
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Role of Cultural Exchange in the Development of Intercultural Competence in the Context of Cultural Diplomacy

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| ABSTRACT

This study positions cultural exchange students at the core of cultural diplomacy and argues that those students can become potential agents of soft power by making them appreciate cultural differences and developing their intercultural competence. In other words, this study aims to report on the role of cultural exchange in developing students' intercultural competence. A mixed-method approach was used to collect the data, including a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. 16 former exchange students of the YES (Youth Exchange Scholarship) Program were invited to complete a questionnaire related to their cultural exchange experience. Then, seven of them were selected to take part in the semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study showed that the development of participants' intercultural awareness and abilities is largely positive in consideration of the positive perception of the host culture and the authentic cultural exchange in which they took part. Besides, the findings also indicated how participants become active agents of cultural diplomacy thanks to cultural exchange.

| KEYWORDS

Cultural exchange, intercultural competence, cultural diplomacy, exchange students, soft power.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, it has become crucial to develop and sustain intercultural dialogue as a way to minimize cultural differences, promote cultural diplomacy and maintain international relations between countries. Diplomacy and dialogue were found to be great ways of building mutual understanding and dispelling misunderstandings worldwide (Akli, 2012, p. 38; Saaida, 2023, p. 54). Hence, enhancing culturally personal and social skills that pertain to intercultural competence, as research has shown, is a desired objective of cultural diplomacy for better cross-cultural understanding, cooperation, and integration (e.g., Akli, 2012, p. 38). To achieve this objective, exchange student programs, specifically cultural ones, play a major role in establishing understanding and communication between different cultures. The reason behind this is that besides increasing foreign language learning (Weichbrodt, 2013, p. 10) those programs provide authentic experiences for students to interact with others from different cultures (Goff, 2013, p.3; Saaida, 2023, p. 51) which helps in increasing their global and cultural awareness as confirmed by previous research (e.g. Weichbrodt, 2013, p. 10; Gaia, 2015, p. 21; Mphahlele, 2017 as cited in Hien, 2022, p. 151; Paige et al. 2010, Twombly et al. 2012 as cited in Asada, 2019, p. 25-26; Dresseler et al., 2021, p. 15).

In light of this, this paper aims to explore students' cultural exchange as one of cultural diplomacy's instruments of 'soft power' (Atkinson, 2010, p.3) to enhance cross-cultural awareness and communication through the development of intercultural competence as the case of the American government and its foreign policy of diplomacy (Izadi, 2016, p. 13; Sustarsic, 2020, p. 913) towards Morocco. Hence, the present research makes a noteworthy contribution to the paucity of studies that target the experiences of young Moroccan exchange students as it investigates the role of cultural exchange in improving students' perception of other cultures and developing intercultural competencies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural diplomacy

One of the widely retained definitions of cultural diplomacy, according to Goff (2013), is the one provided by Cumming (2003), who defines it as *"the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding"* (p. 2). Therefore, Cultural diplomacy makes use of cultural elements such as art, music, language, and literature and exploits them in various forms and activities, for example, *"art exhibitions, music and dance performances, film festivals and academic exchanges such as seminars and conferences"* through which the individual is provided with the opportunity to connect with another culture at an emotional and personal level (Saaïda, 2023, p. 53). Those activities can be either sponsored by the government or the private sector (Schneider, 2006, p. 196). One of those main activities is designing and sponsoring short-term and long-term cultural exchange programs.

2.2 Cultural exchange

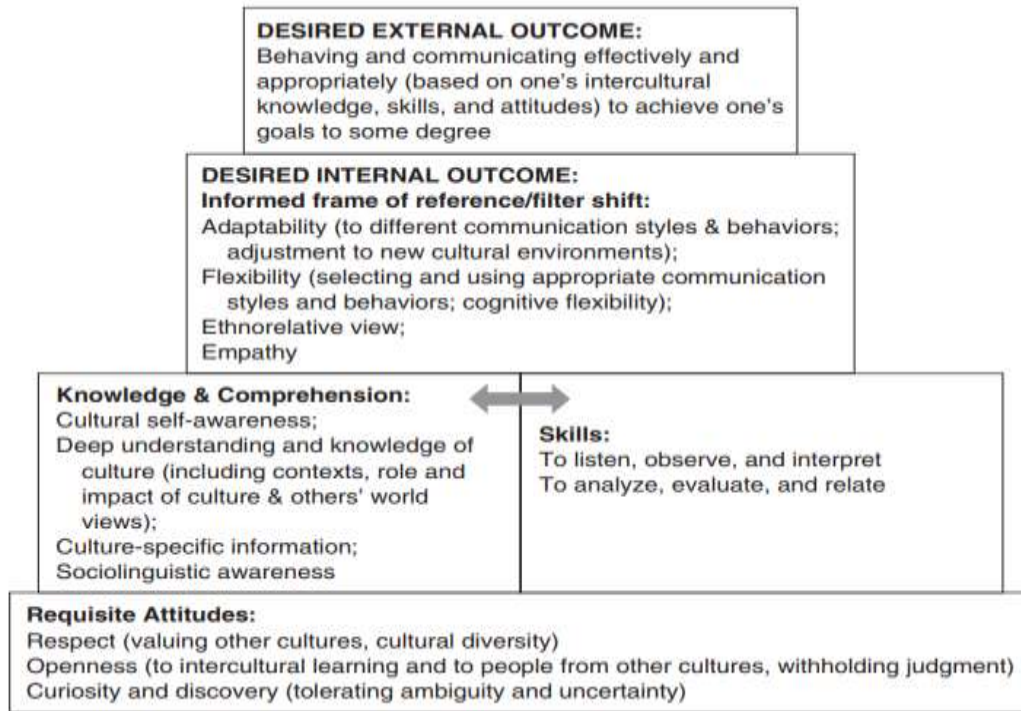
In contrast to an Academic exchange program which is a form of educational exchange and mobility in which a student takes courses in a host university mainly with the aim of broadening and enhancing career choices and prospects and gaining job opportunities in the international job market (Parey and Waldinger, 2007, Teichler, 2007 as cited in González et al., 2010, p. 414; Gaia, 2015, p. 21; Biryuk, 2023), Cultural exchange programs provides students with not only the opportunity to learn about a different culture but also to integrate in it and experience it first-hand (Wang, 2013, p. 567; Hien, 2022, p. 151). However, both types of exchanges have been ever-increasing and encouraged as they result in great benefits for the host countries (Abreu et al., 2020, p.3; Sustarsic, 2020). Moreover, there has also been a great impact of cultural exchange on the tourism industry as these programs facilitate the travel of students and consequently the travel of their relatives and friends (López et al., 2016 as cited Abreu et al., 2020, p. 4). Hence, cultural exchange has been utilized by many governments as a tool of soft power because it contributes to *"promoting a nation's values through dialogue and exchange with other cultures in the long term, and encourages relationship-building, trust, and mutuality"* (Pamment, 2013, p. 3).

2.3 Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is centered around intercultural understanding, which can be defined as *"an on-going critically reflexive process involving the development of skills, attitudes and knowledge necessary for interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds"* (Walton et al., 2013, p. 1). Another early and often cited definition of intercultural competence was provided by Deardorff (2006), who paints it as *"The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes"* (p. 241). Hence, intercultural competence is situated within culture learning theory and examines it in the context of the cross-cultural adaptation process, which enables students to learn through another (Tomasello, 2016, p. 643; Pacheco, 2020, p. 4) and acquire knowledge and familiarity with social norms, values, and beliefs of another culture (Berry, 2006; Furnham, 2010; Mahmood, 2014 as cited in *ibid*). In this regard, Wilson et al. (2013) put forward that cultural learning is a form of social learning in which intercultural interactions (i.e., language fluency and communication skills) are indicators of cultural competency that facilitate sociocultural adaptation (p. 902).

This competence of interculturality, as advanced by Byram et al. (2009, pp. 23-28), includes four dimensions: attitudes (e.g., respect and tolerance), knowledge (e.g., awareness of how a social group interacts), skills (e.g., discovering, and interpreting knowledge), and actions (e.g., personal contributions in the common good of a community). Deardorff (2006, p. 254) also advances five dimensions of interculturality in her Intercultural Competence Model, which takes the form of a pyramid and measures the degree of intercultural competence based on the acquired degree of underlying aspects for each dimension (*ibid*, p. 255). The first bottom layer of the pyramid includes requisite attitudes of respect (valuing other cultures' cultural diversity), openness (openness to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures), and curiosity and discovery (withholding judgment, tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty). The second layer includes the dimensions of knowledge and comprehension (cultural self-awareness, deep understanding and knowledge of culture, culture-specific information, and sociolinguistic awareness) and skills (to listen, observe, and interpret; to analyze, evaluate, and relate). The third layer is made up of desired personal internal outcomes such as adaptability, flexibility, and empathy, and these outcomes mostly reflect how an individual takes other viewpoints into consideration and begins responding accordingly. The last top layer involves external desired outcomes, which are effective and appropriate behavior and communication in an intercultural situation. These dimensions also fall under the umbrella of contemporary approaches to intercultural contact advanced by Ward et al. (2001), which covers the affective, behavioural, and cognitive (ABCs) aspects of an individual's intercultural development (Michelini, 2019, p. 28).

Figure 1
Pyramid model of intercultural competence (Deardorff 2006, p. 255)



Both frameworks have been used to investigate the development of intercultural competence among Moroccan students who benefitted from one year of cultural exchange in the US.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to first investigate the extent of authenticity of the exchange program and its impact on students' perception of cultural differences. Second, it aims to explore the extent of the impact of cultural exchange experience in developing Moroccan students' intercultural competence, as it is the focus of the current study. The study also aimed to investigate the link between developing students' intercultural competence and promoting cultural diplomacy. To achieve these purposes, the study was guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent has the cultural exchange experience been authentic for students?
2. How does cultural exchange impact students' positive perception of the host culture?
3. To what extent does cultural exchange develop students' intercultural competence?
4. How does intercultural competence contribute towards the promotion of cultural diplomacy?

In this study, it is hypothesized that increased authenticity of the cultural exchange experience and positive perception of the host country may likely lead to increased development of intercultural competence abilities, which in turn contributes to promoting and sustaining cultural diplomacy.

3.2 Participants

For questionnaire data collection, a total of 16 former exchange students participated in the study. The participants were alumni of the YES (Youth Exchange Scholarship) program, a fully funded educational and cultural program for high school students between the ages of 15 and 17 that is funded by the US Department of State to engage in authentic cultural exchange with the American people for a period of 10 months (U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Morocco, 2023). Therefore, the selection of this group of participants is of high significance to the study. They were 14 females (75%) and 4 males (25%) who ranged in age from under 20 to above 30 and belonged to different educational levels: 6 were high school students (37.5%), 5 were master students (31.3%), 3 were Bachelor students (18.8%) and 2 were PhD students (12.5%).

For interview data collection, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 former exchange students from different years (2 were 2022 alumni, 2 were 2019 alumni, 1 was a 2010 alumna, and 2 were 2009 alumni) to gain in-depth insights into students' exchange experiences.

3.3 Research design

The research design for this study followed both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method has been useful in obtaining statistical data related to the early proposed questions. This quantitative data was supplemented by the collection of more in-depth qualitative data using semi-structured interviews.

3.4 Instrument

For the questionnaire, the first section was devoted to eliciting demographic data, including gender, age, and level of education. The main sections devoted to collecting data related to the guiding questions of this study were adapted from Byram et al. (2009) model of intercultural competence development, which includes four dimensions: attitude, knowledge, skills, and actions. The four dimensions were transformed into different statements that aimed to measure impact both during exchange and post exchange. The questionnaire also contained items about students' perceptions of the host country and their level of familiarity with the host country pre- and post-exchange.

The second instrument in this study was a semi-structured interview in order to collect qualitative data that pertained to the students' personal exchange experience; as Dilshad and Latif (2013, p. 191) explain, *"the technique of interview is of immense use and value in qualitative research studies since they emphasize the in-detail and holistic description of activity or situation."* The interview included open-ended questions and was carried out via email or telephone because the alumni interviewed lived in different cities. The questions aimed to expand and clarify responses from the questionnaire.

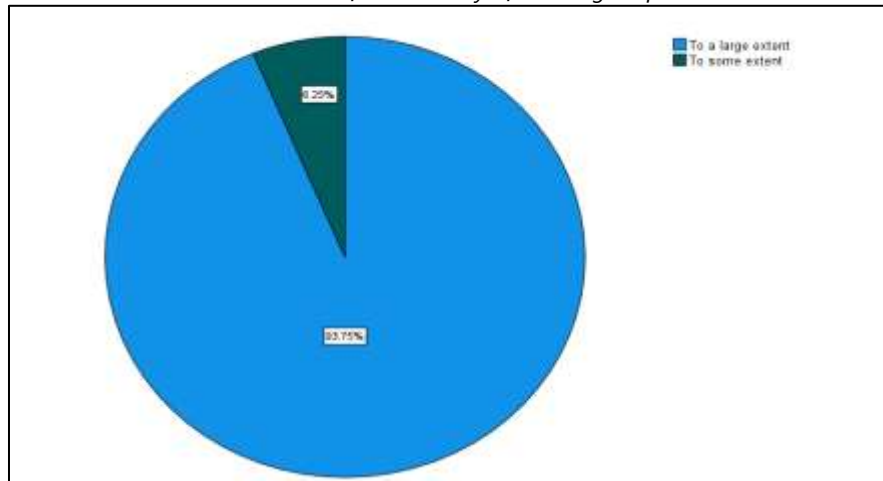
3.5 Data analysis

The results from the questionnaires were computed and explored in Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 27.0 to analyze. As for the semi-structured interviews, they were collected and themed according to the research questions.

4. Results and Discussion

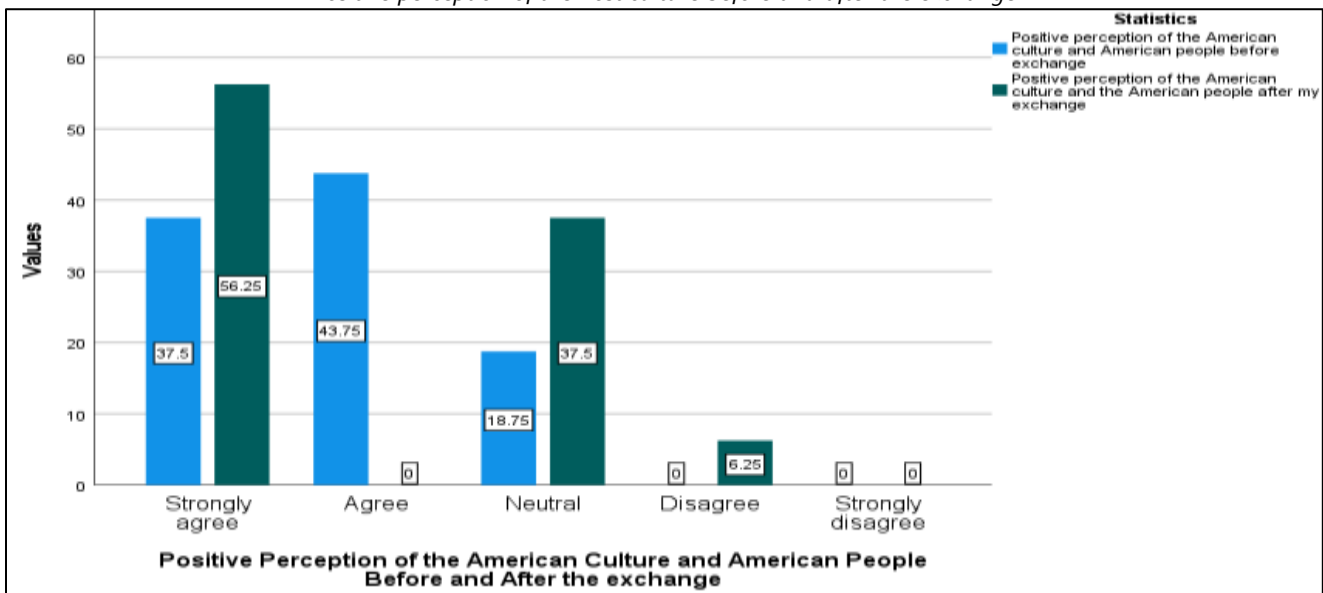
In order for the cultural exchange to be impactful on students, it should provide students with authentic real-life experiences that allow them to integrate into the host community, as mentioned earlier in the literature review. Hence, participants were asked to report on the extent to which their exchange experience was authentic. The results, as shown by Figure 8, reveal that the great majority of 93.75% chose the option "To a large extent", followed closely by 6.25% who chose "To some extent", whereas none of the respondents chose the option "To a little extent" or "To no extent at all." Thus, it is evidenced that the participants have all authentically experienced the host country. This was confirmed by several interviewees who claimed that it was a life-changing experience, such as interviewee 4, who stated, *"It was a truly transformative experience, in every sense of the word. Even with the constant support from your local organization, the U.S embassy and your high school counselor, you still feel a sense of independence and a maturity that comes with facing the world on your own, away from your family, probably for the first time ever (which was my case)."* Similarly, interviewee 1 reported that *"The entire experience helped strengthen my personality and really open me up to new things that otherwise I probably wouldn't have experienced if it wasn't for the exchange program."*

Figure 2
Extent of authenticity of exchange experiences



Regarding the impact of cultural exchange on respondents' positive perception of the host country's culture and people, results indicate, as shown below in Figure 2, that there is a different trend between the respondents' overall perception before and after the exchange. Before the exchange, a plurality of respondents (37.5% strongly agreed and 43.8% agreed) said that they had a positive perception, whereas 18.8% answered "Neutral." As for the participants' perceptions after the exchange program, although more than half of the respondents (56.3%) strongly agreed, 37.5% answered "Neutral", whereas 6.3% disagreed, which means that only a few respondents changed their perceptions. For the respondents who answered neutral, it somehow indicates that those participants felt less inclined to express their opinion about whether they have changed their perception of the host culture and people or not. This, as interviewee 6 argued, was due to "having very minimal expectations about my host community/culture." In the same vein, interviewee 2 stated that "getting in touch with my host family for some time before arrival helped give me an idea of what to expect, doing research about the area I was going to be as well as asking questions from former exchange students." Another interviewee 4 reported that during her exchange experience, she has come to the realization that the host culture was "not better, not worse, just different." However, it can be concluded that overall, there is a positive perception of the host country's people and culture pre and post exchange since half the respondents voted so. In the case of interviewee 3, who expressed how positive her exchange experience was, she stated, "My experience was everything I expected and more. Most people I met were helpful and nice, and I got to celebrate and enjoy almost all the holidays I used to see in movies. It was truly amazing." Likewise, interviewee 7 confirmed, "The benefits and personal growth I've gained from my exchange program have far exceeded any initial concerns or challenges."

Figure 3
Positive perception of the host culture before and after the exchange



For the third and main question in the study, which is related to the role of cultural exchange in the development of students' cultural competence, different items were used in the questionnaire to investigate the different dimensions of intercultural competence that were mentioned earlier in the literature review. The results are shown in the table below.

Table 1
Frequency Statistics of Extent to Which Students Developed Aspects of Intercultural Competence

Items	To a large extent	To some extent	To a little extent	To no extent
1. Greater respect for the general cultural difference	93.8%	6.3%	0.0%	0.0%
2. Developing a greater tolerance for ambiguity	75.0%	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%
3. Ability to withhold judgment on behavior that initially appears inappropriate	68.8%	31.3%	0.0%	0.0%
4. Awareness of how culture influences communication style	56.3%	37.5%	6.3%	0.0%
5. Increased knowledge related to worldwide topics and issues	87.5%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%
6. Ability to recognize cultural patterns in way members of host culture think and act	62.5%	37.5%	0.0%	0.0%
7. Ability to differentiate between descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative language and thoughts in self and in others	31.3%	56.3%	12.5%	0.0%
8. Ability to adapt behavior to make it more like that of host culture	68.8%	25.0%	6.3%	0.0%
9. Deepened relationships with foreign nationals	68.8%	18.8%	12.5%	0.0%
10. Ability to predict how members of host culture may think or act in given situations and respond accordingly	62.5%	25.0%	12.5%	0.0%
11. Increased interactive and social skills	87.5%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%
12. Volunteering and community service	43.8%	43.8%	12.5%	0.0%

A close statistical analysis of the table shows that most respondents reported high levels of development of their intercultural competence aspects and abilities. For the dimension of attitudes, which includes item 1 (i.e., respect), item 2 (i.e., tolerance for ambiguity), and item 3 (i.e., openness), a total of 93.8%, 75.0%, and 68.8% of respondents selected respectively the option "To a large extent" followed by 6.3%, 25.0%, 31.3% respectively who selected the option "To some extent." This was confirmed by the

general positive attitude displayed by interviewees as well; for instance, interviewee 4 enthusiastically expressed how her experience made her become interested in learning about other cultures; she stated, *"I fell in love with learning about foreign cultures, religion, and peace promotion through dialogue, something that I want to pursue professionally."* Interviewee 3 also stated that *"Thanks to my exchange experience, I have become more accepting, tolerant and appreciative of personal and cultural differences."*

Items 4 (i.e., cultural self-awareness), 5 (i.e., understanding of other cultures and world views), and 6 (i.e., sociolinguistic awareness) make up statements that describe the elements in the second dimension of knowledge and item 7 (i.e., to listen, observe, and interpret; to analyze, evaluate, and relate) of skills. As can be observed in the table, in general, a great proportion of respondents' choices fall between being able to achieve the elements from a large extent to some extent, with only a few respondents who selected the option to "A little extent" 6.3% and 12.5% for items 4 and 7 respectively. Thus, it is evidenced that most respondents had a good grasp of knowledge and skills related to handling and navigating their exchange experience. Interviewee 4 confirmed how her exchange experience has been transformative to her; she shared, *"What makes an exchange year a great one is the character development and cultural blooming the student undergoes during this transformative, one-of-a-kind journey, and I was lucky to check both boxes."* Interviewee 7 also shared how his experience helped him become culturally aware, among other personal benefits; as he put it, *"From a personal perspective, I developed a deeper understanding and appreciation of different cultures, became more independent, adaptable and open minded to new ideas."*

For the third dimension, which is personal desired outcomes, item 8 (i.e., adaptability and flexibility) and item 9 (empathy) were used to investigate it. An equal proportion of 68.8% selected the option to a large extent. This is confirmed in the interviews as in the case of interviewee 6, who stated, *"I used to be quite serious and not as flexible, now I am definitely more flexible than before."* On the other hand, interviewee 3 argued that her exchange experience helped her refine her skills; as she put it, *"Personally speaking, I have always been flexible and tolerant, and my exchange experience was only a chance for me to hone this skill."* In regard to item 9, interviewee 2 argued how her experience made her become more empathic thanks to the meaningful connections she managed to have with other people from different cultures; she stated, *"Absolutely! Again, I emphasize the tremendous impact of having made so many meaningful connections with amazing people from all over the world, which makes me feel one with everyone. It makes me relate to the joy, sadness, hope, and pain of every single human being, no matter their religion, nationality, skin color, or background."*

As for the fourth and final dimensions, which include both desired external outcomes and actions, the three following items were used: item 10 (i.e., effective and appropriate behavior), item 11 (communication), and item 12 (i.e., personal contributions to the common good). A majority of 62.5% and 87.5% chose the option to a large extent, whereas an equal proportion of 43.8% answered that they performed item 12 to a large extent to some extent. Almost all interviewees exhibited outstanding display of items 11 and 12; for instance, interviewee 6 confirmed how one of the continued impacts of her exchange experience has been improving her communication skills, as she put it, *"realized that now I can make friends rather quickly and my communication skills especially about how I feel have extremely improved."* Similarly, interviewee 3 stated, *"My communication skills are good as I can easily and effectively engage in conversations about different topics and state my ideas and discuss arguments."* For engaging in action and contributing to the common good, interviewee 6 passionately expressed how she felt that she could do anything to serve to achieve common goals; she stated, *"In this life, I can do anything I want, not only in my home country but anywhere else of course with respect of the law and the culture in different parts of the world."* More interestingly, interviewee 4 described that the alumni she encountered during her experience are willing to contribute and create an impact in their community; she claimed, *"The biggest blessing after my exchange year is definitely the amazing alumni family I got introduced to. It is a supportive community, thriving to create impact in their communities and country."*

All in all, the above presented survey findings supported by qualitative data from the interviews display notable positive development of the participants' intercultural related competencies thanks to their authentic cultural exchange experience, which largely aligns with findings from previous studies that investigated the role of exchange in enhancing intercultural competencies (Deardorff, 2006; Earnest et al., 2016; Krishnan et al., 2017; Sobkowiak, 2019). Other related findings (e.g., Sobkowiak, 2019; Suryanto et al., 2022; Aladegbaiye et al., 2022) were also found to align with the findings of the fourth question, which addresses how developing intercultural competence contributes towards promoting cultural diplomacy through cultural exchange, all interviewees emphasized how their cultural experience has made them global cultural citizens who appreciate other cultures, have a net worth of foreign network, and more importantly engage in intercultural dialogue. For instance, interviewee 3 stated, *"I feel that I have become a more global citizen. I know people from many parts of the world. I engage in and attend activities and events that address international issues and invite people around from different nationalities."* Interviewee 4 has also stressed how meaningful connection, especially with other exchange students, helped her overcome many culture-related issues; as she put it, *"Creating genuine connections with other exchange students, from all over the world, by overcoming the barriers of culture, religion, and language leads one to think beyond borders."* Interviewee 7 also listed various competencies that he learned throughout his

exchange experience, which all fall under the umbrella of cultural diplomacy; as he stated, “I learned to approach new ideas and people with curiosity rather than judgment and stereotypes that the media often pushed onto us. I also started actively engaging in global issues and initiatives, whether through volunteering, participating in conferences, or advocating for causes with global significance.” Thus, it is evident that cultural exchange is highly impactful as it has a transformative power that embodies and serves several principles of cultural diplomacy.

5. Limitations and recommendations

Although the current study yields some positive findings, the small scope sample is considered one limitation of this study. Hence, evidence would be more cogent with a larger number of participants and larger groups of participants besides YES exchange program alumni. Additionally, the current study determines students’ development of intercultural competencies and how it can contribute to fostering cultural diplomacy between countries, while there should also be related-topic research that focuses on host community samples. Thus, this can help further develop and formulate hypotheses and models regarding the bilateral development of specific aspects of intercultural competence among different samples.

6. Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the role of authentic cultural exchange and positive perception of the host culture in developing participants’ intercultural competence, knowledge and abilities in the context of enhancing cultural diplomacy. The findings are consistent with previous conclusions found in the literature review. First, the findings of the study confirmed that participants took part in authentic cultural experiences, and most of them maintained a positive perception of the host culture before and after their exchange. The findings consequently revealed that the participants reported high positive levels of the underlying elements of intercultural competence. Further, the study related the positive development of the participants’ intercultural competence, which contributes to enhancing cultural diplomacy as it empowers them to engage in intercultural dialogue and become agents of societal and global change.

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