

Building Intercultural Friendships

UNIT 4



Activity 4.1: Thinking about the Benefits of Intercultural Friendships

1. Describe a time when you met, talked to, or befriended someone from another culture. What was most valuable about this opportunity?
2. Imagine that you need to convince someone to make a friend from another culture. What would you say are the benefits of intercultural friendships?

What Are the Benefits of Intercultural Friendships?

Types of Friendships

Research indicates that having social support is an essential part of the cultural adjustment process for international students and can provide a number of different benefits (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). In fact, feeling lonely and isolated without adequate social support can cause international students psychological stress that manifests as depression or homesickness. Because developing a strong foundation of social support can make your overall **study abroad** experience more enjoyable and fulfilling, some researchers (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977) propose three main types of friendships that international students might develop and describe the characteristics of each:

1. **Multi-national friendships** include **recreational** relationships with other international students *not* from your home culture.
2. **Co-national friendships** are likely to be deep, close relationships with students from your home culture.
3. **Local friendships**, also known as host national friendships, often serve as academic or **functional** relationships with students from the host culture. When studying in the U.S. then, local friendships would be defined as any friendship you build with a U.S. student.

Pause and Reflect

How many friends do you have in each of these categories? How does each type of friend influence you?

All of these types of friendships—multi-national, co-national, and local—offer specific benefits to you as an international student. Some friendships may feel more natural or easy to develop, but it is important to be thoughtful about how each type of friendship will contribute to your time studying in the U.S.

Multi-National Friendships

Although any of these friendships could be classified as intercultural friendships and support the development of intercultural skills, each would impact a study abroad experience in different ways. For example, Hendrickson, Rosen, and Aune (2011) demonstrated how friendships with other international students can positively influence international students' psychological adjustment and sense of cultural identity. Building multi-national friendships gives you the chance to learn from the experiences of other international students, access useful guidance about different cultural topics, and increase your awareness and understanding of other cultures. When you invest in building friendships with other international students, you can participate in a global **network** of friends and learn skills for contributing both emotional and academic support to other international students.

Co-National Friendships

Co-national friendships are likely to be the most convenient to develop because making friends with students from your home culture will usually feel comfortable and natural. You can speak the same language together, so communication is typically easier and less stressful. Friends from your home culture will also be likely to better understand your cultural identity because they are familiar with your cultural values and perspectives, so it will be relatively easy to find common topics to discuss. Because co-national friendships require less effort and provide a strong sense of support, they are often an international student's primary friendship network (Brown, 2009a; Neri & Ville, 2008). If you primarily rely on co-national friendships for social support, there may be such a strong sense of familiarity in these circles that it may not really feel that you have left your home culture. However, if most of your friends are from your home culture, this may prevent you from building more diverse types of friendships.

Local Friendships

If you make a goal to develop friendships with local students while studying in the U.S., you are likely to experience several specific benefits. Several studies, some conducted in the U.S. and some in other countries, have shown that international students have reported experiencing many benefits as a result of interacting and developing relationships with local students:

- an increase in cultural awareness (de Figueiredo & Mauri, 2012)
- gains in academic achievement (Westwood & Barker, 1990)
- stronger English language skills (Brown, 2009b)
- greater overall life satisfaction (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011)
- a decrease in homesickness (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011)

U.S. students also can experience significant growth through building relationships with international students. Most important, friendships with international students afford local students the valuable opportunity to learn about other cultures. Soria and Troisi (2014) found that U.S. students who interacted with international students experienced an increase in their global, intercultural, and international competencies. Other studies demonstrate that U.S. students who interact with international students saw an improvement in their intercultural communication skills (Campbell, 2012), learned strategies to support cultural adjustment, and felt a sense of satisfaction from helping international students in their adjustment process (Geelhoed, Abe, & Talbot, 2003).

Pause and Reflect

Have you experienced any of the benefits discussed? Have you considered how local students may benefit from building friendships with international students?

Activity 4.2: Building Intercultural Friendships: What Challenges Do Students Experience?

Part 1: Read Case Studies

Read each short case study. What challenges are these students are experiencing?

Case Study 1

Min-jung is a new international student from Korea studying in the U.S. As classes begin and she establishes a schedule, Min-jung begins to make friends with other students from Korea. Although she wishes she could build friendships with the U.S. students, there do not seem to be any opportunities to do so. There is a lot of group work in her Chemistry lab, but all of the international students work together and all of the local students work together. The two groups even sit in separate sections of the room. Min-jung enjoys her Korean friendships but wishes she could find a way to talk to U.S. students.

Case Study 2

Ling, a student from China, is in a group project with several U.S. students. She is excited for the opportunity to get to know U.S. students better through their group work. Each day during class, the group has time to meet to discuss their project. Before getting started, the group usually takes some time for informal conversation—the U.S. students talk about what they did over the weekend, the shows they are watching on TV, and the most recent sports news. Although she is listening to their discussions, Ling is quiet during this time. Even when one of the U.S. students asks her how she's doing, Ling doesn't have much to say. One U.S. student in particular frequently tries to include her in the opening conversations, but Ling remains quiet.

Case Study 3

Mohammed is an international student from Oman in his first year at a university in the U.S. In his computer science class, Mohammed is assigned to work with a U.S. student, Jeremy, for some of the major class assignments. Throughout the semester, Mohammed and Jeremy work well together, and Mohammed is excited to continue this relationship after the class is over. On the last day of class, he's happy to hear Jeremy say that they should hang out sometime soon. They exchange phone numbers and Mohammed waits for Jeremy to send him a text message. A few weeks pass and Mohammed still hasn't heard from Jeremy, so he sends him a text message to ask how things are going. Jeremy replies but doesn't say anything to indicate he wants to continue their friendship outside of their class partnership.

Part 2: Write Your Own Case Study

Work with a partner to write your own short case study. It should include a description of a situation that demonstrates some other challenges you think students may experience when trying to build intercultural friendships.

Part 3: Share

Share your case study with another group. Ask them to identify the key challenges students are experiencing in their relationships and strategies they might use to overcome barriers.

What Are the Challenges of Intercultural Friendships?

Staying in Your Comfort Zone

One challenge that affects both local and international students is the tendency to stay within your **comfort zone** and interact mainly in **monocultural groups**, or those comprising students from the same culture. Consider how this Chinese student describes benefits of building co-national friendships (friendships with others from your home culture): “We share the same culture, maybe we have the same habits, so it’s very convenient and very comfortable to live together” (Wright & Schartner, 2013, p. 120). This tendency to stay within monocultural groups limits the cross-cultural interactions that occur on multi-cultural campuses. As previously mentioned, international students may choose to invest in co-national friendships because those friendships offer comfort, security, and easy communication.

International students may often have feelings of anxiety that can make them hesitant to approach U.S. local students. In fact, international students have explained a range of concerns they have about interacting with U.S. students, including fears about being misunderstood when trying to communicate and anxiety about experiencing **discrimination** (a form of unfair treatment based on one’s cultural or ethnic background) (Wang et al., 2017). Even if you would really like to get out of your comfort zone and build some friendships with local students, it is possible you may feel too apprehensive about your ability to choose a topic of discussion, explain your ideas clearly, and keep up with the conversation.

You may find it surprising to know that local students may also have some anxiety about interacting with international students. Local students may be hesitant to engage in communication with international students due to a fear that they will be misunderstood or unintentionally cause offense. For example, Peacock and Harrison (2009) interviewed local students in two British universities, and one of the students described being “afraid of talking to international students from other cultures in case they said the ‘wrong’ thing” (p. 494). In other research, U.S. students explained they were uncertain of how to find conversation topics of common interest to international students (Geelhoed, Abe, & Talbot, 2003).

Pause and Reflect

What are other reasons that international and local students may feel anxious about interacting?

Language Barriers

Another potential challenge when engaging in intercultural interactions is **language barriers**. One international student describes the challenge of speaking English in class this way:

The main problem is speaking out in class. I seriously felt goosebumps even if [I exceeded the admission requirements for English]. It's not about knowing English. It's about the anxious feeling that whether what you are speaking is important enough to ask in a class and whether the professor and other students can understand. (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 12)

International students who speak English as an additional language have achieved a huge accomplishment in becoming bilingual—even if they are still developing their language skills for academic studies in the U.S.—but

interacting with local students can cause international students to have anxiety about speaking accurately and clearly; listening to fast-paced speech; and responding to jokes, **slang**, and topics about **pop culture** when in conversations with local students.

Even when they are willing to adapt their jokes, references to pop culture, fast speech, and complex sentences to be more understandable for students from diverse backgrounds, U.S. students may still find themselves facing a communication dilemma. Humor and cultural references are often important aspects of communication in friendship development, and some U.S. students may experience a sense of discomfort and superficiality when adapting their communication to be more straightforward. However, researchers Geelhoed, Abe, and Talbot (2003) reported that U.S. students who were willing to persevere in uncomfortable conversations with international students had greater confidence for future interactions. A good strategy is to recognize that initial conversations may be uncomfortable, but with time and persistence, it is possible to build friendships despite language barriers.

Cultural Differences

Cultural differences may be another challenge that international and local students experience in their interactions. Different cultural values and ways of communicating may become a source of tension. One international student described the challenges this way:

Most probably [the major problem for adjusting is] the ability to fit in with local students. There are many times too much culture difference between the respective nationality and the American, which become the biggest obstacle to become close with local students. As a result, most international students only mingle with students of their own nationality or other foreign students, especially students from Asian countries. (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 14)

If U.S. and international students are working together, differences may arise in the ways they approach a project: students from some cultures may prefer to be task focused (concerned about meeting course goals) whereas students from other cultures may prefer a more relationship-focused approach (more concerned about building relationships). Members of some cultures may prefer more polite, formal, and indirect methods of communication, while members of other cultures may prefer to be more direct and to the point. Misunderstandings can occur in situations where students are coming from different cultural perspectives, which can make friendship development more complicated. Students from different cultures also often vary in the ways in which they build friendships, spend their free time, and participate in social activities.

Pause and Reflect

Which do you think is a more difficult challenge to overcome in building intercultural friendships: language barriers or cultural differences?

Activity 4.3: Learning Strategies for Overcoming Barriers in Intercultural Relationships

Part 1: Read Case Studies

Read each short case study. Which strategies did the students use to overcome intercultural barriers and develop deeper relationships?

Case Study 4

Wang is an international student from China who is in his first year at a U.S. university studying marketing. He has several group projects for his classes, and in most groups, he is the only international student. In one of his groups, Wang is feeling uncertain about the group assignment and what his role is. After several group meetings, more anxiety, and less certainty, Wang decides to ask a few group members if he can take them to coffee to clarify the group project goals. Thankfully, the group members say yes, and after they discuss his questions, they all talk for a little bit about their homework and their other classes. Wang feels much more comfortable with both the assignment and his group members after this experience, and he finds it much easier to talk openly with his group members throughout the rest of the semester. He even feels confident to share marketing principles from a Chinese perspective, which his group members are really interested to learn.

Case Study 5

Tran is an international student from Vietnam and is studying Economics. One of her main goals is to develop friendships with local students at her school, but she quickly realizes it is not very easy to do so. Everyone is friendly and smiles, but local students do not often talk to her or invite her to do things. Most of her Vietnamese friends stay together, eat together, socialize with only one another, and only speak Vietnamese. She appreciates those friendships, but she wants to get out of her comfort zone. As a first step, Tran starts attending the international coffee hour that happens every Friday night. After a few weeks, Tran has made several new friends who are from different countries. At the end of her first semester, she has a network of international friendships and she speaks English more frequently outside of class. She is more confident in her English skills and is even feeling braver to talk and to start conversations with local students in her classes.

Part 2: Write Your Own Case Study

Work with a partner to write your own short case study. Include a description of a situation that demonstrates some other strategies students could use to overcome barriers they experience in intercultural relationships.

Part 3: Share

Share your case study with another group. Ask them to identify the strategies that students used to overcome intercultural barriers and build deeper friendships.