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Students' confidence in using intercultural communication in work-integrated learning excursions

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■ Abstract

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is a professional attribute that requires confidence for effective and appropriate communication between diverse cultures. First-year student teachers (FSTs) entering university from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds often face the challenge of adapting to the intricate and language-diverse tertiary education environment. This transition requires them to develop confidence not only in their academic abilities but also in their communication skills, enabling them to engage effectively in various

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cultural contexts. Recognising this, universities can facilitate ICC by incorporating immersive experiences such as work-integrated learning excursions, which provide practical opportunities to interact with peers and professionals from diverse cultures, ultimately empowering students to navigate the complexities of cross-cultural communication with assurance. Excursions create a welcoming and safe social environment where these students feel appreciated, can share their feelings, express their creativity, voice their opinions, raise challenges and direct their learning, especially in a heterogenous institution of higher learning such as North-West University (NWU). Taking this perspective into account, the study examined the ICC of FSTs enrolled at the Faculty of Education at NWU, alongside their attitude towards diverse cultures. A qualitative content analysis was used to mine data from participating students' responses sourced from a questionnaire with open-ended questions and reflective portfolios. These were supplemented by non-participant observations and analysing video recordings to determine behavioural patterns. The findings show that students experienced verbal and non-verbal interactions, which sometimes lead to frustrations and false assumptions about other cultures. Furthermore, the findings indicate that students faced challenges when engaging in intercultural communications. The most notable findings are that FSTs appreciated and valued diverse cultures were motivated to engage with diversity, recognised the importance of embracing diversity and treated individuals from different cultures with respect and kindness.

■ Introduction

The importance of developing confidence in intercultural communication cannot be overstated. Developing cultural competence is an essential component of preparing first-year student teachers (FSTs) for success in the global workforce (Miño & Gibson 2020). Wang and Han (2020) perceive cultural nuances and non-verbal cues as essential components of intercultural communication. Accordingly, FSTs who lack an understanding of cultural nuances and nonverbal cues may struggle to communicate effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, a lack of understanding of cultural nuances and non-verbal signals contributes to misunderstandings, misinterpretations and negative perceptions resulting in cultural biases, stereotypes or even inadvertently offending others using inappropriate or impolite gestures (Ntuli 2012, see Chapter 2).

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is a professional attribute that needs to be developed in higher education institutions (HEIs) to support effective and appropriate communication between

diverse cultures. The need for developing such competence is underscored by the rise of globalisation, which has heightened cultural, linguistic, ethnic and social diversity, consequently amplifying intercultural encounters among citizens (Banks & Diem 2008). Given global demand, where individuals are frequently required to interact with people from diverse backgrounds, both in local and international contexts, ICC can be developed through cultural immersion, reflection and feedback (Arasaratnam, Baresjee & Dembek 2010; Spitzberg & Chagnon 2009). Participation in the globalised world requires certain competencies to interact with people of diverse cultures. Hence, the ability to communicate and interact appropriately with individuals from diverse cultures, as an integral part of 21st-century learning skills (Kivunja 2015), holds particularly true for HEIs, especially in developing countries like South Africa, known for their rich cultural diversity and multilingualism.

Developing FSTs' ICC is a complex and challenging process, especially in a culturally heterogeneous environment like most universities in South Africa. In this chapter, we argue that HEIs must adapt to develop intercultural communication skills for FSTs to prepare them for the teaching profession characterised by diverse cultures and the challenges associated with that. In this study, FSTs are used interchangeably with the term 'students' to refer to the participants. Our argument concurs with Taljaard (2018) who attests to HEIs grappling with the issue of adequately preparing students for the challenging and diverse circumstances that present themselves in 21st-century schools. We must acknowledge the insights of Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005), who state:

[7]here is a high demand for developing student teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to work successfully with an increasingly diverse student population, particularly those whose cultural, racial, language, sexual orientation, and ethnic backgrounds are different from the teachers' backgrounds. (p. 57)

The introduction of first-year student excursions at the North-West University (NWU) Faculty of Education in 2016 marked the beginning of a transformative educational journey designed to broaden students' horizons and enhance their learning experiences, as self-directed learning (SDL) students who learn about topics of interest (Robinson & Persky 2020:292). These excursions, initially conducted face-to-face, allowed students to step outside the confines of the classroom and immerse themselves in real-world contexts, providing invaluable opportunities for practical learning and intercultural exposure. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in subsequent years forced the Faculty of Education to adapt and reimagine its approach to excursions during 2020. The need to protect students' health and adhere to safety protocols required a shift away from traditional face-to-face excursions. In response, the faculty turned to innovative alternatives, such as synchronous virtual

excursions, including simulations and other methods based on technology, to continue to provide enriching educational experiences (Du Toit & Petersen 2023:5). Despite these adaptations, the core need for excursions remains as relevant as ever. The importance of exposing students to diverse environments, cultures and real-world challenges to foster their personal and academic growth as SDL remains a fundamental principle in education because it empowers the FSTs to take ownership of their learning process, enhancing their ability to navigate cultural complexities independently (Petersen, De Beer & Mentz 2020). While the methods have evolved, the underlying goal of enhancing students' understanding of the world and their ability to apply classroom knowledge in practical settings remains constant (De Beer et al. 2022).

Our participation in previous work-integrated learning (WIL) excursions brought to our attention the high number of FSTs who experience intercultural communication challenges. For example, some students struggled to convey their ideas or instructions effectively in a language that was not their native tongue, which hindered their ability to communicate with clarity and precision. Another common intercultural communication issue encountered during the excursions was cultural misunderstandings. Some students inadvertently offended or misinterpreted the actions and behaviours of individuals from other cultures because of a lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity. For example, a student might not have understood the importance of certain customs or gestures, leading to unintentional disrespect or discomfort in intercultural interactions (Sebotsa, Petersen & Speight Vaughn 2020). These misunderstandings highlighted the need for improved intercultural competence among students to navigate such situations effectively. We, therefore, found it imperative to explore the confidence of FSTs in intercultural communication during imminent WIL excursions. We needed to investigate theories and models to address this gap in the literature, given the extensive body of scholarly work on ICC, but the apparent scarcity of literature specific to its application within the context of WIL excursions. Scholars such as Doolan et al. (2019), as well as Martin and Rees (2019), have described WIL as a popular approach to higher education in recent years that offers students the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings, interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, gain practical experience and develop essential skills for their future careers. Work-integrated learning excursion in our context is a two-day programme designed to prepare FSTs for diverse classrooms and the complexities of 21st-century education during their Bachelor of Education (BE) qualifications. Similarly, Petersen et al. (2020) confirm that participation in WIL excursions or other similar programmes allows students to gain first-hand experience with different cultures and develop their intercultural sensitivity and competence.

To develop the ICC of FSTs, the current study, therefore, explored how WIL excursions can contribute to this goal.

In the context of this chapter, WIL excursions resemble a platform where FSTs may learn, cooperate, interact, communicate and become aware of different cultures. The focus of the study was to explore how WIL excursions can help develop FSTs' confidence in their ICC. The use of WIL excursions to develop confidence in intercultural communication is an under-researched area in the field of education. This aligns with Arasaratnam and Doerfel's (2005:137) argument that '[...] intercultural communication competence is an area of study that is becoming more relevant, yet to be developed in the increasingly multicultural communities we live in'. Few studies have attempted to address the importance of intercultural competence in educational settings (Darvin & Norton 2015; Gao, Wang & Sun 2016) and ICC (Arasaratnam & Banerjee 2011). Published studies, however, fall short of filling the gap in ICC among FSTs from diverse cultures, which the current study sought to address. The intention was that well-equipped students with intercultural communication skills would be able to navigate and handle cultural differences thoughtfully during the rest of their tertiary studies as self-directed learners and in their future careers as well.

Given the significance of ICC, it is crucial to prepare FSTs to teach in an inclusive environment that tackles challenges concerning diverse populations and to direct the students to reflect critically on their worldviews and perceptions of the many realities in which they live. The degree to which students perceive intercultural communication entirely depends on the beliefs they hold about respect for diverse cultures and their own confidence in this regard. Therefore, the primary research question of this study was: How did the WIL excursions contribute to the development of FSTs' confidence in ICC?

First-year student teachers with deficiencies in these aspects may result in them struggling to navigate intercultural interactions effectively, thus hindering effective communication and relationship building and creating negative perceptions of cultural biases and stereotypes (Wang & Han 2020). The researchers in the current study argue that effective intercultural communication will be a struggle without understanding cultural nuances and non-verbal cues. The current study adopted the theory of ICC by Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) as a framework to interrogate the complexities of ICC in the context of WIL excursions. Studies such as that of Wang (2018) and Zhang (2017) have confirmed a relationship between confidence in intercultural communication skills and ICC. In this way, we explored how WIL excursions as part of the BEd teacher preparation programme could support the development of FSTs' confidence in intercultural communication.

■ Theoretical framework: Intercultural communication competence

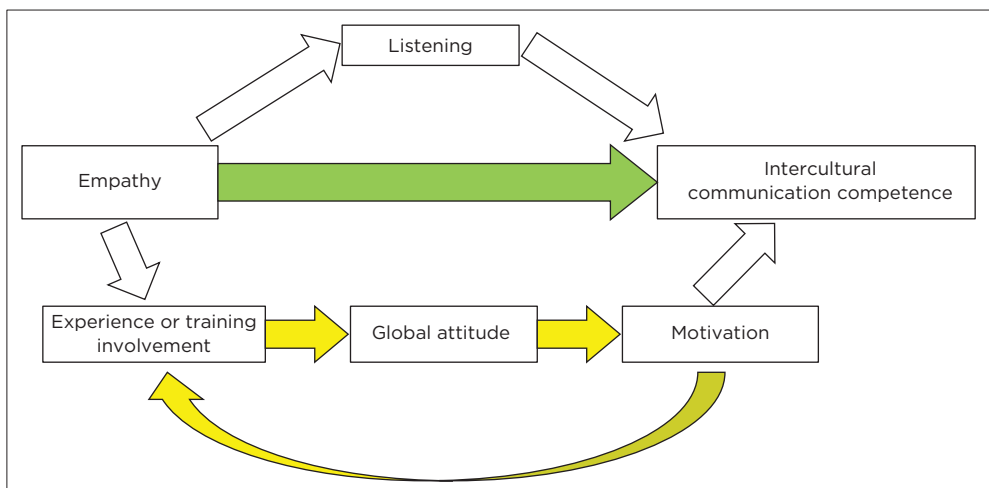
Intercultural communication competence suggests that communication competence in intercultural contexts involves knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable individuals to adapt their communication behaviours appropriately to different cultural contexts (Spitzberg & Chagnon 2009). Intercultural communication competence refers to the abilities and competencies of the speaker to achieve effective and appropriate communication in a culturally diverse society (Chen & Starosta 1996). These authors identified three competencies of ICC, namely intercultural sensitivity that deals with affective processes, intercultural awareness that focuses on cognitive processes and intercultural agility (see Chapter 1) that relates to behavioural processes (Chen & Starosta 1996). According to Byram (2020), ICC is comprised of key competencies such as sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and intercultural competence. These competencies contribute to an individual's skills and attitudes to communicate and interact with other people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Lázár et al. 2007). The crux of Arasaratnam's ICC framework (2006) lies in intercultural sensitivity that involves both cognitive and affective dimensions, including knowledge, empathy, tolerance for ambiguity and openness to different perspectives (Bennett 1986). Intercultural sensitivity means 'the ability to recognise and appreciate cultural differences and to adjust one's communication behaviour accordingly' (Chen & Starosta 1998).

In practice, developing ICC is crucial for fostering effective and harmonious communication in a culturally diverse society, helping individuals build their confidence to engage with people from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds in a respectful and understanding manner (Deardorff 2006; Ilie 2019). This confidence helps reduce nervousness and improves how people communicate. As a result, it leads to more meaningful and mutually beneficial cross-cultural relationships, which are essential in our increasingly interconnected global community (Ilie 2019).

Arasaratnam (2006) developed an integrated ICC model (see Figure 5.1) based on the premise that ICC should be studied from the perspective of the 'other', as opposed to self-reported perceptions of one's own ICC, to incorporate multiple cultural competencies. The model consists of five variables (Figure 5.1). The first variable is experience, which refers to prior exposure to and/or training in intercultural communication (Arasaratnam et al. 2010). Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) define experience in terms of several dimensions, such as close personal relationships with people from other cultures. The second variable is

listening, which relates to the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in the communication process (Arasaratnam et al. 2010). The third variable is a positive attitude towards other cultures, which refers to a positive, nonethnocentric disposition towards people from other cultures. A positive attitude towards people of other cultures leads to motivation to communicate with such people, which in turn leads to more experience in intercultural communication and contributes to ICC (Arasaratnam 2006). In Figure 5.1, this variable is shown as 'global attitude'. The fourth variable is motivation, which speaks of the desire to participate in intercultural interactions to understand and learn about other cultures. The last variable is empathy, which focuses on the ability to relate to one another at cognitive as well as emotional levels (Arasaratnam et al. 2010; Figure 5.1). Empathy contributes to positive attitudes towards people of other cultures (Arasaratnam 2006). The ability to empathise allows a person to listen well, which, in turn, contributes to being perceived as a competent intercultural communicator.

Given the variables in the framework, Arasaratnam's (2006) hypothesises that experience alone is not sufficient for one to exhibit competent intercultural behaviour and that empathy plays a key role in this process. Therefore, the ICC model depicts empathy and experience as exogenous variables and identifies listening (i.e. being able to receive and interpret messages in the communication process), motivation (i.e. interacting with people of other cultures) and a positive attitude towards people of other cultures as mediating variables that lead to ICC as an



Source: Adapted from Arasaratnam, LA 2006, 'Further testing of a new model of intercultural communication competence', *Communication Research Reports*, vol. 23, no. 2, p. 97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824090600668923>

FIGURE 5.1: The integrated model of intercultural communication competence.

endogenous variable (Arasaratnam et al. 2010; Figure 5.1). The model predicts several interconnected variables that collectively influence an individual's ability to communicate effectively in intercultural contexts. Firstly, there is a cyclical relationship between experience, global attitude and motivation (indicated in yellow). The rationale for this cyclical relationship is that those who have experience with and exposure to intercultural communication are likely to be more positively orientated towards people from other cultures and those motivated to seek intercultural interactions, which in turn contributes to more experience in intercultural communications. Secondly, a direct relationship between empathy and ICC (shown in green) is based on the reasoning that an empathetic individual, regardless of prior experience with intercultural communication, would still be able to communicate effectively and appropriately simply by being able to identify with the other person on a cognitive and emotional level. Thirdly, the four variables of empathy, listening, global attitude and motivation influence each other and work in synergy to help individuals become more competent and effective communicators in culturally diverse contexts. For instance, empathy and a positive global attitude can boost motivation to engage in intercultural interactions. Additionally, listening actively and attentively to people from various cultural backgrounds can foster empathy by promoting understanding, reducing biases and building cultural sensitivity.

For FSTs, developing confidence in using intercultural communication during WIL excursions is essential. These excursions often involve interactions with diverse student populations, making it crucial to adapt to the varying cultural contexts encountered in educational settings. Building confidence in intercultural communication ensures that student teachers can effectively connect with students from different backgrounds, appreciate diverse teaching methods and understand the cultural nuances they will encounter in their future classrooms. As self-directed learners, building confidence in intercultural communication also helps in establishing positive and inclusive learning environments, fostering better engagement and promoting cross-cultural understanding, which are key aspects of successful teaching. Ultimately, this confidence in intercultural communication not only benefits the student teachers but also greatly enhances their ability to provide high-quality education and support to their future learners.

■ Research methodology

This section includes a discussion of the research process and research design that guided this study and the methods used in its implementation.

■ Research paradigm

In the current study, a qualitative approach and an interpretive paradigm were used to explore how WIL excursions contribute to the development of FSTs' confidence in ICC. Interpretivists are of the view that '[...] reality and knowledge are constructed and reproduced through communication, interaction, and practice' (Tracy 2020:51). Access to reality is mainly through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings. Qualitative studies are often rooted in social constructivist and interpretivist research (Creswell 2014). For the purpose of the current study, the qualitative interpretive research paradigm aligned with the research question that guided the investigation: 'How did the WIL excursions contribute to the development of FSTs' confidence in intercultural communication competence?' These views informed the hermeneutical approach followed in our deductive analysis of the responses of FSTs.

■ Context of the study

The WIL excursions in the context of this study was a two-day programme designed to prepare the FSTs for diverse classrooms and the complexities of 21st-century education during their BEd qualifications were conducted at NWU in 2023. North-West University is a public university with three campuses: Mahikeng, Potchefstroom and Vanderbiljpark and hosts approximately 54,207 students per year (NWU 2023). The Faculty of Education, one of eight faculties at the university, provides teaching qualifications for aspiring student teachers and also extends its offerings to in-service teachers through additional programmes. Because of the practical nature of the qualification, FSTs have to undergo WIL in which theory and workplace practice are merged. To prepare these students' understanding of the complexity of the teaching profession before they implement their training in schools, the Faculty of Education embarked on an innovative and interventional educational excursion journey (Du Toit & Petersen 2023). Two sets of excursions were organised successfully in 2023, with the first taking place virtually from 02-04 of May 2023, to cater to students from the unit for distance learning (UDL) at NWU, as in-person attendance was difficult for these students. The second set was conducted in a face-to-face format to accommodate full-time students. First-year student teachers attending the face-to-face (field trip-like) excursions were accompanied by facilitators and spent three days away from the formal university environment in a youth centre in the Magaliesberg mountains to live and learn together. Given that the participants were self-directed learners, their lecturers' role shifted from a teacher to that of a facilitator of learning who offered procedural guidance rather than content transmitters

(Knowles 1975). This format followed the description by Taljaard (2018), who noted:

[T]he excursions, as they occur in an environment other than the traditional classroom setup, primarily allow students to affective learning and engage in cognitive learning, allowing them to change ideas and preconceptions through close interaction and continuous participation. (p. iv)

In the view of Taljaard (2018), such excursions create a safe space for students to experiment with new pedagogies and for them to get to know their lecturers (who act as excursion facilitators) in a more relaxed environment. Self-directed learning authors like Robinson and Persky (2020:292) refer to this space as an 'experiential setting' where the SDL skills should be introduced and developed in the didactic portion of the curriculum. This setting allows students to develop skills over time. Given this, the excursion further reinforces what students have learnt while also introducing new elements that challenge their expectations and add to their knowledge.

The students in this study were characterised by coming from diverse backgrounds in terms of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, language and culture. During the excursion, students FSTs challenge, confront and disrupt misconceptions, untruths and stereotypes that lead to structural inequalities and discrimination, based on race, social class, gender and other social and human differences (Batchelor & Mahomed 2021). The same authors continue to explain that a sincere effort is made to create a welcoming and safe social environment where students feel appreciated, can share their feelings, express their creativity and voice their own opinions (p. 278). We have already outlined the significance of ICC in the subsequent discussions, particularly that it is (1) an area of study that is becoming more relevant; (2) an underresearched area in the field of education and (3) well-equipped students with intercultural communication skills will navigate and handle cultural differences cautiously. The excursions reported in this study were purposefully designed to develop intercultural skills and a sense of belonging for FSTs to contribute to sensitising them to the complexity of the teaching profession (Du Toit & Petersen 2023; also see Chapter 3).

■ Research design

The current qualitative study involved a content analysis design to explore how WIL excursions helped to develop FSTs' confidence in their intercultural communication skills. Data collection consisted mainly of five open-ended questions (OEQs) that addressed the students' experiences of their relationships with people of other cultures, listening skills, positive attitudes towards other cultures, motivation to interact with people from other cultures and empathy towards other cultures (see Figure 5.1). We believe

that OEQs would allow participants the possibility to demonstrate their thoughts more willingly than highly controlled closed-ended questions. This willingness is particularly important because we aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of how FSTs interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Creswell 2014). The perspectives of FSTs shed light on aspects that were deemed important for the current investigation.

■ Research ethics considerations

Throughout the research process, we adhered to the national and institutional ethics guidelines and policies. Ethical clearance from EDU-REC at NWU and permission from the NWU Gatekeeper were secured for obtaining data from NWU students. Before completing the WIL excursion activities an independent person invited the students to participate in the academic study in which some of the answers provided in the activities will be used while keeping their names anonymous. The purpose of the study was explained to the students, and they were informed that while the completion and submission of the WIL activity documents were compulsory, participation in the research study was completely voluntary. Students were assured that their choice to have their responses included or excluded from the study would not influence the results of the excursion. Because the activities were part of the excursion, no compensation was awarded for participation. Furthermore, to maintain the privacy of participants and the confidentiality of the data, the identities of students were concealed during data analysis and coding, using three identifiers. That is an anonymised student number, the instrument used in obtaining the evidence and the date of data collection.

■ Sampling and data collection

The population of this study consisted of all FSTs ($n = 2,704$) comprising of both contact students ($n = 2,259$) and UDL students ($n = 445$) who participated in the WIL 2023 excursions, which were mandatory and required their participation in all scheduled activities. However, not all students were expected to participate in the data collection process. Consequently, this chapter exclusively used data from FSTs who willingly gave their informed consent ($n = 2311$).

Virtual excursion data were obtained from the digital reflections of UDL students who consented to participate ($n = 94$), as well as the video recordings (VR) of the virtual WIL excursions. The VRs provided us with a visual record of student interactions, while the students' reflections provided insight into the participants' interactions during the

virtual excursions. Data from students in the face-to-face excursions who consented to participate ($n = 2,217$) were collected from paper-based questionnaires with OEQs and a reflective portfolio (RP) that the students completed during the excursions. However, a random sampling technique selected 280 participants to complete the questionnaire on the last day of the excursion. Although the questionnaire included several other questions to contribute to learning activities, for the current study, only the following questions contributed to the data that this chapter reports on:

1. How did students experience personal relationships with fellow students from diverse cultures?
2. To what extent did the students demonstrate their listening skills within a culturally diverse environment?
3. What are the students' attitudes towards the cultures of other students?
4. What motivates students to interact with fellow students from diverse cultures during excursions?
5. How does empathy influence students' abilities to be competent intercultural communicators?

In a similar manner, questions exclusively from Activities 6 and 13 were chosen for inclusion in the RP. This selection was made based on their relevance to ICC, as they delve into various aspects of individuals' attitudes, experiences and perceptions related to interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. Data collected from all instruments were transcribed in preparation for data analysis.

■ Data analysis

The current study adopted a content analysis approach (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018). Because of the complexity of the data, the analysis was conducted collaboratively using ATLAS.ti™ (version 23) computer analysis software. In the first stage, we analysed a sample of responses and identified codes related to ICC. We then discussed and revised the codes to establish a preliminary coding scheme. Ambiguous codes were discussed and revised, and then a final coding scheme was adopted and applied. The categories that were identified from the data were: respect, adaptability, acceptance, assumptions, frustrations, communication barriers, language barriers, stereotyping, discrimination, building meaningful connections, verbal and non-verbal interaction, communication skills and strategies, active listening and engagement, cultural diversity and inclusivity, cultural curiosity and personal growth and cultural sensitivity and awareness. The themes were predetermined to align with the five questions that were drawn from the questionnaire that were selected for analysis in the current investigation.

□ Trustworthiness

A three-stage coding process was carried out as guided by De Vos et al. (2011) to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. The researchers worked towards content validity and dependability through the triangulation of data (Burke Johnson & Christensen 2017). We looked for consistencies and different perspectives from the data generated in the four methods of data collection, as well as from both face-to-face and virtual excursions.

■ Findings and discussion

All five variables depicted in Figure 5.1 of Arasaratnam's (2006) integrated model of ICC were pursued as codes and found in data obtained from student participants. Using the data from the four instruments (the questionnaire with OEQs, RP, VR and virtual excursion student's reflections [VER]), we draw attention to the findings that emerged in relation to the five themes linked to experience, listening skills, attitudes, motivation and empathy. Three of the five identifiers, namely student, data source (OEQs, RP, VR and VER) and date, are included when quotations are presented as evidence.

■ Theme 1: Student experience of personal relationships with students from other cultures

The participating students acknowledged that they experienced challenges and opportunities in their personal relationships with diverse students during the excursions. These included aspects of verbal (language) and non-verbal interactions, frustrations and false assumptions about students from other cultures as challenges. Generally, participants reflected on instances where they witnessed or caught themselves making judgements about the cultural background of others. For instance, one participant said:

'I had an unexamined belief that participants who resigned during discussions lacked valuable information.' (S127, OEQ, May 2023)

Furthermore, other participants indicated that their initial judgements were proven wrong when they made assumptions about specific ethnic groups. On the same note, some participants observed how other students were making assumptions about particular ethnic groups:

'I witnessed a participant making assumptions about another person's dietary choices based on their ethnic background.' (S145, RP, May 2023)

Another participant shared a similar assumption of cultural bias or had misconceptions about other cultures:

'I noticed some participants assuming that individuals of a certain ethnic background would have a natural talent for a specific artistic activity.' (S127, VR, May 2023)

Other participants explained that they were frustrated when they did not get something right. Several other participants shared similar sentiments. These frustrations stemmed from various factors, including cultural differences, misunderstandings and conflicts:

'There were instances when misinterpretations occurred due to differences in cultural norms and values.' (S118, VR, May 2023)

'Sometimes, it was challenging to navigate cultural differences and understand the perspectives of others.' (S95, OEQ, May 2023)

'When it comes to [culture A], I have been thinking that they are the same. Only to find out that they are not the same, some are not bullies like others.' (S42, OEQ, May 2023)

These data confirm the literature on the lack of understanding that contributes to misinterpretations and the creation of negative perceptions of cultural biases and stereotypes (Ntuli 2012; Wang & Han 2020). To attest to experiences of personal relationships with other cultures, the observation data revealed issues relating to verbal and non-verbal interactions. This was evident from the greetings from the students. Some students greeted each other with warmth and enthusiasm, using phrases such as 'Hey, how are you?' or 'Nice to see you!' while others greeted each other in a less personal manner, with a simple nod or wave, which may not have conveyed as much warmth or interest. This offers insights into the dynamics of personal interactions and how they vary among students from different cultural backgrounds (Arasaratnam et al. 2010). The varying ways in which students greet each other – some with warmth and enthusiasm, while others with a simple nod or wave – reflect differences in cultural communication styles. These differences in verbal and non-verbal interactions can impact how students perceive and experience personal relationships with peers from other cultures (Spitzberg & Chagnon 2009). For example, students who are accustomed to warmer and more effusive greetings may find it challenging to connect with those who use more reserved forms of greeting. This finding was corroborated by the findings in some of the RPs in which the participants reported that they experienced communication barriers that hindered personal relationships in their heterogeneous groups. One particular student, for instance, mentioned that they were grouped with students from other campuses and cultures that meant whose languages were different, which was a challenge. The diverse grouping, according to this participant, negatively affected the group's effectiveness:

'[It was a challenge to] get activities done due to lack of communication skills.' (S209, OEQ, May 2023)

Additionally, the language barrier caused a delay in the group's progress. This was also noted in the VR when other participants mentioned:

'It can sometimes be difficult to try to convey a message in a language that you don't normally use.' (S173, OEQ, May 2023)

'[*Students who are not proficient in English*] require additional time during group discussions to formulate their sentences accurately and express themselves effectively.' (S152, VR, May 2023)

Another participant also wrote the following in their VER:

'[We] occasionally experienced language barriers that required us to type our thoughts more slowly to ensure clarity.' (S16, VER, May 2023)

Despite the various challenges, one student, however, suggested measures their group members used to alleviate the language challenges and explained:

'We employed strategies such as using translation tools, providing written summaries and encouraging patience and clarification to ensure inclusive and meaningful participation.' (S173, OEQ, May 2023)

Other participants explained that they use English when communicating so that they accommodate and understand each other. The issue of the language barrier left participants frustrated in most instances. One of the participants explained the frustration:

'I admit, there were moments when I got frustrated because I couldn't express myself as fluently as I wanted. But it also motivated me to work harder on my language skills to communicate more effectively in diverse settings.' (S249, RP, May 2023)

This finding, indicating that language was a communication barrier, aligns with literature (Arasaratnam et al. 2010; Spitzberg & Cupach 1984), which emphasises the importance of effective communication skills for building close personal relationships with individuals from diverse cultures. Arasaratnam's (2006) illustration of intercultural communication tends to exhibit a favourable orientation towards individuals from diverse cultures. This orientation, in turn, motivates participants to seek intercultural interactions (Arasaratnam et al. 2010) actively, fostering a positive feedback loop by enhancing their experience and proficiency in intercultural communications, which will contribute to future teacher preparation for their profession. The WIL excursion provided an opportunity for FSTs to confront and navigate language barriers and intercultural challenges, ultimately encouraging some to take proactive steps to enhance their intercultural communication skills (Wang 2018; Zhang 2017) and, in turn, their confidence in building close personal relationships with individuals from diverse cultures. It is evident from the findings that some students experienced a lack of confidence in their ability to navigate communication barriers in heterogeneous groups. The findings emphasise the need for effective communication skills to foster positive relationships and dispel misconceptions, underscoring that confidence in intercultural

communication may have been missing in some instances. Therefore, the refinement of WIL excursions is necessary to strengthen the development of effective intercultural communication skills and cultural awareness among student teachers, ultimately building their confidence in personal relationships with individuals from different cultures.

■ Theme 2: Enhancing listening skills for effective intercultural communication in students

Although the participants were affected by linguistic differences (Theme 1), the responses of the participants also shed light on the challenges they faced when engaging in listening skills as part of intercultural communication. For example, one participant encountered a cultural context gap, and this was mentioned in the following:

'Sometimes, what was said had a different meaning in their culture, and I had to learn to ask for clarification to avoid misunderstanding, and this required a lot of effort and patience in my listening.' (S100, RP, May 2023)

The VRs of the virtual excursions also provided evidence that listening to different languages was a significant challenge to many participants. A participant shared:

'Understanding accents and regional dialects was tough. I often had to ask people to repeat themselves, which made me feel like I wasn't listening well.' (S09, VR, May 2023)

From our observations, it became evident that students sharing similar cultural and racial backgrounds naturally formed more cohesive groups and communicated more seamlessly. This suggests that their confidence in intercultural communication may have been higher because of the common cultural and linguistic context, leading to smoother interactions. However, it is essential to note that the quoted passage does not explicitly mention the confidence levels of these students. Realising the importance of effective intercultural communication in overcoming challenges, participants acknowledged the need to learn more about ICC. Nevertheless, the challenges faced by students in developing listening skills during WIL excursions may have contributed to building their confidence over time. The development of these skills prepares student teachers to thrive in diverse educational settings and foster meaningful cross-cultural relationships, suggesting that confidence is an essential component of their success.

The finding indicates that, in groupings with diverse students, students may have initially lacked confidence in their listening skills because of frequent challenges in effective communication. Language barriers, cultural misunderstandings and varying communication norms presented obstacles

to interaction. However, as the literature suggests, students who actively listened, sought clarification and displayed patience emerged as more successful communicators in these challenging situations (Arasaratnam et al. 2010). Therefore, while some students might have faced initial confidence issues in their listening skills, the observations suggest that, through experience and active listening, their confidence in intercultural communication may have increased over time. This observation underscores the importance of enhancing students' listening skills for effective intercultural communication, suggesting a potential growth in confidence in this area (Ilie 2019).

The reflections of students after the virtual excursion also highlighted the significance of enhancing listening skills for effective intercultural communication. In virtual interactions, listening may be more significant, as participants often cannot see each other and therefore do not have visual cues to support interpretation (De Beer et al. 2022). Realising the importance of active listening in overcoming challenges, participants acknowledged the need to learn more about ICC. Some of the participants illustrated their recognition of the importance of active listening and promoting understanding. For example, a participant explained how they facilitated the exchange of diverse perspectives and promoted an environment of mutual respect and active listening within their small group:

'In our group, we made a conscious effort to create a welcoming atmosphere where everyone felt comfortable sharing their thoughts. We started each discussion by acknowledging our diverse backgrounds and perspectives, which set a positive tone. When someone spoke, we actively listened and asked follow-up questions to better understand their point of view. It created a space where we all felt valued and respected.' (S238, VER, May 2023)

The findings suggest that students' confidence in their listening skills and their ability to facilitate effective intercultural communication may have increased. Students who actively chose to listen to each other created an environment that allowed every group member to communicate freely. Additionally, other participants highlighted their efforts to foster an environment conducive to improving listening skills and emphasised the importance of creating a safe space for the open sharing of perspectives. These actions led to enriching discussions and positive outcomes, indicating that students were confident in their capacity to create such an environment and facilitate effective communication (Wang & Han 2020).

Notwithstanding Ntuli's (2012) thoughts of impolite gestures as a sign of misunderstanding the data together with the analyses from the VRs showed that some of the students used appropriate eye contact to signal engagement in the conversation as well as indicated that they were listening to the speaker. Additionally, other students used open body language, such as uncrossed arms, which suggested that they were open to hearing other perspectives, in

other words, to listen for understanding. These findings on students' listening skills resemble two sides of a coin. One side of the coin shows how students' confidence in their listening skills may have been affected by linguistic differences, as they could not understand and interpret conversations effectively. However, on the other side of the coin, it is evident that some students recognised the importance of active listening, mutual respect and creating a safe space for open expression. This recognition suggests that their confidence in intercultural communication skills may have increased as they appreciated the significance of these elements in effective communication. This finding aligns with studies (Deardorff 2006; Lázár et al. 2007) on the importance of creating inclusive spaces that foster respect and appreciation for cultural diversity, which is supported by interaction involvement, particularly listening skills. Arasaratnam et al. (2010) and (Lázár et al. 2007) argue that engagement portrays cognitive and behavioural engagement in a conversation.

■ Theme 3: Exploring students' attitudes towards other cultures and their impact on intercultural communication

The responses of the participants revealed a spectrum of attitudes towards other cultures (Lázár et al. 2007; Spitzberg & Chagnon 2009). Some students exhibited positive attitudes characterised by curiosity, openness and genuine interest in learning about diverse cultures. These attitudes suggest that these students may have had an increased level of confidence in their ability to engage with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, as they displayed an eagerness to learn and connect. For instance, one participant stated:

'I was excited to interact with students from different cultures and I was eager to learn about their traditions and perspectives.' (S105, OEQ, May 2023)

A fellow student highlighted the impact of a positive attitude, saying:

'I realised that having confidence in my ability to adapt and learn from other cultures positively influenced my intercultural interactions because it allowed me to approach these group activities with a sense of respect and a genuine desire to learn from my peers.' (S118, RP, May 2023)

As evident in the literature, students with positive attitudes engaged actively with their peers from diverse backgrounds, asked questions and sought to understand cultural nuances, indicating that they were confident to learn from and interact with peers from other cultures (Arasaratnam et al. 2010). This led to more effective and meaningful intercultural exchanges, as was noted by one participant:

'Approaching discussions with an open mind allowed us to connect on a deeper level, resulting in more enriching conversations.' (S55, VER, May 2023)

In contrast, students with negative or apprehensive attitudes initially struggled with intercultural communication, indicative of them being less confident in this regard. However, as they participated actively in discussions and interacted with their peers, their attitudes began to change and their confidence seemed to increase. Batchelor and Mahomed (2021) support this transformation, suggesting that direct contact with individuals from different cultures can help break down stereotypes and misconceptions, which can positively shape intercultural experiences. For instance, a participant noted:

'I had some doubts at first, but as I got to know my fellow students, I realised that we had more in common than I thought.' (S89, OEQ, May 2023)

The finding emphasises the critical role of attitudes in shaping intercultural communication experiences. Although initial attitudes may vary, active participation and exposure to diverse cultures can lead to positive shifts in perceptions and more effective intercultural communication (Spitzberg & Chagnon 2009). Creating a supportive and inclusive environment within the WIL excursions, as evidenced by the responses of the participants, was essential to fostering positive attitudes and promoting productive intercultural exchanges (Deardorff 2006; Lázár et al. 2007), which buttressed students' confidence in managing these exchanges.

The following quotes from OEQs additionally indicate the participants' positive attitude towards other cultures:

'One of the most valuable aspects of our intercultural interactions is the friendships I have formed with students from different parts of the world. I've not only learned about their cultures but also gained lifelong friends.' (S264, OEQ, May 2023)

'I learned that working with other people from other cultures and others who use different languages, and how to treat others who use different languages and how to treat others and my positive attitude towards them [*developed*] as they did.' (S416, OEQ, May 2023)

It is evident from the foregoing quotations that participants appreciated the richness and significance that diverse cultures brought to the WIL excursion environments and that this learning contributed to their confidence in interactions with others. Most participants showed the need to challenge stereotypes and biases and approach people from different cultures to their own with an open mind and a positive attitude to foster understanding and effective intercultural communication, echoing findings by Chen and Starosta (1998). For example, a participant mentioned:

'[W]e actively sought to understand each other's backgrounds and experiences.' (S216, VER, May 2023)

Other participants in the current study emphasised intercultural sensitivity, which Arasaratnam (2006) reports to be essential to counteract stereotypes.

The recognition of the importance of intercultural sensitivity underscores the significance of having an open and empathetic attitude towards individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Arasaratnam et al. 2010). When exploring students' attitudes towards other cultures and their impact on intercultural communication, it becomes evident that intercultural sensitivity plays a vital role in breaking down preconceived notions and fostering understanding. In turn, being more culturally sensitive supports positive attitudes and improved confidence. During the WIL excursions, students had opportunities to put this into practice, and their growing intercultural sensitivity, coupled with the development of confidence in their ICC, allowed them to engage with peers from various cultures in a more informed, respectful and meaningful manner. This transformation in attitude and skills is a testament to the profound impact of experiential learning and practical exposure in shaping confident and culturally aware future teachers.

The responses of the participants underscore the importance of having a positive attitude towards other cultures and embracing cultural diversity in the context of intercultural communication. This is highly relevant to FSTs and in WIL excursions, where developing ICC is essential to help prepare them for their future careers as educators. It has been shown in Figure 5.1 that a positive attitude towards other cultures leads to motivation to communicate with people of diverse cultures (Arasaratnam 2006), and such increased motivation supports confidence. Embracing cultural diversity enhances ICC (Spitzberg & Chagnon 2009). Including these principles in the preparation of student teachers in WIL excursions helped students navigate intercultural interactions more successfully by ensuring that they are not only academically prepared but also equipped with the right attitudes and skills to engage positively and confidently with diverse students and colleagues, creating a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment.

■ Theme 4: Understanding students' motivation for active participation in intercultural interactions

Participants' responses indicate that many student teachers had a genuine curiosity about other cultures and a desire to learn from their peers, suggesting an increased level of confidence in actively pursuing and participating in intercultural interactions. Many participants expressed a genuine curiosity about other cultures and a desire to learn from their peers. One participant said:

'I was eager to discover new perspectives and traditions, and this curiosity motivated me to actively participate in discussions.' (S124, OEQ, May 2023)

The finding underscores the diverse motivations driving students to participate actively in intercultural interactions during WIL excursions.

These motivations align with literature that highlights the importance of positive attitudes and curiosity in fostering intercultural communication (Arasaratnam 2006; Wang & Han 2020). Active participation in intercultural interactions not only enriches students' cultural awareness but also contributes to their personal development and communication competence (Spitzberg & Chagnon 2009). This prepares them for the globalised world, where effective communication across cultures is an essential skill. It was evident from the VER and RPs that participants demonstrated the motivation and desire to build meaningful connections with individuals from diverse cultures:

'I am motivated to engage in intercultural interactions because I believe that building meaningful connections with people of different cultures enriches my teaching practice and promotes a sense of inclusivity in the classroom.' (S29, VER, May 2023)

'I am motivated to engage in intercultural interactions because I want to broaden my horizons and gain a deeper understanding of the world we live in.' (S62, RP, May 2023)

Participants expressed a genuine interest in collaborative learning and that it motivated them to interact with different cultural groups, even when not sharing the same physical space and when participating in the WIL excursions in an online environment. This motivation and interest in collaborative learning may indicate some confidence in engaging with diverse peers and using virtual spaces for learning and interaction. This notion confirms the ideas of SDL where students take ownership of their learning process (Petersen et al. 2020). The virtual space also provided participants with opportunities to have fun as they learned (Robinson & Persky 2020), which served as motivation for some students' career choices towards becoming a teacher, through the content and structure of the WIL excursion programme:

'Despite being physically separated, the collaboration between students from different campuses of NWU nurtured a supportive and inclusive community, where we could rely on one another for guidance, encouragement, and motivation.' (S161, OEQ, May 2023)

'I enjoyed the excursion because it was just motivation, I needed to make sure I was satisfied with my choice of study. I learned a lot from my peers.' (S59, VR, May 2023)

Another participant explained how they found the collaboration between students from different NWU campuses to be a source of inspiration and motivation in the face-to-face excursions, by stating:

'[...] witnessing the dedication and passion of my peers [*from different campuses*] encouraged me to strive for excellence and persevere in my academic pursuits.' (S189, OEQ, May 2023)

The finding showed that there was evidence of collaboration between different cultures, encouragement and motivation to learn from other cultures, and this could imply increased confidence in intercultural communication, as they actively participated and sought opportunities for learning and engagement across cultures. The finding further revealed that students are motivated to engage and build connections with diverse cultures, to gain insight into their complex and diverse world. This finding resonates with Spitzberg and Chagnon (2009), who emphasise the importance of building meaningful relationships and connections as a catalyst for intercultural competence. Students' motivations reflected their recognition of the transformative power of intercultural interactions in fostering genuine connections and promoting a sense of belonging among diverse individuals. Students' active involvement in intercultural interactions stems from their intrinsic motivation to learn, grow and develop as individuals and future teachers (Arasaratnam 2006), which also implies that students may have developed more confidence in their ability to participate in intercultural communication effectively. Intrinsic motivation will provide students with the tools to independently pursue knowledge and experiences that contribute to their ICC (Arasaratnam et al. 2010). This was seen as a strength of the 2023 student-teacher cohort in the WIL excursions and should contribute a firm foundation for subsequent intercultural relationship building in the rest of their BEd qualification, suggesting that their confidence in this area was evident and potentially increased.

■ Theme 5: Exploring empathy as a key factor in students' intercultural communication

Many participants noted that empathy played a central role in their ability to understand and relate to individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Their awareness of empathy's importance in seeing the world through different perspectives implies some or even increased, confidence in their intercultural communication skills. The acknowledgement of empathy as a valuable tool for relating to diverse peers indicates that students had confidence in their ability to employ empathetic understanding in their interactions (Arasaratnam et al. 2010). Therefore, confidence in intercultural communication skills seems to be evident in this context. Some of their thoughts included:

'Empathy was like a bridge that helped me connect with others' experiences and perspectives.' (S112, OEQ, May 2023)

'Empathy helped me navigate disagreements constructively, turning potential conflicts into opportunities for growth.' (S88, RP, May 2023)

Some of the participants talked about how the WIL excursions helped them develop confidence and empathy in intercultural communication. For example, they mentioned:

‘One of our activities required us to work with students from diverse backgrounds and by actively listening and seeking to understand their perspectives, our communication significantly improved, fostering trust and stronger connections.’ (S77, RP, May 2023)

‘It wasn’t just about the words; it was about understanding their feelings and perspectives.’ (S49, VR, May 2023)

The participants’ acknowledgement of empathy as a bridge to understanding aligns with the literature, which stresses the role of empathy in breaking down barriers and promoting cultural sensitivity (Arasaratnam et al. 2010). This understanding fosters a more confident approach to intercultural interactions. Participants also described how empathetic listening and consideration helped de-escalate misunderstandings and fostered harmonious relationships, suggesting that students were confident in their ability to employ it effectively. This concurs with Arasaratnam et al. (2010), who illustrates that empathy, as a fundamental attribute, enables effective communication even in the absence of prior intercultural experience. An empathetic individual possesses the ability to connect with others on both cognitive and emotional levels, facilitating a nuanced understanding of diverse perspectives and thereby promoting successful and appropriate intercultural communication (Byram 2020). Moreover, the findings underscore the pivotal role of empathy in student intercultural communication during WIL excursions, emphasising its contribution to understanding, conflict resolution and trust-building within diverse teams. The recognition of empathy’s significance in these areas suggests that students’ confidence in intercultural communication was evident and possibly increased, as they understood the impact of empathy on building trust and promoting effective communication in diverse contexts. This aligns with the broader literature on intercultural communication, emphasising the value of empathy in promoting effective and harmonious interactions (Chen & Starosta 1998). Empathy can be inferred from students’ demonstrated ability to put themselves in the shoes of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, displaying a genuine interest in understanding their perspectives and experiences.

The findings from the students’ experiences in WIL excursions contributed to the development of FSTs’ confidence in ICC. Through their positive attitudes and open-mindedness towards diverse cultures and their demonstrated adaptability, empathy and cultural sensitivity, these student teachers enhanced their capacity to navigate cultural complexities. It is evident that the WIL excursions acted as a catalyst for nurturing their confidence in intercultural communication, preparing them for the demands

of diverse educational settings. Therefore, devising ways in which student teachers can further enhance their confidence in WIL is paramount and should be a priority for HEIs. These experiences have showcased the transformative potential of such programmes, emphasising their pivotal role in equipping educators with the skills and mindset needed to foster inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments.

■ Conclusion

The findings of this study shed valuable light on the importance of ICC in teacher education. Collectively, the findings emphasise an enduring need to develop the intercultural competence of FSTs, and WIL excursions serve as a pivotal avenue to facilitate this development. Additionally, the participants in this study realised the need to further enhance their ICC. The findings emphasise the significance of empathy and practical experiences in shaping the confidence of FSTs in ICC during WIL excursions. These experiences equipped students with the skills and attitudes necessary to engage with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in a respectful and understanding manner. As they embark on their teaching careers, the confidence gained through these excursions will serve as a strong foundation for fostering harmonious and effective cross-cultural relationships within diverse educational settings.

To strengthen WIL programmes and further develop FSTs' confidence in ICC, several key recommendations should be considered. Firstly, the strong focus on the integration of experiential learning opportunities within these programmes should be maintained. Such experiences enable students to actively engage with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, fostering empathy and understanding. Secondly, the students should be recognised as self-directed learners who take responsibility for their learning. This entails not only the ability to independently initiate and manage their learning processes but also requires a high degree of autonomy, motivation and effective time management. Thirdly, cultural competency training should be incorporated within WIL excursions, providing students with the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate diverse cultural landscapes. Moreover, assigning mentors or guides who are experienced in intercultural communication can offer valuable support to students, helping them develop the confidence needed to engage effectively with diverse peers (also see Chapter 8). Fourthly, encouraging students to engage in reflection and providing constructive feedback on their intercultural experiences can facilitate continuous growth and improvement, further enhancing their confidence and intercultural communication skills. By implementing these recommendations, WIL programmes can play an instrumental role in preparing student teachers

for successful interactions in diverse educational settings and in fostering meaningful cross-cultural relationships. This study is limited concerning the lack of involvement of all the student teachers in the Faculty of Education, as it only selected FSTs. It also used four instruments to collect data.

In light of the findings, we recommend that the NWU Faculty of Education:

- Continue to design and conduct WIL excursions to provide FSTs with cultural awareness and support their acceptance and appreciation of other cultures.
- Create a collaborative space where diverse student teachers can interact, collaborate and learn from one another to increase their confidence in ICC.

We also recommend that further studies use personal interviews conducted with students to obtain their verbal perceptions. Such an approach will add depth to responses and allow for iterative discussions to develop shared understanding.