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DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE CURRICULUM: COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN AN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine whether cooperative learning, implemented through real-life intercultural case studies This study examines whether cooperative learning, implemented through real-life intercultural case studies within an internationalized curriculum, supports undergraduate students' perceived development of intercultural competence. The research was conducted in a second-year Intercultural Communication course in which students worked in culturally heterogeneous groups to resolve an intercultural misunderstanding through structured cooperative roles.

A quantitative research design was employed. Data were collected through an online survey consisting of 15 items measured on a 10-point Likert scale and administered to 37 undergraduate students following completion of the cooperative learning activity. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to examine students' perceptions of their learning experience, focusing on multicultural teamwork, clarity of instructions, experiences of discomfort and frustration, and perceived movement outside their comfort zone.

Findings indicate that students evaluated the cooperative learning experience positively while also reporting significant levels of challenge. A majority of participants indicated that the activity required them to move outside their comfort zone and that they experienced frustration during the group work process. These results suggest that cooperative learning, when embedded in an internationalized curriculum, creates structured conditions that support intercultural learning by engaging students in meaningful interaction with cultural difference.

Key words: Internationalization of the curriculum, Cooperative learning, Intercultural competence, Higher education

JEL Codes: I23; A23; F63

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current globalized context in which we live and work, understanding globalization and its direct connection to the internationalization of higher education institutions (HEIs) has become fundamental. Globalization refers to "the process and consequences of instantaneous world-wide communication made possible by new technology," leading to an explosive growth in the quantity and accessibility of knowledge and to increasing integration and interdependence of global economic and financial systems (Grünzweig & Rinehart, 2002, p. 7). The metaphor proposed by Grünzweig and Rinehart in *Rockin' in Red Square* aptly captures the dynamic, interconnected, and often disruptive nature of globalization.

Globalization has a direct impact on universities, as HEIs are responsible not only for preparing students for their professional careers but also for enabling their participation in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Consequently, higher education must equip students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to operate effectively in global and multicultural contexts (Currie, DeAngelis, de Boer, Huisman, & Lacotte, 2003).

Internationalization of higher education is therefore understood as a continuous and evolving process that extends far beyond student mobility programs. When examined systemically, following the work of Mestenhauser (2011), Sierra-Huedo, Bruton, and Fernández (2024), and grounded in Senge's (2006) systems thinking approach, internationalization permeates all areas of the university. However, such holistic reflection is often absent, as HEIs frequently operate within institutional and disciplinary silos (Mestenhauser, 2011). As a result, internationalization continues to be commonly equated with mobility initiatives alone, overlooking its curricular and pedagogical dimensions (Sierra-Huedo, Aguareles, & Romea, 2024).

International exchange programs have historically played a central role in internationalization efforts and are frequently described as transformative experiences for participating students. Programs such as the Peace Corps, initiated in the 1950s, and later initiatives such as the Erasmus program in the 1980s, have contributed significantly to cross-cultural learning and personal development (Pusch, 2004; Sierra-Huedo & Ozgoren, in press). While the educational value of mobility experiences is undeniable, access to such opportunities remains limited to a relatively small proportion of the student population.

For the purposes of this study, internationalization is understood as the process of integrating "an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of a higher education institution" (Knight, 2004, p. 2). Expanding this definition, Mestenhauser and Ellingboe (1998) conceptualize internationalization as "an ongoing, future-oriented, multidimensional, interdisciplinary, leadership-driven vision that involves many stakeholders working to change the internal dynamics of an institution to respond and adapt appropriately to an increasingly diverse, globally-focused, ever-changing external environment" (p. 199).

Given that education is inherently future-oriented and that university students represent the future workforce and citizenry, the internationalization of HEIs is no longer optional but essential. The extent to which future societies are capable of cooperation, mutual

understanding, and constructive engagement across differences is closely linked to the educational experiences provided today.

Research has shown that the adaptation and integration of international students cannot be achieved merely by placing them alongside local students in the same classrooms, a concern highlighted by initiatives such as the MULTICLASS project and grounded in Allport's (1954) contact theory. One of the most critical yet underexplored components of internationalization is the internationalization of the curriculum and, within it, the adoption of intercultural pedagogies that intentionally foster interaction, reflection, and learning across differences.

This article presents a case study conducted within an undergraduate Intercultural Communication course, in which cooperative learning and case-based methodology were employed as pedagogical strategies to promote intercultural learning. Students worked in multicultural groups to resolve a real-life intercultural misunderstanding, assumed specific roles within the group, and engaged in structured collaboration. Following the activity, students reflected on their learning experiences and completed a survey designed to evaluate the perceived impact of the assignment on their intercultural learning.

The guiding research question of this study is: *To what extent does cooperative learning, implemented through real-life intercultural case studies, contribute to undergraduate students' perceived development of intercultural competence?*

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study is structured around three complementary bodies of literature that together explain how intercultural competence can be fostered through pedagogical design in higher education: (1) intergroup contact theory and the reduction of prejudice, (2) cooperative learning as an inclusive and experiential pedagogy, and (3) internationalization of the curriculum and models of intercultural competence development. Taken together, these perspectives provide a coherent foundation for examining cooperative learning as a mechanism for internationalizing the curriculum and promoting intercultural learning in the classroom.

2.1. Prejudice and Stereotypes within the Classroom

The presence of cultural diversity in higher education classrooms does not, in itself, guarantee meaningful intercultural interaction or learning. As Allport argued in *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), simply placing individuals from different social or cultural groups in contact with one another is insufficient and may even reinforce existing stereotypes and tensions if the conditions under which contact occurs are not carefully structured. Allport's intergroup contact theory, which has served as the foundation for decades of research in social psychology, emphasizes that contact can reduce prejudice only when specific conditions are met.

According to Allport (1954), effective intergroup contact requires: (a) equal status among group members, (b) common goals, (c) cooperation rather than competition, and (d) institutional support or endorsement by an authority figure. Subsequent research has empirically validated and expanded these claims, demonstrating that structured and

meaningful contact can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup attitudes (Pettigrew, 1998, 2008; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000).

Importantly, Allport conceptualized prejudice as a learned phenomenon rather than an innate characteristic. Because prejudices are acquired through socialization, cultural narratives, and power relations, they can also be unlearned under appropriate conditions. This perspective aligns with educational approaches that view learning as socially constructed and positions the classroom as a critical site for intentional interventions aimed at reducing bias and fostering intercultural understanding.

Within higher education, Allport's theory has been applied to explain why diversity initiatives that lack pedagogical structure often fail to achieve their intended outcomes. The mere coexistence of domestic and international students in the same courses does not automatically lead to intercultural learning or integration. Without guided interaction, students may remain within cultural comfort zones or reproduce existing stereotypes. This insight underscores the need for pedagogical approaches that operationalize Allport's conditions within everyday teaching practices.

From an educational standpoint, intergroup contact theory provides a powerful explanatory framework for understanding why diversity alone does not automatically translate into intercultural learning. However, the theory remains largely descriptive unless it is operationalized through concrete pedagogical practices. Cooperative learning offers such an operationalization by embedding Allport's optimal contact conditions, equal status, shared goals, cooperation, and institutional support, directly into classroom design. Through intentional group composition, structured interdependence, role distribution, and active teacher facilitation, cooperative learning transforms contact into guided interaction, thereby reducing the risk of reinforcing stereotypes and increasing the likelihood of meaningful intercultural engagement.

2.2. Cooperative Learning as a Methodology for Inclusion and Intercultural Learning

Cooperative learning has been widely documented as one of the most effective pedagogical methodologies for fostering inclusion and active participation in heterogeneous classrooms. When learning techniques are intentionally designed and implemented through cooperative structures aligned with course content, students' involvement increases and inclusive learning environments are strengthened (Alemán & Mayora, 2009). In such settings, students not only engage cognitively with subject matter but also develop transversal competencies through "the identification, formulation and resolution of problems, as well as negotiation and decision-making" (Alemán & Mayora, 2009, p. 115). These competencies are particularly relevant in intercultural education, where learning is inseparable from interaction, interpretation, and meaning making across differences.

Historically, the emergence of cooperative learning in the United States can be traced to early nineteenth-century experiences such as the Lancasterian School (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). However, its consolidation as an educational movement is often associated with Dewey and Lewin, who emphasized student interaction and cooperation as foundational to learning and democratic participation (Fraile, 1997; Prenda, 2011). This tradition also contributed to

the development of experiential pedagogies that brought real-life situations into the classroom through simulations and case studies, approaches that are highly compatible with intercultural learning objectives.

Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1999) define cooperative learning as "the instructional use of small groups in which students work together to maximize their own learning and that of others" (p. 5). This definition highlights a key distinction: cooperative learning is not synonymous with group work; rather, it is a structured instructional approach designed to ensure that interaction becomes a mechanism for learning. Gimeno (2000) further conceptualizes cooperative learning as an educational structure capable of supporting high intellectual demand in classrooms that are heterogeneous academically, linguistically, racially, ethnically, and socially, turning academic tasks into challenges that remain both engaging and meaningful (p. 17). Similarly, Díaz-Barriga and Hernández (2002) argue that cooperative group work can enhance learning and enjoyment, strengthen relationships, support self-esteem, and foster values and behavioral dispositions that are less likely to develop in individualistic or competitive learning environments. In this sense, cooperative learning operates simultaneously on cognitive, interpersonal, and ethical dimensions of education, which makes it particularly relevant for intercultural pedagogy.

Cooperative learning can also be understood as a method of collectively constructing knowledge in which the learner is embedded within a heterogeneous team of interdependent members, guided by a teacher responsible for designing the work plan, scaffolding the process, and assessing outcomes (Alvarado Bocanegra, 2013). Maset (2003) emphasizes that teamwork is frequently used in the classroom to address diversity precisely because it enables teachers to pursue multiple objectives simultaneously and to support students according to their needs. Given the practical limits of individual teacher attention in large groups, cooperative structures create conditions for peer-supported learning and more individualized engagement within the group context. Maset (2003) identifies three interrelated pillars underpinning this methodology: (1) sustaining academic performance with particular support for those who need it most, (2) promoting the establishment of social relationships, and (3) generating psychological, cognitive, and social experiences that help students acquire values such as respect for others' opinions, learning opportunities that are often lost in individual work (Johnson et al., 1999).

The rigor of cooperative learning also lies in its structured design and sustained classroom presence. Johnson et al. (1999) argue that cooperative methodology should constitute a substantial proportion of classroom practice, often recommended at 60–80% of instructional time, if institutions aim to maximize both learning and social development outcomes. This emphasis underscores that cooperative learning is not an occasional technique but a pedagogical orientation that, when implemented consistently, shapes classroom culture, peer relations, and student engagement.

2.3. Phases for Developing Effective Cooperative Work

Effective cooperative learning requires deliberate planning and sequencing. Domingo (2008) outlines phases that support the development of productive cooperative work: (1) creating heterogeneous teams, often of three to five students, formed intentionally by the teacher (Maset, 2008); (2) offering short instructional sessions so students learn how to

collaborate effectively; (3) presenting the topic and establishing group agreements or a "contract" of commitments; (4) assigning roles that specify responsibilities (e.g., coordinator, secretary, spokesperson); (5) planning timelines and collaborative checkpoints; (6) teacher monitoring of progress, conflict resolution, and decision-making; and (7) evaluation, including assessment of group members and whole-class reflection on outcomes.

This sequencing is particularly important in intercultural contexts, where collaboration involves not only task completion but also negotiation of communication styles, expectations, and culturally shaped interaction norms. In other words, the structure itself becomes a learning scaffold.

2.4. Types of Cooperative Groups

Cooperative groups vary by duration and pedagogical purpose. Maset (2003) notes that cooperative groups commonly consist of three to six students, with four as a frequent configuration. Johnson et al. (1999) distinguish three types: (1) formal cooperative groups, lasting from one session to several weeks, designed to accomplish specific academic goals; (2) informal groups, lasting from a few minutes to one class period, used to support attention and comprehension during instruction; and (3) cooperative base groups, long-term heterogeneous groups aimed at providing sustained academic and emotional support over time (Maset, 2008). This typology is useful in higher education contexts because it makes explicit that cooperative learning can be designed both as a short-term intervention and as a longer-term social support structure, an important consideration when working with diverse cohorts and international students.

2.5. Essential Components of Cooperative Learning

A contribution of Johnson et al. (1999) is the identification of five essential elements that determine whether group learning becomes genuinely cooperative: positive interdependence, interpersonal and group skills, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, and group processing. Positive interdependence ensures that group members perceive their success as linked to the success of others. Interpersonal and group skills refer to the non-academic abilities necessary for teamwork, such as leadership, communication, and conflict management. Interaction supports explanation, dialogue, and cognitive elaboration, while individual accountability ensures that each student is responsible for contributing. Finally, group processing introduces structured reflection on group functioning and performance, enabling students to identify what worked and what must improve.

These elements are especially relevant to intercultural learning because they shape not only how tasks are completed but also how students interact across differences. When properly implemented, cooperative structures create predictable, equitable, and reflective spaces in which cultural diversity becomes a resource rather than a barrier.

2.6. Group Formation and Role Assignments

Group formation is not neutral. Pérez and Urbieta (2005) emphasize that the purpose of group composition is to enhance learning by enabling students to learn from one another and provide mutual support. Teachers must therefore decide between homogeneous and

heterogeneous groups. While homogeneous grouping often aligns with a teacher-centered model of instruction (Feito, 2004), heterogeneous grouping is widely supported as a more effective approach for inclusion, particularly in interethnic contexts (Díaz-Aguado, 1992; Maset, 2003; Slavin, 1992). Accordingly, heterogeneous groups intentionally structured by the teacher are typically recommended (Maset, 2003, 2008), especially when intercultural interaction is a central learning goal.

Within cooperative learning, role assignments are essential because it organizes participation and ensures equitable contribution (Johnson et al., 1999). Roles simulate real-life professional environments and distribute responsibilities that support group formation and functioning, as well as deeper cognitive engagement. Roles may include those supporting group formation (e.g., voice/noise monitor, turn-taking supervisor), group functioning (e.g., recorder, task guide), knowledge integration (e.g., summarizer, comprehension checker), and deeper thinking (e.g., idea critic, option producer, reality checker). By formalizing these functions, cooperative learning reduces the risk of unequal participation and supports accountability, issues that can otherwise become sources of conflict or exclusion in multicultural groups.

In sum, cooperative learning constitutes a structured pedagogical methodology that simultaneously advances inclusion, academic engagement, and social development. Its emphasis on heterogeneity, interdependence, structured interaction, and reflection makes it particularly well suited to intercultural education contexts, where learning outcomes involve not only knowledge acquisition but also the development of skills and dispositions required to collaborate and communicate effectively across cultural differences.

When implemented in culturally heterogeneous classrooms, cooperative learning functions not only as a methodology for inclusion but also as an intercultural learning environment. The structured nature of cooperative tasks requires students to negotiate meaning, manage differences in communication styles, and coordinate perspectives shaped by diverse cultural and academic backgrounds. In this sense, cooperative learning shifts intercultural interaction from an incidental by-product of diversity to an intentional pedagogical objective, positioning interaction itself as a central mechanism of learning.

2.7. Internationalization of the Curriculum

Research on internationalization in higher education has increasingly emphasized that achieving meaningful and equitable internationalization requires moving beyond a narrow focus on mobility programs. While international exchange initiatives have historically played an important role in fostering intercultural exposure, they reach only a limited proportion of the student population. Consequently, scholars and practitioners argue that the curriculum itself must become a central site for international and intercultural learning if internationalization is to benefit all students.

Evidence emerging from initiatives such as the Erasmus+ MULTICLASS project highlights that high-quality internationalization depends not only on the presence of culturally diverse student cohorts, but also on the intentional internationalization of curricula and pedagogical practices. From this perspective, internationalization is not an add-on or

peripheral activity, but a core academic process that shapes teaching, learning, and assessment across disciplines.

Internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) has been widely conceptualized as the integration of international, intercultural, and global dimensions into both the content and the processes of education (Leask, 2015). This understanding underscores that internationalization involves more than incorporating international examples or perspectives into course materials; it also requires rethinking how students learn, interact, and construct knowledge within the classroom. Curriculum design therefore encompasses not only what is taught, but how learning experiences are structured, how interaction is facilitated, and how learning outcomes are assessed.

Within this framework, the curriculum is understood as a dynamic and evolving process rather than a static body of content. As Leask (2015) argues, effective IoC requires academics to engage in reflective curriculum design that foregrounds pedagogical processes, teaching–learning interactions, and assessment practices. Internationalized curricula must intentionally create opportunities for students to engage with differences, reflect on diverse perspectives, and develop the capabilities required for participation in a globalized world. This shift places pedagogy at the heart of internationalization efforts.

From this curricular perspective, cooperative learning can be understood as a powerful mechanism for enacting IoC at the classroom level. By organizing learning through cultural, linguistically, and academically heterogeneous groups, cooperative learning embeds intercultural interaction within everyday teaching practice. Forming heterogeneous groups thus becomes a deliberate act of intercultural curriculum design rather than a neutral organizational choice. Through shared tasks, structured interdependence, and guided interaction, students are required to work with differences as an integral part of their learning process.

IoC frameworks emphasize that diversity should be treated as a pedagogical resource rather than a challenge to be managed. Cooperative learning aligns closely with this principle by positioning student diversity as a source of multiple perspectives, alternative problem-solving approaches, and deeper learning. Through intentional design, cooperative learning creates structured opportunities for students to engage with diverse viewpoints, negotiate meaning, and reflect on their assumptions, processes that are central to intercultural learning interventions.

Moreover, internationalized curricula aim to foster specific graduate attributes, including global awareness, intercultural sensitivity, adaptability, and effective communication across cultural boundaries. Cooperative learning directly supports the development of these outcomes by requiring students to collaborate, negotiate roles, resolve misunderstandings, and communicate effectively within diverse teams. In this way, cooperative learning operationalizes the aims of IoC by translating internationalization goals into concrete learning experiences.

Importantly, IoC shifts responsibility for internationalization from specialized international offices to academic staff and everyday classroom practices. Through pedagogical approaches such as cooperative learning, internationalization becomes embedded in

assessment design, learning activities, and classroom interaction. This approach ensures that intercultural learning is not dependent on students' participation in mobility programs but is accessible to all learners within the institutional curriculum.

In summary, internationalization of the curriculum represents a move toward inclusive, process-oriented, and pedagogy-driven internationalization. Cooperative learning, with its emphasis on heterogeneity, structured interaction, and shared learning goals, provides an effective pedagogical mechanism through which IoC can be enacted. By embedding intercultural interaction within the core of teaching and learning, cooperative learning transforms the classroom into a site of internationalization, ensuring that global and intercultural learning outcomes are systematically integrated into the educational experience.

From the perspective of intercultural competence development, cooperative learning fosters empathy, negotiation, conflict resolution, effective communication, and respect for diverse viewpoints, capabilities that Leask identifies as essential graduate learning outcomes within an internationalized curriculum. In this sense, cooperative learning operationalizes IoC by embedding intercultural interaction and global capabilities into the pedagogical core of the curriculum, linking curriculum design directly to the development of intercultural competence (Sierra-Huedo & Aguareles, 2025).

Figure 1. IoC and Development of Intercultural Competence Models aligned.

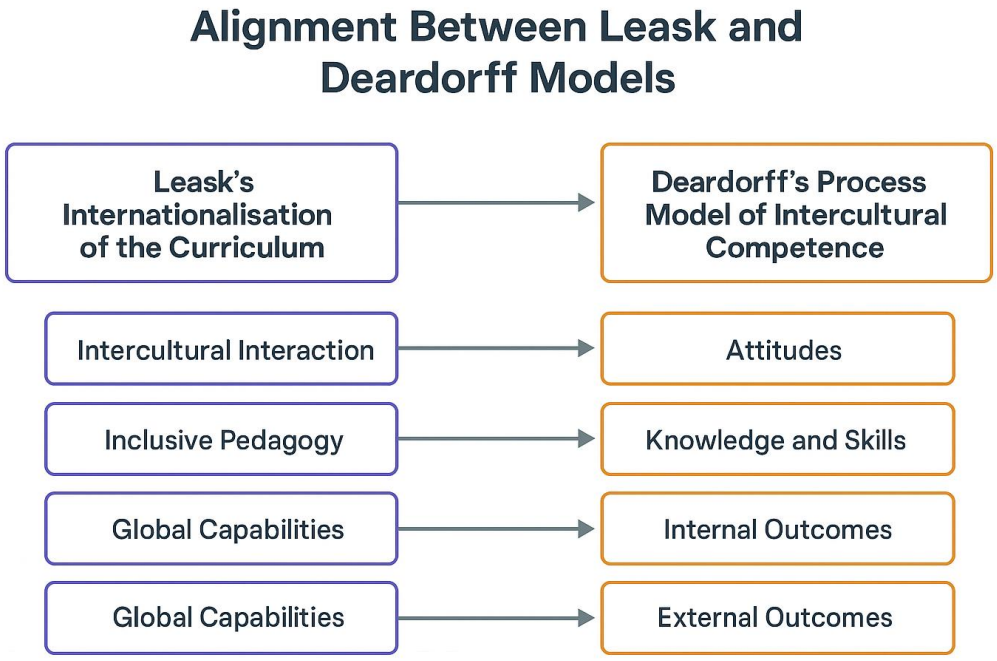

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual alignment between Leask's (2015) framework for internationalization of the curriculum and Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence. This alignment highlights how intentional curriculum design aimed at integrating international and intercultural dimensions also creates conditions for the development of key intercultural attitudes, skills, and outcomes among students.

When academic staff design courses through an internationalization lens and intentionally incorporate opportunities for intercultural interaction within classroom activities, they simultaneously foster foundational intercultural attitudes in students. Inclusive pedagogy, as emphasized within IoC frameworks, builds upon students' existing knowledge and skills while deliberately supporting the acquisition of new competencies required for participation in a globalized professional and social environment. These competencies, often articulated as graduate learning outcomes, are increasingly central to how HEIs conceptualize student success beyond disciplinary expertise.

Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence (2006) conceptualizes intercultural competence as a developmental and cyclical process composed of four interrelated dimensions: (1) attitudes (respect, openness, curiosity), (2) knowledge and skills (e.g., cultural self-awareness, listening, analysis, interaction skills), (3) internal outcomes (adaptability, flexibility, empathy), and (4) external outcomes (effective and appropriate communication and behavior in intercultural contexts). Rather than presenting intercultural competence as a static outcome, Deardorff's model emphasizes progression through these dimensions as learners engage in meaningful intercultural experiences.

Within this framework, cooperative learning aligns closely with the foundational stages of intercultural competence development. The use of cooperative roles, positive interdependence, and shared responsibility encourages students to listen actively, negotiate meaning, and engage respectfully with peers' perspectives. These practices directly support the development of openness, curiosity, and respect, attitudes identified by Deardorff as essential starting points for intercultural learning. Furthermore, cooperative learning's emphasis on dialogue and negotiation promotes the acquisition of interaction skills and cultural self-awareness, enabling students to move beyond surface-level engagement toward deeper intercultural understanding.

As students' progress through cooperative learning experiences, they are also exposed to situations that require adaptability, empathy, and flexibility, internal outcomes that emerge as learners manage difference, ambiguity, and occasional misunderstanding within heterogeneous groups. Through sustained collaboration and guided reflection, these internal dispositions can translate into external outcomes, particularly the ability to communicate and act effectively and appropriately in intercultural contexts.

Taken together, the alignment between Leask's IoC framework and Deardorff's process model underscores the central role of pedagogy in achieving internationalization outcomes. Cooperative learning, with its emphasis on heterogeneity, positive interdependence, and structured peer interaction, provides a concrete and effective mechanism through which internationalized curricula can foster intercultural competence and support the development of globally responsive graduates prepared to communicate and collaborate across cultural boundaries.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative, classroom-based research design to examine undergraduate students' perceived development of intercultural competence after participating in a cooperative learning intervention implemented in an Intercultural Communication course.

Quantitative methodology is appropriate for examining theory-informed hypotheses through the systematic collection and analysis of numerical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2014). In this study, data were collected through a structured online survey administered after the intervention and analyzed using descriptive statistical procedures.

The research followed a deductive and theory-informed approach grounded in established frameworks on cooperative learning, internationalization of the curriculum, and intercultural competence development. The primary purpose was to identify patterns in students' self-reported learning experiences and perceptions associated with multicultural teamwork within a structured cooperative learning environment.

3.1. Research Hypothesis

H1: Cooperative learning implemented through real-life intercultural case studies contributes to undergraduate students' perceived development of intercultural competence.

3.2. Research Context and Design

The cooperative learning intervention was embedded within the internationalized curriculum of the undergraduate course Intercultural Communication. Students worked in culturally heterogeneous groups to resolve a real-life intercultural misunderstanding presented as a course case. Group work was structured through the assignment of cooperative roles and guided collaboration procedures.

Following completion of the activity, students were asked to complete an online survey designed to capture their perceptions of the group work experience, including perceived learning, challenge, and intercultural stress factors.

3.3. Instrument

Data were collected using an online questionnaire developed in Microsoft Forms. The survey included 15 items. Because the instrument aimed to capture different dimensions of the cooperative learning experience (e.g., satisfaction, stress factors, perceived usefulness, and instructional scaffolding), item formats varied: some items used a 10-point response scale, others used 5-point Likert-type scales, and some were binary (yes/no) or categorical.

Items focused on students' perceptions of:

• working in multicultural teams,

• overall evaluation of the cooperative learning experience,

• clarity and usefulness of instructions and guidelines,

• experiences of discomfort and frustration,

• perceived need to move outside the comfort zone, and

• perceived stress related to intercultural teamwork (communication style, time management, and language).

These dimensions were selected to align with theoretical constructs related to intercultural learning, experiential pedagogy, and cooperative learning.

3.4. Participants

A total of 37 undergraduate students participated in the study. All participants were enrolled in the second year of their degree programs and were taking the course Intercultural Communication. Students were drawn from Journalism, Audiovisual Communication, Advertising and Public Relations, and Translation and Intercultural Communication. Participation in the survey was voluntary and responses were collected anonymously.

3.5. Data Analysis

Survey results were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages and distributions) to summarize students' responses and identify general trends in perceptions of the cooperative learning experience. Given the exploratory nature of the classroom intervention, the sample size, and the objective of describing perceptions rather than establishing causal relationships, inferential statistical analyses were not conducted.

3.6. Results

This section presents descriptive findings on students' perceptions of cooperative learning in a multicultural group context. Overall, students evaluated the experience positively, while also reporting elements of discomfort, stress, and challenge associated with intercultural collaboration.

Figure 2. Students' ratings of satisfaction with multicultural teamwork

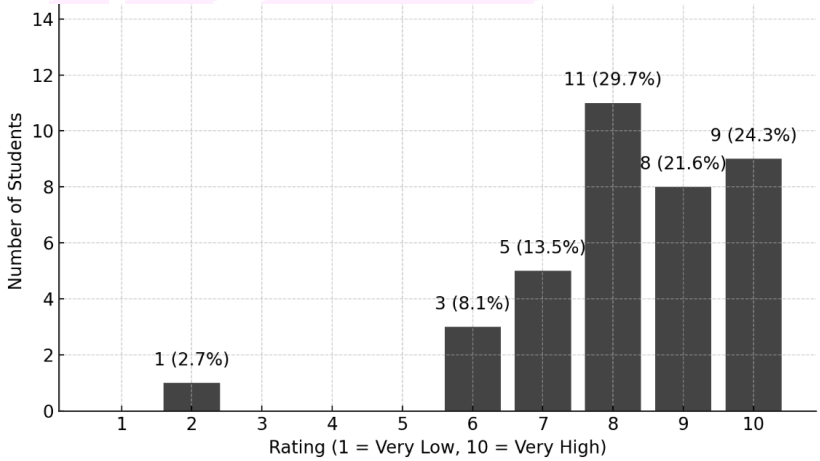

Figure 2 illustrates a strong tendency toward high levels of student satisfaction with multicultural teamwork. Among the 37 respondents, a significant majority (75.7%) rated their experience as 8, 9, or 10 on a 10-point scale, with the highest concentration at rating 8 (29.7%). Only one student (2.7%) selected a low rating of 2, and no respondents gave scores between 1 and 5. This pronounced skew toward the upper end of the scale suggests that students overwhelmingly perceived their multicultural group work experience as positive. The minimal presence of low or neutral scores and the clustering of responses around the highest values

reflect a broadly shared sense of engagement and value. These findings provide empirical support for the benefits of interculturally diverse, cooperative learning environments in fostering student satisfaction and may point to the development of intercultural competencies within such settings.

Figure 3. Reported frustration during groupwork

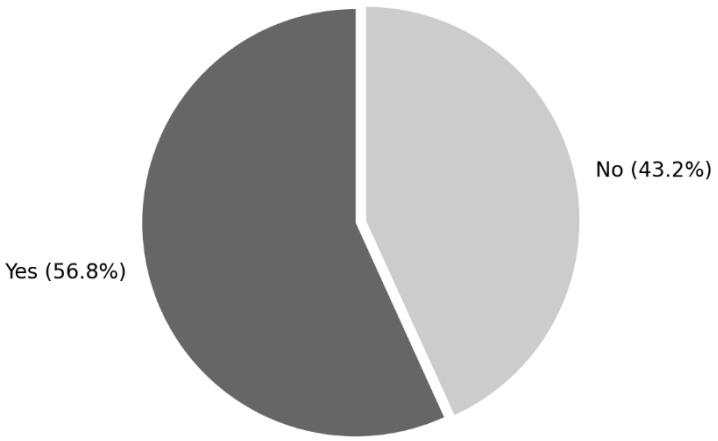

Figure 3 presents a binary response to the question of whether students experienced frustration during group work. Among the 37 respondents, 56.8% answered "Yes," indicating that over half of the participants encountered some level of frustration in their collaborative experience. In contrast, 43.2% reported not feeling frustrated. This finding suggests that while multicultural teamwork was generally perceived positively (as seen in Figure 2), challenges related to group dynamics, communication, or task coordination may still arise. The presence of frustration in over half the group underscores the need for structured support mechanisms in intercultural group settings, such as clearer role definitions, guided facilitation, or enhanced conflict resolution strategies.

Figure 4. Perceived need to move outside the comfort zone during group work

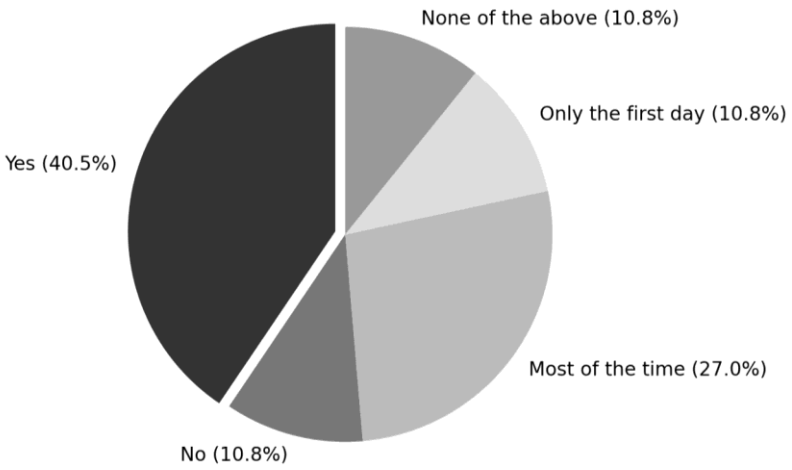

Figure 4 illustrates students' perceived need to step outside of their comfort zones during multicultural group work. While 40.5% of respondents answered "Yes," an additional

27% indicated this occurred “Most of the time,” suggesting that two-thirds of students experienced some level of consistent discomfort associated with the activity. Smaller segments reported feeling challenged “Only the first day” (10.8%) or “Not at all” (10.8%), while another 10.8% selected “None of the above.” These results support the notion that intercultural teamwork presents a degree of affective and interpersonal challenge, which, rather than being purely negative, may serve as a catalyst for personal and academic growth. The data highlights the importance of scaffolding emotional resilience and reflection in diverse group learning contexts.

Figure 5. Perceived clarity and helpfulness of instructions.

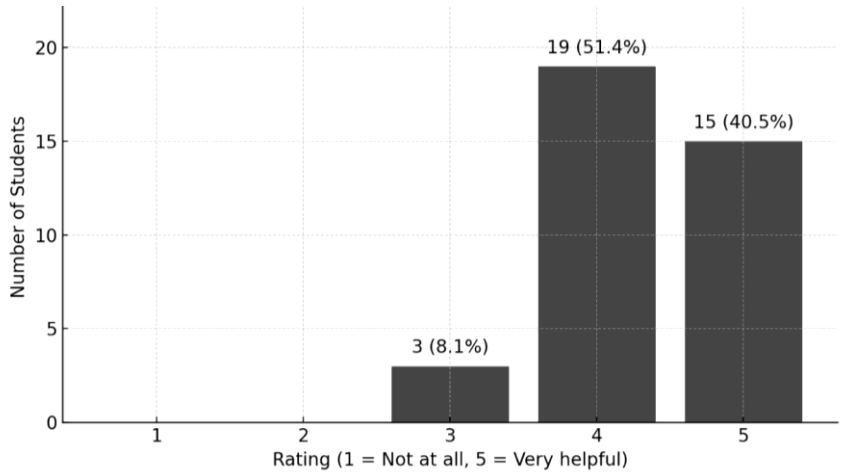

Figure 5 shows student ratings on the clarity and helpfulness of instructions during group work, using a 5-point Likert scale. Among the 37 respondents, 91.9% gave a score of 4 or 5, with the largest group (51.4%) selecting 4, and another 40.5% rating the instructions as highly clear and helpful (5/5). Only 8.1% gave a neutral score of 3, and no respondents chose the lowest categories (1 or 2). These results suggest that instructional design and guidance were largely effective in supporting students through the collaborative process. The near absence of dissatisfaction indicates that students likely felt oriented and prepared, which may have positively influenced their overall experience of multicultural teamwork.

Figure 6. Effectiveness of Guidelines in Supporting Student Reflection on Group Work

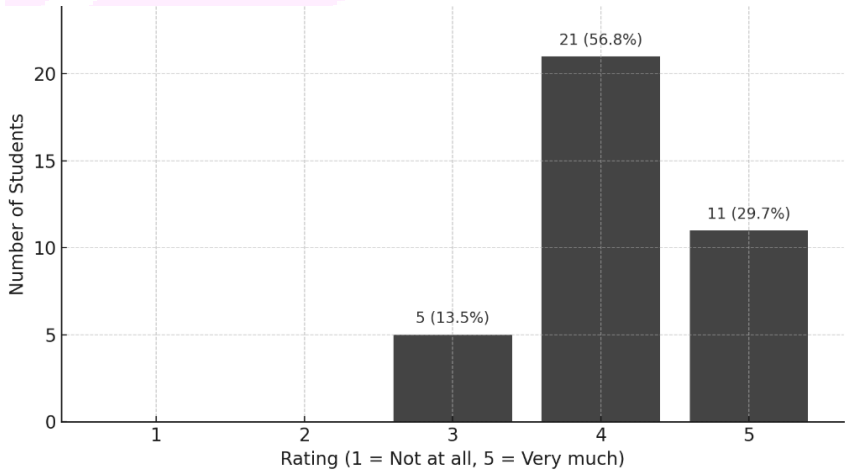

Figure 6 illustrates student perceptions of whether the provided guidelines helped them reflect on their group work experience. The majority of respondents (86.5%) gave a rating of

4 or 5, with 56.8% selecting 4 and nearly a third (29.7%) assigning the highest rating. A smaller segment (13.5%) gave a neutral rating of 3, and no students reported low scores. These results indicate that the guidelines were largely effective in fostering structured reflection, which is critical for the development of metacognitive awareness and intercultural learning. The high ratings suggest that the scaffolding provided through instructional prompts successfully guided students in processing their group dynamics and personal contributions.

Figure 7. Application of Course Theory to Cope with Frustration and Difficulties in Multicultural Teams

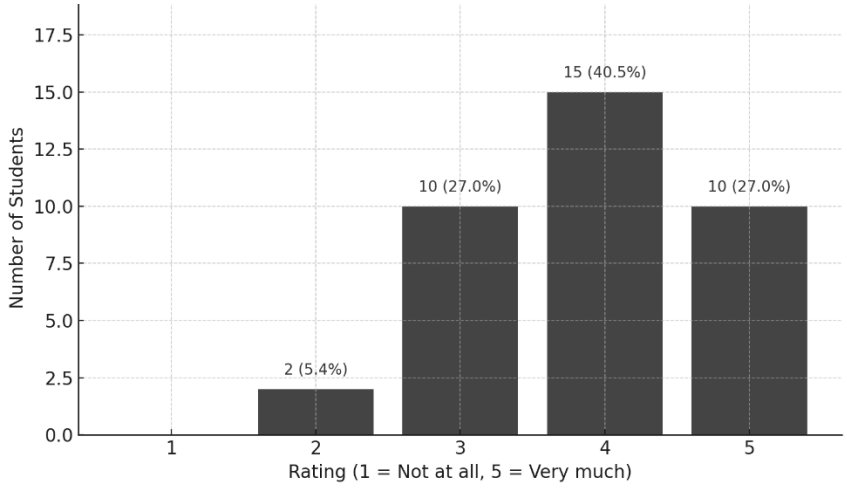

Figure 7 presents student evaluations of their ability to apply course theory to navigate frustration and challenges in multicultural teams. A combined 67.5% rated their application as 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale, suggesting that the majority perceived the course content as practically relevant to their team-based experiences. An additional 27.0% gave a moderate score of 3, while only a small minority (5.4%) reported minimal application (2/5). These findings imply that theoretical frameworks presented in class were not only understood but internalized and mobilized to cope with real interpersonal dynamics in diverse group settings. The results support the pedagogical value of linking conceptual learning with experiential practice in the development of intercultural competence.

Figure 8. Impact of Communication Style Differences on Student Stress During Group Work

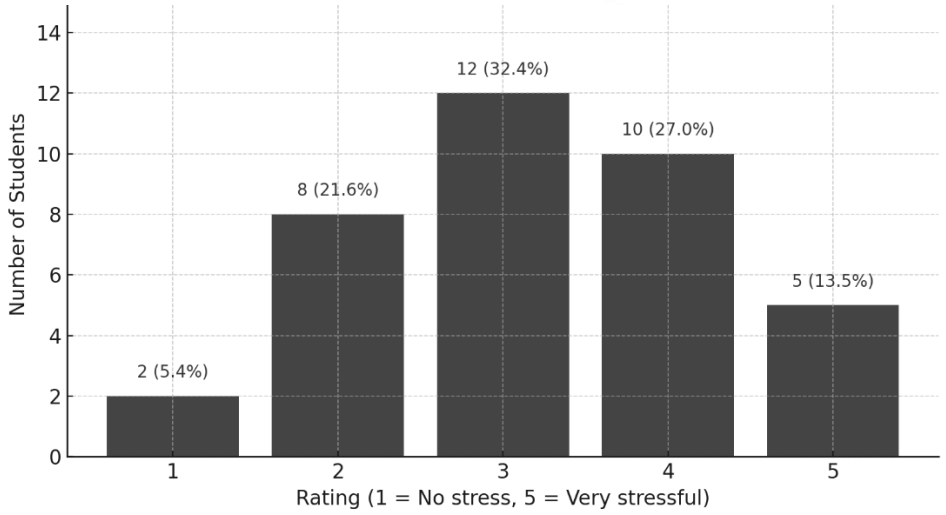

Figure 8 captures the perceived stress students experienced as a result of differing communication styles during multicultural group work. The majority of responses clustered around the mid-to-high range: 32.4% rated the experience a 3, 27.0% a 4, and 13.5% the maximum stress level (5/5). In contrast, only 5.4% and 21.6% of students reported low levels of stress (1 or 2). These results indicate that while communication differences were not overwhelmingly negative, they did present a moderate to significant challenge for many participants. The data underscores the importance of developing intercultural communication awareness and strategies in internationalized classrooms, as unmanaged differences in style can become a source of tension and misunderstanding.

Figure 9. Stress Related to Time Management During Multicultural Group Work

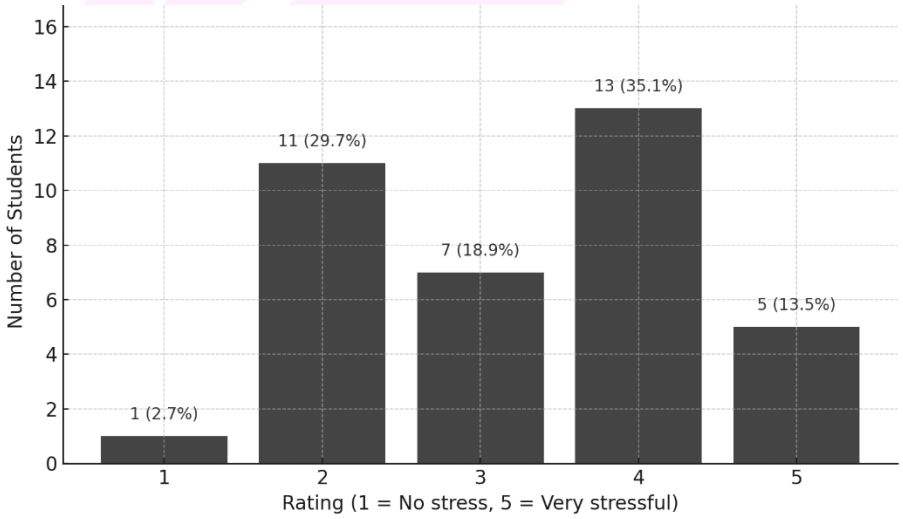

Figure 9 shows student perceptions of time management stress during group work. The majority of students reported moderate to high stress, with 35.1% selecting 4/5 and 13.5% selecting 5/5. An additional 18.9% gave a middle score of 3, indicating that time coordination was a recurring challenge. Only a small portion of students (2.7%) reported no stress, and nearly one-third (29.7%) chose 2/5, suggesting some level of difficulty even among those less

impacted. These results reflect the complexity of coordinating tasks, schedules, and deadlines in multicultural team settings, and highlight the need for explicit time management strategies in cooperative learning design.

Figure 10. Stress Caused by Language-Related Challenges in Multicultural Group Work

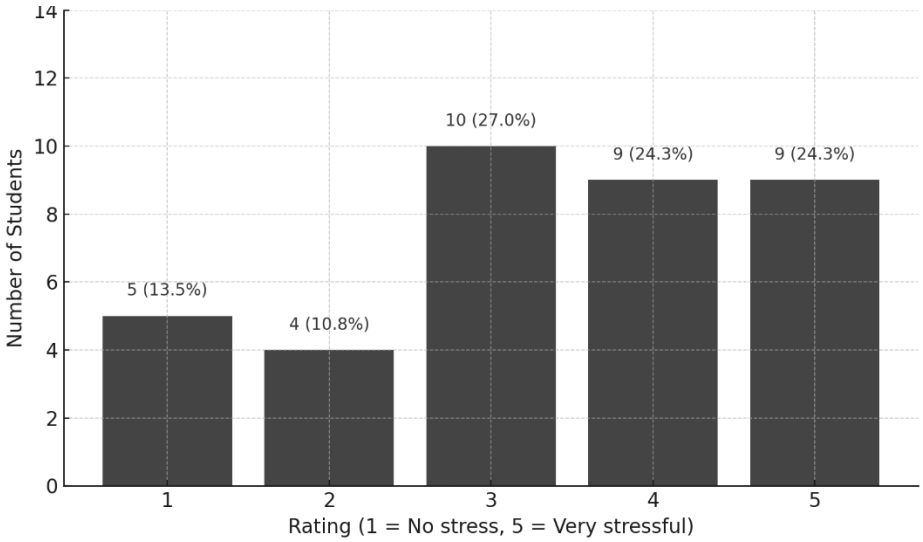

Figure 10 illustrates the levels of stress students attributed to language-related challenges during multicultural group work. While responses were spread across the scale, most students reported moderate to high stress levels, with 27.0% selecting 3, and 48.6% selecting 4 or 5. A smaller group of students (24.3%) reported low stress (1 or 2), suggesting that while language was not a universal barrier, it was a significant factor for many. These findings highlight the need for both linguistic inclusivity and support strategies when designing collaborative learning tasks in intercultural settings, as language complexity can hinder participation, comprehension, and group cohesion.

Figure 11. Perceived Usefulness of Multicultural Group Work for Future Professional Life

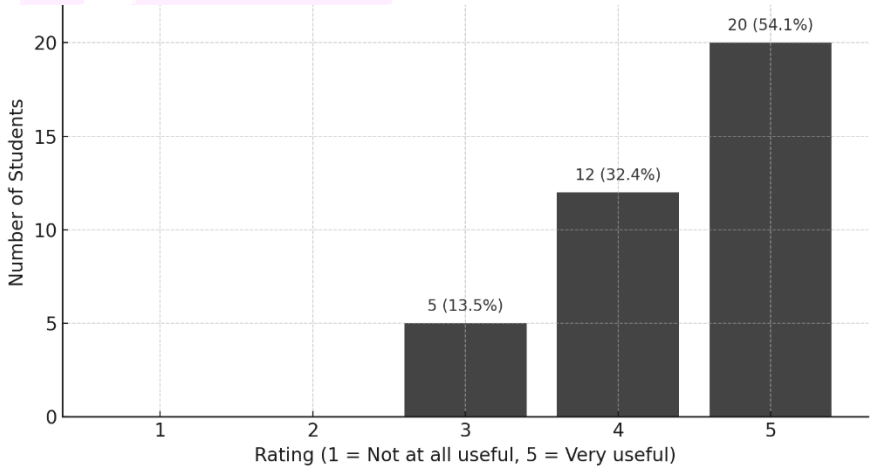

Figure 11 summarizes students' perceptions of the professional relevance of multicultural group work. Over half of the respondents (54.1%) rated the experience as highly useful (5/5), while an additional 32.4% selected 4/5. Only 13.5% chose the neutral midpoint

(3/5), and no students reported low usefulness. This overwhelmingly positive distribution suggests that students recognize the transferability of skills developed in intercultural collaboration, such as communication, negotiation, and adaptability, to real-world professional contexts. These findings reinforce the argument that experiential, diversity-oriented pedagogies not only benefit academic outcomes but also prepare learners for globalized and team-based work environments.

4. DISCUSSION

Intercultural competence is not an innate skill, to acquire it several things need to happen there should be training, experiential learning and emotional development (cognitive, behavioral and emotional) (Deardorf, 2009). It is indeed a developmental process that must be intentionally fostered through educational experiences (Paige, 1993; Bennett, 1993). Similarly, learning to work effectively in heterogeneous and multicultural groups does not occur naturally but requires structured pedagogical support. The findings of this study suggest that cooperative learning, when embedded within an internationalized curriculum, provides an effective context for supporting this developmental process among undergraduate students.

The results highlight the central role of pedagogy and assessment design in internationalization of the curriculum initiatives. As emphasized by Leask (2015) and Mestenhauser and Ellingboe (1998), internationalization efforts are most effective when they are embedded within teaching, learning, and assessment practices rather than treated as peripheral or symbolic activities. In the present study, cooperative learning was intentionally integrated into course assessment through real-life intercultural case studies, requiring students to apply theoretical concepts from intercultural communication theories and developmental models (Paige, 1993; Bennett, 1993) to practical situations. This alignment between curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment appears to have contributed to students' positive evaluation of the experience and their perception of its relevance for their future professional development.

A significant finding is that many students reported experiencing frustration and the need to move outside their comfort zone while working in multicultural groups. Drawing on Paige's (1993) conceptualization of intercultural learning as an experiential and developmental process, these experiences can be interpreted as indicators of intercultural learning rather than as negative outcomes. Moments of discomfort, ambiguity, and emotional challenge often function as catalysts for reflection, adaptation, and learning. In this sense, the reported frustration and discomfort suggest that students were engaging with cultural difference at a deeper level, rather than remaining at a superficial or observational stage.

This interpretation is consistent with Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which posits that progression toward more ethnorelative orientations requires exposure to difference and the ability to tolerate ambiguity. Through cooperative learning, students were placed in culturally heterogeneous groups with shared goals and interdependent roles, compelling them to negotiate meaning, manage misunderstandings, and adapt their communication strategies. These processes are central to the development of intercultural competence and align with the attitudinal and behavioral dimensions described in Deardorff's (2006) Process Model.

The findings also support Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory by demonstrating the importance of structured contact conditions. Cooperative learning in this study was designed to ensure equal status among group members, shared academic goals, intergroup cooperation, and continuous instructor support. Students' experiences of working with peers who differed from them culturally suggest that these conditions facilitated meaningful interaction rather than reinforcing stereotypes or avoidance behaviors. In this way, cooperative learning operationalized Allport's conditions within the classroom context, transforming diversity into a learning resource.

Furthermore, the sequencing and scaffolding of the cooperative learning assessment played a critical role in enabling students to cope with intercultural challenges. Clear instructions, role distribution, and teacher monitoring provided a structured framework that supported students as they navigated moments of uncertainty and frustration. From Paige's (1993) perspective, such pedagogical support is essential for ensuring that intercultural stress leads to learning and growth rather than disengagement. When discomfort is accompanied by guidance and opportunities for reflection, it becomes a productive element of intercultural learning.

From the perspective of internationalization of the curriculum, the results demonstrate that cooperative learning can translate internationalization goals into concrete classroom practices. By embedding intercultural interaction within assessment and everyday learning activities, the course ensured that all students, not only those participating in mobility programs, had access to meaningful intercultural learning opportunities. This finding reinforces Leask's (2015) argument that internationalization must be enacted through pedagogy if it is to have a sustained impact on student learning.

Overall, the findings indicate that cooperative learning, implemented through real-life intercultural case studies and supported by structured pedagogical design, fosters conditions conducive to intercultural competence development. Students' experiences of challenge, discomfort, and adaptation should be understood as integral components of the intercultural learning process, consistent with the theoretical frameworks underpinning this study. In this sense, cooperative learning emerges as a particularly effective pedagogical approach for internationalized curricula, supporting cognitive, behavioral, and experiential dimensions of intercultural learning while preparing students to communicate and collaborate effectively in culturally diverse professional contexts.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the extent to which a cooperative learning intervention based on real-life intercultural case resolution, embedded within an internationalized Intercultural Communication curriculum, contributed to undergraduate students' perceived development of intercultural competence.

Overall, the descriptive findings provide support for the hypothesis that cooperative learning contributes to students' perceived intercultural competence development. Students reported high satisfaction with multicultural teamwork, rated the experience as professionally useful, and indicated that they were able to apply course theory to cope with difficulties encountered in intercultural collaboration. At the same time, students reported frustration,

moderate to high stress related to communication, time management, and language, and a frequent need to move outside their comfort zone. Rather than contradicting the positive evaluation of the experience, these results suggest that cooperative learning created conditions in which students engaged with intercultural difference in ways that were authentic, challenging, and educationally meaningful.

The study also highlights the importance of instructional design and scaffolding. High ratings for clarity of instructions and usefulness of reflective guidelines suggest that structured support mechanisms are critical for enabling students to navigate intercultural stress and transform it into learning rather than disengagement. In this sense, cooperative learning appears most effective as an intercultural learning intervention when it is intentionally designed, monitored, and connected to theoretical frameworks presented in the course.

From the perspective of internationalization of the curriculum, the study reinforces that internationalization is achieved through pedagogy and assessment practices that create inclusive access to intercultural learning for all students, not only those participating in mobility programs. Embedding cooperative learning and intercultural cases into curriculum and assessment provides a concrete strategy for advancing internationalization at home, focusing on the quality aspect of an internationalization process.

Limitations. The study relied on a small classroom sample and self-reported perceptions, which limits generalizability and does not allow causal claims. Future research could incorporate mixed methods approaches, include validated intercultural competence measures, compare instructional designs, and adopt longitudinal designs to examine developmental change over time.

Despite these limitations, the findings suggest that cooperative learning, when embedded in an internationalized curriculum and supported through structured instructional scaffolding, offers a promising pathway for fostering intercultural competence development in higher education.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The increasing impact of globalization on higher education has intensified the need for universities to prepare students for professional and social participation in culturally diverse and interconnected environments. While internationalization has traditionally been associated with student mobility programs, research and institutional practice have repeatedly shown that mobility reaches only a limited proportion of the student population. Internationalization at Home (IaH) has focused on the quality of the internationalization process rather than on the quantity and mobility programs. Therefore, internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) has gained prominence as a key strategy for ensuring that all students regardless of whether they participate in mobility are offered meaningful international and intercultural learning opportunities within their formal academic programs. Within this shift, pedagogy and assessment become central: internationalization cannot remain a policy discourse or a set of extracurricular initiatives but must be enacted through teaching–learning processes that structure interaction, support reflection, and guide students toward the development of the competencies required in globalized contexts.

This study examines cooperative learning as a pedagogical mechanism for enacting internationalization of the curriculum and fostering the development of intercultural competence among undergraduate students. Specifically, it explores the extent to which cooperative learning, implemented through a real-life intercultural case resolution embedded in an internationalized Intercultural Communication course, contributes to students' perceived development of intercultural competence. The study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives that together justify the intervention and inform the interpretation of findings: (1) intergroup contact theory and the structured reduction of prejudice, (2) cooperative learning as an inclusive and structured pedagogy for heterogeneous classrooms, and (3) internationalization of the curriculum frameworks aligned with developmental models of intercultural competence.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study draws first on Allport's intergroup contact theory (1954). Allport argues that contact between members of different social groups can reduce prejudice only when specific conditions are met equal status within the contact situation, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support from authorities or institutional structures. Importantly, Allport warns that contact without such conditions may backfire, reinforcing stereotypes or increasing tension. In higher education contexts, this argument has direct relevance. Universities often assume that bringing domestic and international students into the same classroom will automatically lead to intercultural interaction and learning. However, research and classroom experience suggest that diversity alone does not guarantee meaningful engagement; students may remain in parallel social circles or interact in ways that reproduce existing power relations and stereotypes. Consequently, the classroom must be intentionally designed so that intercultural contact becomes educationally productive rather than merely incidental.

Cooperative learning provides a practical pedagogical structure through which Allport's optimal conditions can be operationalized. Unlike unstructured "group work," cooperative learning is a structured instructional methodology in which students work in small groups to maximize both individual and collective learning. In classic formulations (Johnson, Johnson,

& Holubec, 1999), cooperative learning is defined by essential elements such as positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction (face-to-face or close interaction), explicit development of interpersonal and group skills, and group processing (structured reflection on group functioning). These features are especially relevant for intercultural education because they require students to coordinate meaning-making, negotiate roles, manage differences in communication styles, and sustain collaboration under shared academic goals. Cooperative learning therefore does not merely place students in contact; it structures interaction through designed interdependence and accountability, and it positions the instructor as an active facilitator—precisely the kind of "authority support" that Allport identifies as necessary for contact to reduce prejudice and foster more constructive intergroup relations.

The study is also situated within contemporary frameworks of internationalization of the curriculum, particularly those that emphasize integration of international, intercultural, and global dimensions into both curriculum content and learning processes (Leask, 2015). IoC is understood here not as the addition of international examples to course content but as a broader curricular transformation that includes learning outcomes, pedagogical processes, classroom interaction, and assessment practices. In this view, curriculum is a dynamic process: what students learn and how they learn are inseparable, and internationalization must be realized in the everyday practices of teaching and assessment. This perspective supports the central argument of the study: cooperative learning can function not only as a classroom technique but as a curricular strategy that embeds intercultural interaction into the core of teaching and assessment, thereby supporting "internationalization at home" and making intercultural learning accessible to all students.

In parallel, the study aligns with developmental models of intercultural competence, particularly Deardorff's Process Model (2006). Deardorff conceptualizes intercultural competence as cyclical and developmental rather than static, involving progression through interrelated dimensions: foundational attitudes (respect, openness, curiosity), knowledge and skills (cultural self-awareness, listening, analysis, interaction skills), internal outcomes (adaptability, flexibility, empathy), and external outcomes (effective and appropriate communication and behavior in intercultural contexts). This model reinforces the pedagogical implication that intercultural competence is not acquired through information alone; it requires experiential engagement with difference, accompanied by structured reflection and guided practice. Cooperative learning environments, especially when designed through heterogeneous grouping and structured roles, provide repeated opportunities for such engagement. Students must collaborate across differences, tolerate ambiguity, and adapt their communicative strategies to achieve shared goals, creating conditions for movement through Deardorff's developmental process.

Methodologically, this study adopted a quantitative, classroom-based research design focused on students' perceptions following participation in a cooperative learning intervention. The research was conducted in a second-year undergraduate course, Intercultural Communication, in which cooperative learning was embedded as part of course assessment. Students worked in culturally heterogeneous groups to resolve a real-life intercultural misunderstanding presented as a case. The intervention required students to collaborate under structured cooperative roles, encouraging shared responsibility, negotiation, and joint

decision-making. Instructor guidance was provided through clear task instructions and reflective guidelines intended to support both process management and learning reflection.

Data were collected through an online survey administered after students completed the cooperative learning activity. The instrument contained 15 items and was designed to capture multiple dimensions of the intercultural group work experience. Because the study aimed to measure varied aspects of student experience—overall satisfaction, perceived usefulness, instructional support, and stress-related intercultural challenges—items included different response formats. Some items used a 10-point scale (e.g., overall satisfaction with multicultural teamwork), while other items used a 5-point Likert-type scale (e.g., clarity of instructions, usefulness for professional life), and some used binary or categorical options (e.g., whether students experienced frustration; frequency of feeling outside the comfort zone). A total of 37 undergraduate students participated. Students were enrolled in Journalism, Audiovisual Communication, Advertising and Public Relations, and Translation and Intercultural Communication. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages and distributions) to summarize response trends. Given the exploratory scope of the classroom-based study and the sample size, inferential statistical analyses were not conducted; therefore, conclusions focus on patterns in perceptions rather than causal claims.

Findings indicate that students evaluated the cooperative learning experience positively while also reporting substantial levels of challenge associated with multicultural teamwork. In relation to satisfaction with multicultural group work (10-point scale), responses were strongly skewed toward the upper end: 75.7% of participants rated their experience as 8, 9, or 10, with the largest concentration at 8. No participants selected ratings between 1 and 5, and only one student selected a low rating (2). This distribution suggests that students overwhelmingly perceived the multicultural cooperative experience as positive and worthwhile. Such high satisfaction is consistent with literature on cooperative learning indicating that structured collaboration can increase engagement, perceived learning value, and classroom inclusion when properly designed.

At the same time, the study found that the experience was not frictionless. When asked whether they experienced frustration during group work (binary item), 56.8% responded "Yes," while 43.2% responded "No." This indicates that frustration was common, even within an overall positive experience. The presence of frustration is particularly important in intercultural learning contexts, where differences in communication norms, expectations, and task coordination can generate tension. Rather than interpreting frustration as an indicator of failure, the study approaches it as a potential marker of genuine engagement with intercultural complexity—especially when accompanied by pedagogical scaffolding and reflection.

This interpretation is reinforced by responses related to comfort zone disruption. Students were asked whether they had to move outside their comfort zone during the group work (categorical frequency item). 40.5% answered "Yes," and a further 27.0% indicated that this occurred "Most of the time," suggesting that approximately two-thirds of participants experienced recurring discomfort or challenge during multicultural collaboration. Smaller proportions reported being challenged "Only the first day" (10.8%) or "Not at all" (10.8%), while 10.8% selected "None of the above." Taken together, these results suggest that the cooperative learning intervention frequently required students to confront unfamiliar

interactional dynamics and to adapt—an experience consistent with developmental models of intercultural competence that emphasize the role of discomfort, ambiguity, and adjustment in learning progression.

Crucially, students' perceptions of instructional scaffolding were strongly positive. On a 5-point scale, 91.9% rated the clarity and helpfulness of instructions as 4 or 5, with 40.5% selecting the highest rating. Similarly, 86.5% rated the effectiveness of guidelines in supporting reflection as 4 or 5. These findings indicate that students generally felt oriented and supported, which matters because intercultural challenge without structure can lead to withdrawal, stereotyping, or negative group experiences. High ratings on instructional clarity and reflective support suggest that the intervention design provided a stable framework within which students could navigate complexity.

In addition, students indicated that they were able to connect course theory to lived group experience. On a 5-point scale measuring the extent to which students applied course theory to cope with frustration and difficulties in multicultural teams, 67.5% selected 4 or 5, while 27.0% selected 3. Only a small minority (5.4%) selected 2, and none selected the lowest category. This pattern suggests that students perceived the theoretical content of the Intercultural Communication course as practically relevant and usable in real collaboration contexts. This is pedagogically significant, as a central aim of internationalized curricula is to ensure that intercultural learning outcomes are embedded not only in content but in applied learning processes and assessment.

Beyond these global indicators, the study also examined perceived stress linked to specific intercultural teamwork factors. Students rated stress related to communication style differences, time management, and language-related challenges (5-point scales). Responses clustered in the moderate-to-high range across these stress factors, suggesting that intercultural teamwork demands were salient. Communication style differences often create tension when students interpret directness, silence, turn-taking, or disagreement through culturally shaped expectations. Time management challenges in multicultural teams may emerge from different approaches to scheduling, deadline interpretation, and task distribution. Language-related stress, similarly, can affect participation, confidence, and perceived equity. The descriptive patterns reported in this study indicate that these factors were experienced as real sources of challenge for many participants, supporting the notion that the intervention generated authentic intercultural learning conditions rather than superficial "internationalized" activities.

Finally, the professional relevance of the experience was strongly endorsed. On a 5-point scale measuring perceived usefulness of multicultural group work for future professional life, 54.1% selected the highest rating (5) and 32.4% selected 4, with the remaining 13.5% selecting 3 and none selecting low values. This result suggests that students recognized the transferability of skills developed through cooperative multicultural work—such as negotiation, adaptability, communication, and collaboration—to professional contexts. This perception is aligned with internationalization rationales that position intercultural competence as a core graduate attribute required in globalized labor markets and diverse social environments.

In discussion of these findings, the study argues that cooperative learning—when intentionally structured and embedded within an internationalized curriculum—can create

classroom conditions supportive of intercultural competence development. The combination of high satisfaction, high perceived professional usefulness, reported comfort-zone disruption, and moderate-to-high stress factors reflects a learning environment that students experience as valuable and developmentally challenging. Developmental perspectives emphasize that intercultural learning often involves affective tension and ambiguity. Within Deardorff's (2006) model, such experiences may be interpreted as moments in which attitudes and skills are being tested and developed, potentially leading to internal outcomes such as empathy and adaptability. From this standpoint, the reported frustration and discomfort are not necessarily negative; rather, they may indicate that students are engaging with difference in ways that require reflection and adjustment.

From an intergroup contact perspective, the cooperative learning design operationalized several of Allport's optimal contact conditions. Students worked toward common academic goals, under cooperative interdependence, with instructor support and structured roles designed to promote more equal participation. These conditions reduce the likelihood that contact will remain superficial or competitive. While the study did not directly measure prejudice reduction, the findings suggest that structured cooperation across difference was both feasible and valued by students, and that it created experiences in which intercultural challenges emerged in manageable ways.

From an internationalization of the curriculum perspective, the study highlights the importance of embedding internationalization in pedagogical and assessment practice. The intervention ensured that intercultural learning was not dependent on mobility but enacted through classroom activity accessible to all students. This addresses a key equity rationale for IoC: the need to democratize internationalization benefits across the student body. Cooperative learning functioned as a practical curricular mechanism for this purpose by making intercultural interaction a central component of assessed learning, not an optional add-on.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on a small sample ($n = 37$) from a specific course context, which limits generalizability. Second, the findings are based on self-reported perceptions rather than validated intercultural competence measures or performance-based assessments, and therefore reflect perceived learning rather than objectively measured competence development. Third, the analysis was descriptive; causal claims cannot be made regarding the effect of cooperative learning on intercultural competence development. Future research could strengthen evidence by employing mixed-methods designs that include qualitative reflection data, validated competence scales, and longitudinal designs to examine development over time. Comparative studies contrasting cooperative learning with alternative pedagogies would also help clarify which design elements are most influential in fostering intercultural competence within IoC.

Despite these limitations, the study offers relevant implications for higher education practice. It suggests that cooperative learning, when intentionally designed through heterogeneous grouping, structured roles, clear guidelines, and reflective scaffolding, can support intercultural learning outcomes within internationalized curricula. The findings also indicate that instructors play a critical role in transforming intercultural stress into learning through pedagogical design: clarity of instructions and reflective guidelines were perceived as highly supportive, and students reported applying course theory to manage difficulties. These insights reinforce the notion that internationalization is enacted through teaching and

assessment decisions made by academic staff and that pedagogy is a central mechanism for achieving internationalization goals.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that cooperative learning constitutes a robust pedagogical pathway for enacting internationalization of the curriculum and supporting the perceived development of intercultural competence among undergraduate students. Through structured collaboration on real-life intercultural case resolution, cooperative learning created conditions of meaningful intercultural contact, manageable challenge, and reflective engagement with difference. Students not only evaluated the experience positively and recognized its professional relevance, but also reported discomfort and stress factors characteristic of authentic intercultural teamwork—suggesting that the intervention moved beyond superficial exposure toward deeper engagement. By embedding structured interaction with difference into everyday teaching and assessment practices, higher education institutions can move beyond symbolic internationalization and contribute meaningfully to the development of graduates capable of communicating, collaborating, and acting responsibly in an interconnected world.