used to highlight the dynamic, reflective, and relational aspects of intercultural competence: Byram's (1997, 2021) Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), Deardorff's (2006, 2011) Intercultural Competence Model (ICM), and Bennett's (1986, 2012) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). Byram (1997, 2021) conceptualises IC as comprising knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable individuals to engage with cultural diversity while maintaining a critical understanding of their own and others' perspectives. Deardorff (2011) emphasises the processual and developmental nature of IC, highlighting attitudes such as openness and respect as foundational. Bennett (1986) frames IC as a progression from ethnocentric to ethnorelative world views.

Unlike Byram or Deardorff's models, Bennett's DMIS is not built around language and communication but rather around culture and adaptation, focusing on individuals' internal development regarding cultural differences. Bennett's model does not theorise a specific competence but rather a personal *sensitivity*, which remains an influential component of IC. Drawing on his extensive experience teaching intercultural communication, Bennett designed his model to identify the different ways students experience cultural difference. He defined six stages, or positions, on a continuum, noting that progression through these stages is not linear or sequential.

Instead, individuals may exhibit specific positions in specific instances, and all stages likely coexist within an individual to some degree.

Figure 1.

The Six Positions of the DMIS (Bennett, 1986, p. 182)



As *Figure 1* shows, Bennett’s six stages, or positions, are organised along a continuum that moves from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Bennett defines ethnocentrism as a position in which one’s own culture is central to one’s reality, with its beliefs and values remaining unquestioned. In contrast, ethnorelativism refers to the realisation that one’s cultural beliefs and values are just one among many viable ways of organising and understanding reality. The first stage, *Denial*, is the most ethnocentric, where individuals are only aware of their own culture and see others as mere collections of tangible artefacts, without recognising different beliefs or values. Following this is *Defence*, where cultural differences are acknowledged but viewed through stereotypes, creating a polarised ‘us versus them’ mindset that deems one’s own culture superior. *Minimisation*, the final ethnocentric stage, downplays these differences by focusing on similarities, often trivialising or romanticising other cultures. *Acceptance* marks the first ethnorelative stage, signifying a shift in cultural awareness where differences are acknowledged and respected, though not necessarily agreed with or liked. *Adaptation* involves both cognitive and emotional shifts, enabling empathy and appropriate actions across cultures. Finally, in the *Integration* stage, individuals seamlessly incorporate multiple cultural perspectives, moving between them without losing their sense of self.

Bennett’s DMIS was initially developed to assess students’ intercultural sensitivity and provide them with appropriate support. In this study, it served as a reference for both participants and researchers to discuss and analyse intercultural sensitivity. Its clearly defined stages and examples help illustrate a desirable progression without personal judgment, facilitating a thorough analysis.

2.2 Studies Researching Intercultural Competence

Research on intercultural competence has traditionally focused on its measurement as an outcome of study abroad (SA) programmes. Most of these studies apply quantitative methods and, despite using a wide range of instruments to measure IC, generally indicate some development of IC between pre- and post-SA measures (Anderson et al., 2006; Moreno Bruna & Goethals, 2021; Rundstrom Williams, 2005; Watson & Wolfel, 2015; Wolff & Borkikowsky, 2018). While these studies demonstrate the potential of SA for fostering IC, they often fail to explain the process—how and when it occurs. Additionally, they do not address instances where IC development does not happen, which is evident only in the high variability among participants, nor do they explain these difficulties. This paper – and previous qualitative studies – focuses precisely on these processes, examining how SA participants deal with cultural differences, how they react when confronted with a different habitus, and how they respond when their own cultural assumptions are challenged.

Contrary to the generally positive outcomes of quantitative studies, qualitative research reveals more adverse results. It shows that when students encounter different cultures, some withdraw and cling to their perceived cultural superiority, especially during short-term stays. This often leads to increased ethnocentrism upon returning home (Block, 2007; Jackson, 2015, 2019; Kinginger, 2013; Plews, 2015; Wilkinson, 1998). Cultural misunderstandings can stem from both the student and host community, with host stereotypes and negative emotions hindering communication (Spencer-Rodgers, 2002). Racial perceptions may also prevent intercultural exchanges due to feelings of judgment and rejection (Goldoni, 2013; Talburt & Stewart, 1999). Studies highlight that female students sometimes face sexual harassment abroad (Polanyi, 1995; Talburt & Stewart 1999; Trentman, 2015; Twombly, 1995). Additionally, Brown and Brown (2013) found that some students in the UK often re-identify with their home culture (Russia, Iran, Indonesia, China and Slovenia) when confronted with negative external perceptions, defending their national identity and disengaging from intercultural experiences, thus missing language-learning opportunities.

SA participants do not need to face discrimination to struggle with understanding cultural differences. Goldoni (2013) noted that many students expect the host culture to be similar to their own, maintaining an ethnocentric view. For instance, American students in France and French students in Australia often misinterpret teachers' behaviour as disrespectful (Patron, 2007; Kinginger, 2009). Kinginger and Whitworth (2005) found that two American students were uncomfortable with French norms of femininity and heterosexual relations, leading one to avoid contact with locals. This suggests a lack of awareness of their own cultural ideologies. Patron (2007) also noted judgmental reactions from French students towards Australian pub culture. Brubaker (2007) found that short-term SA students in Germany were aware of cultural differences but could not understand them deeply. Mitchell and Tyne (2021) reported that many participants' experiences abroad reinforced their attachment to their home culture without fostering IC. Qualitative studies thus showed that the development of IC is not an easy or straightforward process, although positive outcomes can also arise.

Indeed, some studies report positive or nuanced results in IC development, such as a deconstruction of stereotypes (Edmonds, 2010; Larzén-Östermark, 2011; Mas-Alcolea, 2019). Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) qualitative study of 50 SA students in Europe found that an initial heightened awareness of differences and a tendency toward generalisation faded over time and was replaced by a more personal approach to others. Patron (2007) observed that French students in Australia initially reaffirmed their cultural identity but gradually developed a hybrid identity through their experiences. Mitchell et al. (2017) noted that while some students retained stereotypes, others, like one who had taken an ethnography class, gained new cultural perspectives. This highlights the variability of intercultural learning and the importance of equipping students with the right tools to address cultural challenges.

Although intercultural competence is often perceived as a positive outcome of SA in the "social imaginary", this transformation is not automatic nor systematic; there is a high risk of a reaffirmation of the self-identity and the consolidation of a "Self vs Other binary" (Kubota, 2016, p. 354). Consequently, there is an agreement among scholars on the need to support students before, during and after SA in order to develop their IC (Engle & Engle, 2004; Jackson, 2015; Kinginger, 2009; Jackson & Oguro, 2018; Paige et al., 2009; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012; Vande Berg, 2007; Vande Berg et al., 2012), a recommendation followed in this study, and more specifically its broader project (Ferry-Meystre, 2025a).

The present study focuses on secondary school students, and research on adolescents abroad is scarce. Moreover, very few of the existing studies discuss cultural aspects. Perrefort (2008) and Tan and Kinginger (2013) both noted that the young age of adolescents gave them more opportunities for intercultural encounters – or meaningful connections with the locals – than university students, which could possibly favour the development of IC, although this was not measured specifically. At the same time, in his ground-breaking work on the child's psychological development, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, Erikson (1968) noted that adolescents can become particularly intolerant of differences as a means of protection. As they face biological and psychological changes and are having to constantly redefine their positions in the social world, they often feel the need to identify strongly with some of their peers, which is frequently combined with the rejection of those who are different: "Young people can become remarkably clannish, intolerant, and cruel in their exclusion of others who are 'different,' in skin color or cultural background, in tastes and gifts, and often in entirely petty aspects of dress and gesture arbitrarily selected as the signs of an in-grouper or out-grouper" (Erikson, 1968, p.132). Is their young age an opportunity for more social connections and IC development, or a barrier due to the identity crisis they are going through?

The present study aims to investigate the perceptions of five Swiss secondary school students regarding their English secondary school experiences, in relation to both the school system and curriculum, as well as the local students' attitudes. Through analysis of the students' narratives, this study thus seeks to understand the (inter-)cultural experiences and intercultural sensitivity of adolescents abroad: it questions their positionings – as defined by Davies and Harré (1990) which "focus[es] attention on dynamic aspects of encounters in contrast to the way in which the use of "role" serves to highlight static, formal and ritualistic aspects" (p. 43) – regarding different cultural practices. Finally, and to a lesser extent, this study looks at the usefulness of discussing cultural differences and intercultural competence with students and having them write about intercultural critical incidents.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

This paper focuses on adolescents’ cultural positionings using a qualitative approach, based on the narrative analysis of diaries and interviews of five secondary school students. These participants were part of a bilingual Matura programme in the canton of Vaud, Switzerland. The Swiss education system offers various training options and the Matura grants access to all Swiss universities and technical schools. In 2021-2022, only about 19% of Swiss youth pursued the Matura. In the canton of Vaud, Matura students can opt for a bilingual programme in a national language or in English, mainly through a year-long immersive stay, provided they have a minimum of 45 points at the end of the first year (40 points are necessary to pass Year 1). However, less than 3% of students take this path.

The five participants were all volunteers and free to withdraw from the project at any time. Some biographical and linguistic information is provided in *Table 1*.

Table 1.

Participants’ information

	AGE PRIOR DEPARTURE	PRIOR SA EXPERIENCE	LANGUAGE(S) SPOKEN AT HOME
ROSE	16 (2002)	4 weeks in London	Swiss-German, German, French
AUDREY	16 (2002)	2 weeks in Germany	French
MELANIE	16 (2002)	–	French
ALBERT	16 (2002)	–	Portuguese, French
LILY	16 (2003)	2 weeks in Germany 4 weeks in USA	French (Italian)

3.2 Data Collection and Narrative Inquiry

To collect the data, the research project was designed as a programme to support the participants before, during and after their SA experience. This paper focuses on five students’ cultural positionings within their secondary school environment, although the original project included nine students and examined their social, cultural and linguistic positionings (Ferry-Meystre, 2025a). Before the students’ departure in August 2019, two introductory meetings addressed key social, cultural, and linguistic challenges they would face abroad. Cultures were discussed with students as diverse and often unconscious ways of perceiving and interpreting reality; popular representations, such as stereotypes and cultural shock, as well as more academic models, such as the DMIS, were also introduced in an accessible way. It is important to underline that cultures were not understood or presented in a traditional view, that is “as geographically (and quite often nationally) distinct entities, as relatively unchanging and homogeneous, and as all-encompassing systems of rules or norms that substantially determine behavior” (Atkinson, 1999, p. 626) but as dynamic, context-sensitive and internally diverse, although simplistic oppositions between England and Switzerland may appear in the data which consist of students’ diaries and interviews. Indeed, once in England, participants documented their social, cultural and linguistic experiences in online diaries. Students were free to write whenever they wanted, and their final diaries ranged from 10 to 38 entries and from 2,100 to 9,000 words. To encourage more entries, different questions were asked regularly during the first two months and then approximately once a month until the end of their stay. These questions were both general – to know how they were doing – and more specific, targeting their social, cultural and linguistic positionings. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, their stay ended early, in March 2020, and data collection concluded with personal interviews in French (First language, L1), three months after their return. These interviews, lasting 45 to 90 minutes, provided an opportunity for discussion of their diaries and overall experiences.

The primary data consisted of the students’ narratives, which are both cognitive and social activities that reflect the specific context and intentions of the storyteller (Barkhuizen, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 2012). Narratives offer insights into students’ identities (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015), but they are inherently subjective and one-sided. In the larger study, data were analysed, presented and discussed using the three different narrative approaches described by Benson (2018). First, through a content and thematic analysis of narratives using NVivo 13 (Lumivero, 2020) – where narratives were the source of data; second, through a

discourse analysis of narratives – where the narrative is understood within the context of interaction (Bamberg, 1997); and third, through narrative analysis – with the results also presented as a narrative. Each student's experiences were rewritten into three narratives, focusing on their social, cultural, and linguistic positionings. Representative extracts were analysed using positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997), and students' overall experiences were compared and contrasted. This paper specifically examines five students' cultural positionings within their secondary school environment, in regard to the local school system and their English peers' attitudes and behaviours. These students were chosen because cultural differences were noticed and discussed in their narratives. In fact, the variety of cultural differences observed and experienced was correlated with students' investment in the different local communities. These students also had more connections with the locals (Ferry-Meystre, 2025b). As Bennett (1986) theorised, the greater the students' experiences with the culture, the richer their understanding and interpretation of these experiences will be.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Perceptions of the Local School Systems and Values

For the five adolescents, cultural differences were mainly experienced at school since this was where they spent most of their time. Examining the English school system, the students' narratives reveal that it was experienced both positively and negatively by the students. Starting with the positive, Lily loved the different didactic methods she encountered in her classes.

Actually, I liked all the classes, well I liked 50% of the classes and that's English and Economics, really it's... I loved it. I've discovered new ways. Really, I'm infinitely grateful. I loved it because in English we did psychology. And in Economics, it was just the part of Economics and Law that I love.¹ (Lily: Interview)

Similarly, Albert appreciated the autonomy they were given, and learnt from it.

It's quite interesting because in Switzerland, we're really... We're really taken by the hand. We're accompanied, we have a teacher who's there, he gives us homework, he checks on us and on our homework, whereas over there, we're just given a file, we're given dates, we have to fill in this file. Sometimes you even have to make your own corrections. [...] Anyway, that's it. It's quite nice. (Albert: Interview)

Melanie, for her part, appreciated the lighter timetable which gave her more free time.

My life here is really easy, I mean I finish school super early, do my homework and go to sleep. (Melanie: 25 Feb)

In the secondary school more generally, Rose enjoyed her school's tradition of assemblies and rewards organised around different competing "houses" which created a sense of belonging.

I liked the idea of all the houses coming together because, well, I thought it was pretty special. And it was, well... because each house was supposed to get as many points as possible to win a prize at the end of the year. So, it was a bit of a competition and at the end of each semester, we saw which house had won. And then we won, our house, so I was happy, even though I'd done... well, I hadn't done much, but it was good all the same. (Rose: Interview)

These positive impressions are all linked to immediate rewards or personal benefits. Lily enjoyed interesting classes, Albert and Melanie appreciated the increased freedom in time management, and Rose felt happy and motivated by being part of a successful group. In these cases, positive feedback does not necessarily indicate a comprehensive understanding and acceptance of the system; rather, it reflects a personal appreciation of specific elements that have had a positive impact on their lives. Hence, it cannot be related to Bennett's adaptation stage.

On the other hand, students also raised negative aspects. Audrey had a different perception of the competition implemented by her school in Chester; she hated the elitist and competitive atmosphere instilled by the many prizes and rewards given out in assemblies.

I find the Chester system (I don't know if it's the same in the rest of England) quite elitist. That translates into little things, like receiving a chocolate when you give a correct answer. But there are other little things, like the fact that the teachers write down the 'good' and 'bad' pupils on a board, the fact that each pupil gets a number of points that goes up or down depending on our 'achievements', that at assemblies two pupils get packets of sweets

¹ The original data are in French and have been translated using DeepL (2023) first, then verified and adapted by the author where necessary.

for the work they've done. I have the impression that I'm the only one who feels this way in Chester, maybe I'm thinking too much...? (Audrey: 4 Dec)

The way the school operated conflicted with Audrey's values, causing issues that continued throughout her stay. As a result, Audrey found it difficult to motivate herself in the mornings, and school was not her favourite part of the experience. This prevented her from accepting the school culture, leading her to remain critical of its methods. In her interview, Audrey reiterated her discomfort about various aspects, such as the locked gates, describing them as increasingly disturbing. She noted that "it was fun to discover but no longer". Audrey rejected the system and never managed to see it in a different light. By December, she began to question why she felt isolated in her views, and by June, her opinion had become firmly negative.

Albert and Rose both resented the overly serious and studious atmosphere, which prevented them from having social contacts and enjoying themselves. For Rose, the motivation of her English peers for studying hard was detrimental to their integrity.

I don't know if it was the school or the people in particular, but it was pretty hard to make English friends at first... because I had the impression that they were really only there to work. ((laughs)) It's a really serious school compared to schools in Switzerland, where, I mean, it's really noisy sometimes in class. Over there, it was really very serious. They were also very focused on putting together a dossier for university, so they were really, really serious about school. (Albert: Interview)

Um, well, something that shocked us all, well the Swiss, was that there were a lot of people in our school who were very... well, who did a lot, really a lot for school, because the more you do in England, the more chances you have to go to universities, I mean, good universities. So the more you do, the further you'll be able to go. [...] Yeah, it was a bit weird because in Switzerland, a lot of people tend to do the minimum to get through the year because you can get into a Swiss university with 4 anyway, so it was a bit weird. [...] On the one hand, it was good to be able to have an attitude where you work and you're motivated, but on the other hand, I had the impression that a lot of people were just doing certain things or learning certain things just to put it on their CV. And so that was a bit... I didn't really like that, that everyone was doing it just for their future. Not because it made them happy. (Rose: Interview)

The last two excerpts are particularly enlightening as they underscore a significant disparity between the Swiss² and English educational systems, specifically regarding the pressure students face and the personal commitment required for success. Rose notes that in her home school, many students aim for the minimum required to pass since grades do not significantly impact university acceptance, a sentiment shared to some extent by both Rose and Albert. Encountering students who consistently "work hard," are consistently "serious," and consistently pursue top grades was both "shocking" and "weird" to them. While they could rationalise — and perhaps understand — the motivations behind these behaviours, they struggled to fully grasp or accept them. Rose expressed discomfort at the notion of students working "for their future" rather than for personal enjoyment. She appears to seek justification for her approach to academic work, implying that when she studies diligently, it's because she finds pleasure in it, unlike her English counterparts. The dichotomy between necessity and pleasure, with a preference for pleasure over necessity, seems to serve as a somewhat simplistic means of defending her own values or attitudes. This underscores once more that the participants tended to maintain an ethnocentric perspective of the English educational system, steadfastly defending their own, in need of identification and belonging.

As is evident from these examples, the majority of the students' reflections on school were inherently self-centred and framed in comparison with their experiences in their home school (Patron, 2007; Kinginger, 2009). They welcomed the differences that eased their lives, such as shorter school days or motivational aspects, while criticising those that made them uncomfortable, whether in terms of atmosphere or workload. These perspectives thus largely remained ethnocentric (Bennett, 1986, 2012), as cultural distinctions were perceived and assessed primarily through the Swiss lens, rarely acknowledging the logic unique to the English system. Participants identified differences and critiqued them to varying degrees, often inversely according to their level of acceptance, but seldom adopted them proactively. While they learned to tolerate, accept, or adapt to differences, their stay may have been too brief — and/or the support provided may have been insufficient — for genuine understanding, precluding deeper transformation or integration.

² Switzerland's education system is administered by its 26 individual cantons and thus lacks nationwide uniformity. In this context (and hereafter), 'Swiss' refers more specifically to the system as experienced in the canton of Vaud.

4.2 Perceptions of the Local Students' Behaviours and Values

The participants responded not only to the school system but also to the behaviours and attitudes of local students, which directly or indirectly influenced their experiences. For instance, Audrey felt uncomfortable around local girls as she perceived — and was made to feel — she was quite different from them.

Well, I mean mostly with the girls in our school... They spent their time talking about “what dress are you going to buy for my party,” stuff like that... Yeah... Or also, for example, during parties they would actually spend half an hour sitting on a couch taking selfies, and then they actually just stayed on the couch doing nothing. So yeah... I still don't understand, by the way, but whatever... yeah, that was a little peculiar. And most of all, whenever you dressed differently from them, I mean there really was just one outfit that everyone would wear. Yeah, I mean... I really don't feel that style, so whenever you dressed a little differently, you would get kinda weird looks, like “who's that alien”... like yeah. (Audrey: Interview)

In this excerpt, Audrey is asked to describe behaviours she found “peculiar, surprising, or disturbing,” and the first anecdote she shared focused on “the girls in her school.” Audrey gives a stereotypical portrayal of them as being primarily interested in clothes and parties, noting that they only discussed those topics. Her use of “stuff like that... Yeah...” underscores their superficiality. Audrey feels they show off but have nothing interesting to talk about, citing examples of their behaviour at parties where they would “actually” spend half an hour taking pictures of themselves. This perceived superficiality is further highlighted as they focused only on their appearance, doing nothing after the photo sessions. The repetition of “actually” emphasises that Audrey is reporting facts, without exaggeration. She concludes her sentences with “so yeah...”, implying a judgment she doesn't voice directly. Audrey mentions she “still does not understand” their behaviour, referring to them as “a little peculiar.” She adds that they were very judgmental if someone dressed differently, using general pronouns to make broad statements, but hinting that she herself felt uncomfortable about their judgments. Audrey sees her own behaviour and values as more correct, which justifies her criticism. Her strong negative opinion of these girls may be a defensive reaction to feeling rejected by them, which reinforces her own values and makes relationship development difficult. By stating her differences in interests and outfits, Audrey distances herself from these girls who embodied everything she abhorred.

Likewise, Melanie and Lily struggled to comprehend certain reactions from local students during and after their interactions. Both experienced instances of bullying (Ferry-Meystre, 2025c) and invoked cultural differences to rationalise the unpleasant behaviour and shield themselves.

My friends and I have often thought that teenagers in Switzerland were very different. Especially after something that happened. I was talking to an English student in my maths class and in Switzerland, when you talk to someone, the discussion stays between us or, knowing the stereotypes of girls, you tell your friends but you're not going to tell the whole school. And it just so happened that a week later, different people came to ask me or my friends if I was ‘flirting’ with him, or if I liked him. And Laura and Bettina have a class with a guy who tells everyone's gossip. It was at that point, I think about a month after we arrived, that we realised we didn't have the basics and after talking to my host mum she told me that it went all the way back to their upbringing. To this day, stories like this still happen, but there's nothing you can do about it if they've always lived like that, it's not us three little Swiss girls who are going to change them. (Melanie: 9 Feb)

As for the ‘young people’, it's also very hard to get used to their mentality. I'm sorry, but it's cost me a lot to realise that, yes, we're different and that the way I used to be and act, which was fine in Switzerland, doesn't work here and that behaviours, smiles, messages on snap and everything else are interpreted differently than in Switzerland. (Lily: 14 Feb)

But I was, I was the only one, facing a country, if you can call it that, or a mentality that everyone had and it was really hard. It was really, really hard. Because... because it was new, and because every day I'd get comments or things like that. (Lily: Interview)

The three extracts demonstrate a clear opposition between the local students and the participants, who tend to position themselves as representative of all Swiss students. Both groups are depicted in broad strokes, lacking nuance. In Melanie's story, she realises that she “lacks the basics”, that “they” [the English] have always lived like that and “we” [the Swiss] will not change them. Lily finds herself “facing a country [...] or a mentality that everyone had” as she realises that her behaviours are interpreted in a different way in England. Murphy-Lejeune (2002) observed that it takes time for initial focus on global differences to give way to more specific observations, indicating a progression from stereotypes to a more accurate understanding of people and behaviour. This may explain the participants' generalisations.

At the same time, maintaining a Swiss perspective serves as a defence mechanism, creating distance from uncomfortable situations (Doerr, 2012, 2017). Lily and Melanie, who were both subjected to a kind of bullying, justified the English students' mentalities and behaviour through cultural differences. If they were treated that way, it was not coming from them but from a kind of cultural misunderstanding. They viewed mistreatment as stemming from a cultural misunderstanding rather than a personal attack. In doing so, they safeguarded their self-worth and cultural values. Culture became a convenient explanation for everything they found perplexing or disagreeable.

Overall, participants struggled to move beyond a self-centred viewpoint, yet they made efforts to understand, adapt to, and accept different situations. Othering, though often viewed negatively, is an essential aspect of exploring another culture. Working with the concept of culture presents a paradox: while recognising differences is crucial for learning about others and ourselves, it can also lead to objectification and reinforcement of stereotypes (Dervin, 2012; Doerr, 2017). The participants could not escape the received view of culture (Atkinson, 1999) and the discourse of *same vs. others*, and apprehend their reality differently. To some extent, no other option was available (Dervin, 2009), as they were encouraged to view their experiences through that lens. It could be argued that within students' interactions with the researcher, it was indeed difficult to escape a self-centred position; in other words, interactions with the researcher may have further reinforced this perspective, as participants were repeatedly asked about differences, inadvertently framing their responses in opposition to the "other".

4.3 How to Support Students' Intercultural Learning

In this study – acknowledging the aforementioned limitations – the chosen approach was to raise students' awareness of (cultural) differences and encourage them to reflect and write about them based on the premise that fostering intercultural competence requires the recognition and critical examination of such differences (Bennett, 1986; Doerr, 2017). While it is challenging to define the success of this approach, it certainly increased students' awareness of the issue and aided in understanding some of its complexities, as Rose explained:

Above all, sometimes I'd tell myself that I should let go of my Swiss perspective, and that I should just stay neutral about the situation and act like too "Swiss", with that typical Swiss attitude or opinion about things and just be neutral, or try and see it more from the English side. [...] I would try not to judge them too much, and I feel like that's something that's different from Switzerland, so you can't really... You can't really say anything, and also about the fact that they work a lot, or about what they eat, I mean lots of things like that. [...] In certain situations, I'd just think... Uh, it's not ideal to just be closed-minded and think like a Swiss. (Rose: Interview)

This extract demonstrates both increased awareness and a hint of defensiveness towards others. When asked about the benefits of the support programme, Rose acknowledges intercultural sensitivity, emphasising the importance of avoiding a solely "Swiss perspective". Thus, she tried not to "act like too Swiss", with a Swiss attitude and opinion. Almost paradoxically, Rose instead suggests to stay "neutral" – a position Swiss people are very familiar with – before adding that trying to understand the other's perspective was also a valid option. In practical terms, being an outsider, she could not put herself in their place and should not "judge" them, so she "tried not to". Merely mentioning hard-working students and the food they eat however – and saying that she had to refrain from judgments – implies that she disagreed and could not comprehend them. She distances herself from the locals; it is "them" against "I" or "us", and she makes it clear that she does not want to be associated with them or their point of view. Her acceptance of their difference is thus purely rational or intellectual, rather than integrated, but it still demonstrates a first step toward a more ethnorelative position.

Lily expresses a similar sentiment with different phrasing:

But that's also what travelling is all about, discovering other mentalities. And you kind of anticipated and warned us about that. So certainly not as radical and drastic, etc. But... a change of mentality, whether in the way we eat or in the way we perceive bodies or people or girls, or in general, that's what it's all about. And I knew that if I went to England, I'd have to... not fit into a box, but learn to understand that there are other mentalities, other ways of looking at people than the ones I'd been brought up with. (Lily: Interview)

Lily could not comprehend the way she was physically perceived, and she distanced herself from their "mentalities", opposing them to the way she "had been brought up". But she knew travelling meant "discovering new mentalities". She says the programme had prepared her for it, although it was not supposed to help her accept things which were unacceptable, such as bullying. While it is unclear whether discussing culture with the participants and having them write about it impacted their intercultural sensitivity, the conscious connection between their intercultural experiences and the support programme suggests that it helped them understand or cope with difficult situations.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the cultural positioning and intercultural sensitivity of five Swiss adolescents who were immersed in English secondary schools as part of a bilingual study abroad programme. Drawing on narrative data from diaries and interviews, it revealed how participants made sense of cultural difference through a lens that often remained rooted in their own sociocultural norms. While students encountered a variety of cultural practices — both in educational settings and peer interactions — their responses were frequently characterised by comparisons with familiar Swiss norms, leading to generalisations and, at times, defensive positionings. These tendencies were especially pronounced in situations where participants felt socially excluded or misunderstood, reinforcing the role of affect and belonging in intercultural encounters during adolescence (Erikson, 1968).

However, the study also highlighted moments of reflection and emerging awareness, suggesting that exposure to cultural differences, accompanied by guided questioning and support, can prompt adolescents to critically examine their assumptions and begin negotiating more complex intercultural understandings. This supports Bennett's (1986, 2012) claim that intercultural sensitivity develops gradually and often inconsistently through exposure to the reality of cultural differences. The complexity of interpreting cultural events or behaviour may also be linked to students' intercultural experience. Notably, Lily and Rose, who both demonstrated a critical stance toward the perception of cultural norms, had prior experience abroad (see Table 1 above). While none of the participants fully transitioned to an ethnorelative perspective, several demonstrated an ability to step back from initial judgments, acknowledge alternative viewpoints, and identify their own interpretive frames — an essential first step in developing intercultural competence.

From a pedagogical perspective, this research reinforces the importance of support in study abroad programmes, particularly for adolescents who are still forming their social and cultural identities. Educators and programme coordinators should offer opportunities for guided reflection, narrative engagement, and open dialogue about difference and the resulting discomfort. Doing so not only seems to facilitate intercultural development but also to empower students to approach diversity with greater empathy, curiosity, and resilience.

Finally, this study contributes to a growing body of qualitative research in applied linguistics that foregrounds the lived, subjective dimensions of language learning and cultural engagement. By focusing on adolescents — a population underrepresented in study abroad research — it opens avenues for further inquiry into how age, identity, and emotional development intersect with intercultural experience. Longitudinal research in particular is needed to examine whether and how early intercultural experiences influence students' long-term dispositions, world views, and linguistic trajectories.

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Keywords: Cultural positioning, intercultural sensitivity, study abroad, adolescence

Die kulturelle Positionierung von Schweizer Jugendlichen in englischen Sekundarschulen: Erkundung, Hinterfragung und Instrumentalisierung von Kultur

Zusammenfassung

In dieser Studie wird die kulturelle Positionierung von fünf Schweizer Jugendlichen in englischen Schulen untersucht. Der Fokus liegt dabei auf deren Verständnis und Auseinandersetzung mit Kultur. Auf der Grundlage theoretischer Modelle zur Kommunikation und interkulturellen Kompetenz wird analysiert, wie sich die Jugendlichen im englischen Bildungssystem zurechtfinden, ihre Peers wahrnehmen und ihre Identität aushandeln. Zudem wird der Einfluss eines Förderprogramms auf die Entwicklung interkultureller Sensibilität sowie auf die Bewältigung von Übergängen bewertet. Die Ergebnisse zeigen eine oftmals ethnozentrische Haltung, bei der kulturelle Unterschiede gelegentlich genutzt werden, um sich von unbehaglichen Situationen zu distanzieren, aber auch ein Hinterfragen von Unterschieden durch Diskussionen über Kultur.

Schlagworte: Kulturelle Positionierung, interkulturelle Sensibilität, Auslandsstudium, Adoleszenz

Le positionnement culturel des adolescent·e·s suisses dans les écoles secondaires anglaises : Exploration, questionnement et instrumentalisation de la culture

Résumé

Cette étude examine le positionnement culturel de cinq adolescent·e·s suisses dans une école anglaise, en se concentrant sur leur exploration et leur compréhension de la culture. En mobilisant les théories de la communication et de la compétence interculturelle, elle examine comment ces élèves naviguent dans le système éducatif anglais, perçoivent leurs pairs et négocient leur identité. En outre, elle évalue l'impact d'un programme de soutien sur le développement de la sensibilité interculturelle et la facilitation des transitions. Les résultats montrent un positionnement souvent ethnocentrique, une utilisation occasionnelle de la culture pour se distancier de certaines situations inconfortables, mais aussi une remise en question des différences grâce aux discussions sur la culture.

Mots-clés : Positionnement culturel, sensibilité interculturelle, études à l'étranger, adolescence

Il posizionamento culturale degli adolescenti svizzeri nelle scuole secondarie inglesi: esplorare, mettere in discussione e strumentalizzare la cultura

Riassunto

Questo studio esamina il posizionamento culturale di cinque adolescenti svizzeri in una scuola inglese, concentrandosi sulla loro esplorazione e comprensione della cultura. Utilizzando le teorie della comunicazione e della competenza interculturelle, esamina il modo in cui questi studenti navigano nel sistema educativo inglese, percepiscono i loro coetanei e negoziano la loro identità. Valuta inoltre l'impatto di un programma di sostegno sullo sviluppo della sensibilità interculturelle e sulla facilitazione delle transizioni. I risultati mostrano un posizionamento spesso etnocentrico, un uso occasionale della cultura per prendere le distanze da alcune situazioni scomode, ma anche una messa in discussione delle differenze grazie alle discussioni sulla cultura.

Parole chiave: Posizionamento culturale, Sensibilità interculturelle, Studio all'estero, Adolescenza

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