

# Assessing Intercultural Learning through Introspective Accounts

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## **I n t r o d u c t i o n**

If intercultural awareness is a key area in which sojourners are expected to make progress while abroad, then appropriate methods of assessment should be used to measure the gains they have made. While much attention has focused on the preparation, format, and content of study abroad programs, relatively little has been published about modes of assessment (Byram, Morgan, et al., 1994; Frontiers, 2004; Jaeger, 1999). This is changing, however, as a growing number of sojourns are becoming credit-bearing.

A variety of standardized measures and instruments are used to gauge the language learning and intercultural adjustment of student sojourners such as surveys, inventories, proficiency exams and multiple-choice tests (Allen and Herron 2003; Coleman 1995). Whereas these traditional forms of assessment try to quantify student learning, many interculturalists recognize that “the experience abroad cannot be fully quantified: the outcome has to be measured in terms of the quality of the experience and of the skills acquired, particularly of transferable skills.” (Convey 1995: 142). Consequently, more attention is now being devoted to the use of introspective, qualitative means of assessment.

To gather the sojourners’ point of view and encourage self-monitoring, interviews (Allen and Herron 2003; Murphy-Lejeune 2003), diaries (Callen 1999; Dueñas-Tancred and Weber-Newth 1995; Lewis and Stickler 2000; Wagner and Magistrale 1999; Warden, Lapkin, Swain, and Hart 1995) and other means of self-report (Pellegrino 1998) are being employed much more frequently by intercultural researchers and other educators charged with the evaluation of study abroad learning. For example, large-scale “year abroad” programs for foreign language students, such as the Interculture Project (Lewis and Stickler 2000) and the LARA (Learning and Residence Abroad) project (Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan and Street 2001), have relied on student diaries and interviews to help determine the impact of the sojourn experience.

This paper illustrates the benefits of using first-person introspective accounts to investigate and assess the learning processes of short-term sojourners.

In particular, it focuses on the application and analysis of the diaries of Hong Kong Chinese students who participated in a five-week sojourn in England.

### **The Special English Stream (SES): A Case Study**

In 2001 the English Department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong established the Special English Stream (SES) to challenge and enhance the education of its English majors. The first offering, the focus of this paper, consisted of seminars in Literature and Applied Linguistics (ethnographic research), summer fieldwork in England, debriefing sessions, and a research report-writing course related to the experience abroad. The sojourn, which was credit-bearing, was generously subsidized by a language enhancement grant to the department.

The SES was designed to enhance the English language proficiency of the students in both academic and social situations. With the opportunity to reside in an English-speaking setting, a key aim of the program was to develop the intercultural communicative competence of the participants, as defined in terms of five competences (Byram 1997, Byram and Zarate 1997, Murphy-Lejeune 2003; Roberts et al. 2001). The framework, adapted from Byram (1997), helped establish some of the goals for the SES sojourners:

*Attitude shift* – Abandon ethnocentric attitudes towards other cultures, and heighten their awareness and understanding of the differences and relationships between their own (Hong Kong Chinese) and a foreign culture (English);

*Skills of observation and discovery* – Observe and analyze how people of another language and culture (English) perceive and experience their world; become aware of the beliefs, values and meanings they share;

*Cultural knowledge* – Become aware of aspects of English culture (e.g. beliefs, values and meanings) which help natives of that culture to communicate without making these assumptions explicit;

*Skills of interaction* – Draw upon the previous three areas in real time to interact successfully with English people in England;

*Critical cultural awareness* – Make use of specific criteria to critically evaluate perspectives, practices and products in both their culture (Hong Kong Chinese) and English culture;

Thus, the sojourn aimed to enhance the students' intellectual growth (e.g. to synthesize and solve problems) and foster the development of their interpersonal and social skills so that they would become more independent and confident enough to take the initiative to interact in English with native speakers as well as non-native speakers from other cultures in a wide range of settings.

### **T h e S E S S t u d e n t s**

The participants in the first offering of the SES were 15 full-time second-year English majors at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. They were selected on the basis of their academic results in their first-year studies as well as their performance in an interview with professors from the English department. All of the students were Chinese Hong Kongers with an average of 20.8 years on entry into the program. Twelve were female and three were male; all of the students had an advanced level of proficiency in English. Five had visited an English-speaking country before joining the SES; for some, the trip to England was the first visit outside Hong Kong.

### **P r e p a r a t i o n f o r S o j o u r n**

Prior to their sojourn, in the Literary Studies Seminar, the students prepared for the plays and literary site visits that they would experience in England. In the Applied English Linguistics Seminar, I introduced the students to ethnography and the tools of this mode of research (e.g., participant observation, note-taking, diary-keeping, reflexive interviewing/ conversing, the audio-recording and analysis of discourse). Each student then carried out a "home ethnography," a project in which they investigated some facet of their cultural world (Barro, Jordan and Roberts 1998; Jackson 2004; Roberts 1995, 1997, 2003; Roberts et al. 2001). Throughout their research, they were required to keep a diary to record their thought processes, the action they took, and the outcomes. Since none had ever kept a journal or diary previously, we reviewed several sample entries to help them identify and distinguish between descriptive and interpretative elements, in line with other aspects of the ethnography course.

### **S h o r t - t e r m S o j o u r n i n E n g l a n d**

The students then participated in a credit-bearing fieldwork course, which took place in England. (See Appendix A for the abridged syllabus). For five weeks, each student lived with an English family in Oxford to gain

firsthand experience and exposure to the local culture. They also took literary and cultural studies courses in an English language center, conducted ethnographic research on a cultural scene of their choice (under my guidance), participated in cultural activities with other international students, visited literary sites, and attended local cultural events (e.g. plays). As part of their fieldwork requirement, the students kept a diary to record their observations and reflections on their use of English and their daily activities (e.g. their homestay experience, outings, ethnographic research project, intercultural encounters, and coursework) (Berwick and Whalley 2000; Kohononen et al. 2001) (See Appendix A for guidelines). They were encouraged to describe and reflect on any vivid, stressful or confusing events that they had experienced when crossing cultures. They were also asked to describe the strategies that they used to cope with their new environment (Arthur, 2001). In the last week of the sojourn, they were asked to reread their first entries and provide a self-assessment of their learning and offer their overall impression of the sojourn experience. The students then submitted their entire sojourn diary to me by e-mail. The assessment scheme for the diary entries, which accounted for 40% of their grade, is provided in Appendix B.

### **Post-sojourn Reflection**

In Hong Kong, at the beginning of the next semester, two months later, the students reviewed their personal goals for the sojourn and identified the ones they had met as well as those that were not fully achieved. In a series of debriefing sessions, in small groups, they then discussed aspects of the sojourn that they had found particularly challenging or troubling before identifying the coping strategies that had proved effective. Anonymous excerpts from their diaries provided further stimulus for some very lively and reflective discussions of both positive and negative experiences. This phase helped them to understand better the possible reasons for the critical incidents.

### **Ethnographic Investigation of SES**

To better understand and assess the learning processes of the student sojourners and provide evaluative feedback to university administrators, I carried out an ethnographic investigation of the SES. My study aimed to provide insight into the development of the students' intercultural communicative competence and offer practical suggestions to improve subsequent offerings of the program.

## Methodology

This evaluative case study followed the SES students for eighteen months, from their selection to the post-sojourn report-writing course. It made use of both quantitative (surveys, evaluation forms) and qualitative data (reflective diary entries, critical incident reports, individual and group interviews, informal ethnographic discussions, participant observation, photographs/videotapes [e.g. a visual record of the sojourn], field notes, research portfolios/reports) to document the students' experiences and their reactions to them. Triangulation of the data figured prominently in the analysis, which sought an emic (insider's) perspective (Agar, 1996; Atkinson, 1994; Spradley and McCurdy, 1988). QSR NVivo, a qualitative software program, was employed to assist with data management and analysis (Gibbs, 2002; Richards, 2002).

## Descriptive and Analytical Accounts of the Sojourn

The remainder of the paper centers on the collection and analysis of information gleaned from the diaries that the students kept throughout the sojourn. For this phase of my study, I adopted an ethnographic, culturally-oriented model of narrative analysis (Cortazzi, 2001; Reissman, 2002a, 2002b) to discover the students' "versions of reality" (Ochs and Caps, 1996). Since they had dated each entry, it was possible to track their learning throughout their stay in Oxford.

In my analysis, I examined the expressions the students used to convey their ideas and feelings. I looked for recurring patterns in the diary entries as well as the issues or salient events that captured their attention (Bailey 1983, Bailey and Ochsner 1983). I then reviewed their accounts in relation to the goals of the sojourn, providing a measure of the learning outcomes. The following emergent themes were dominant throughout the entries, and I provide representative samples of each.

## Evidence of Difficulties or "Culture Bumps"

The following section focuses on the critical incidents that the students experienced and wrote about in their diaries. Their candid accounts provided a better understanding of how they grappled with situations that differed from their expectations.

## **Culture Shock**

When moving from one culture to another, it is not unusual for sojourners to experience difficulty coping and become homesick. They may suffer from such symptoms as irritability, insomnia, loss of appetite, and even depression (Adler 1975; Oberg 1960; Pedersen 1995; Ward, Bochner and Furnham 2001). For many of the SES students, the sojourn coincided with a first separation from their families; not surprisingly, some longed for home and experienced some symptoms of culture shock. The following journal entry is representative.

Before coming to Oxford, I didn't think that I would miss my family very much but the truth was that I would constantly dream of my family members in Hong Kong. I remember one very special dream. I dreamed that I went back to Hong Kong after the first week of stay in Oxford and visited my family members. (journal, male, 4)

## **Interacting with Strangers from a Different Culture**

Many of the students initially experienced a great deal of anxiety and turmoil since they were staying with "strangers" in an alien environment. As the following student disclosed, instead of talking with her host family, she and her friends actively took steps to avoid their homestays.

I do not know why but I am very reluctant to go home after school. My friends all have the same feelings as I do and so we all hang around together until dinner time. This may be because I am living in an unfamiliar environment and I feel like an outsider to intrude a stranger's family. I feel quite uncomfortable at home and I go upstairs to my home immediately after I have dinner every night, because I do not know how to start conversations with them. I do not think I am a shy person at all but I just do not know how to deal with this situation. When I open the door and go home the dog always barks at me. I begin to miss my family in Hong Kong a little. (diary, female, 13)

## **Adjusting to Another Lifestyle**

The students were amazed to discover that the dining and sleeping habits of their host families differed from what they were used to in Hong Kong. In their homestays, most had their main meal at 5 or 6 pm and were in bed by 9 or 10 pm. The students were used to eating much later and, in Hong Kong,

most stayed up until the early hours of the morning. In the first two weeks of the sojourn, the students found it difficult to adjust and often complained that the pace of life in Oxford was too slow and boring.

What is difficult for me is to get familiar with my host family's eating habit. Usually, they have supper at six o'clock, which is much earlier than my supper-time in Hong Kong. It is quite a difference from Hong Kong that foreigners, like the English, have meals earlier and sleep early at night. Especially for Hong Kong teenagers, the life at night here is quite boring. (diary, female, 2)

### **Conflicting Beliefs about Health and Wellness**

Several of the students experienced firsthand how differing beliefs can impede communication across cultures. In the following excerpt, for example, the author revealed how frustrated she felt at her inability to explain her dietary concerns to her host mum since they did not share the same fundamental beliefs.

I explained to my host mum that I felt awful sometimes when I eat too much fish'n chips, but she doesn't quite understand what I mean. It is the first time I felt that I couldn't quite communicate with her because of our cultural difference. Although she said she understand what I was saying, what she answered is to let it be; she said it would pass very soon. However, I want to tell her that in Chinese concept, it could not be combated; it is about one's inborn body, different people are genetically destined the amount they could accept before irritating the natural balance. I felt bad to explain all these to her as it seemed to me that she doesn't even understand, I couldn't actually translate the exact Chinese sayings to her even I could well chat with her. (diary, female, 15)

### **Displays of Affection and Emotion**

The frequent and visible display of emotion by their host families and other locals in Oxfordshire caught the attention of most of the students and made them rather uncomfortable. As in the following entry, most observed that this behavior was foreign to them.

My host mother calls her boys, "darling," "honey," and "sweetheart." My little host son says, "you are the best mother in the world." They hug, kiss and embrace each other. Emotional display is allowed in an English family. They are more able to accept physical contact than the Chinese. They do not feel embarrassing." (diary, female, 8)

## Perceptions of Discrimination

One of the most troubling findings in the analysis of the diaries was the tendency of the students to attribute any miscommunication across cultures to prejudice against the Chinese. As in the following incident, differing communication styles or norms of politeness were not considered as possible factors impeding the communication process. This negative perception was a stumbling block in the students' attempts to interact with people from other cultures.

Last Saturday, I had an experience of discrimination, which was both depressing and educational. We went to a travel agency to purchase boarding tickets for the train from Paris to Amsterdam. The agent who sold us the tickets showed her prejudice towards Chinese since she showed us a grave face and was very impatient about our questions and advice. We thought that it was very unfair for her to treat us this way because she treated the local people quite well but when she faced us she just changed immediately. For the first time in my life I have been discriminated against and I think that is not a pleasant experience at all. (diary, female, 13)

While the ticket agent may have been prejudiced against the students because they were Chinese (or young people), it is also conceivable that they may have unwittingly broken some of the norms for transactions in this cultural setting. By the second week of the sojourn I had noticed that the students rarely said "please" or "thank you" in situations in which these expressions were routinely used in England. Thus, in their encounter with the agent they may have unintentionally seemed very rude and pushy.

## Lack of Informal Conversation Skills in English

Most of the Hong Kong students found it difficult to initiate and keep a conversation going in English with students from a non-Asian culture, especially in the first few weeks of the sojourn. Even though their level of proficiency in English tended to be higher, the SES students were used to speaking the language in formal classroom settings with other Chinese students and many found themselves at sea in informal, intercultural situations. When social encounters did not go well in England, as in the following incident in a pub, the first reaction of the students was to regard their interlocutor as prejudiced against their ethnic group.

After arriving at the pub, I ordered a glass of traditional English beer because I wanted to know why English people are crazy about beer. After sipping a little bit of the beer, I introduced myself to other international students. However, their attitude was rather apathetic. I felt quite uncomfortable to continue our conversation because they seemed to be quite cold to me. Therefore, I just stopped trying to blend into their group. I become close with three Chinese students who came from Beijing. Chinese could always accept Chinese!... But I just sometimes find the international students particularly cold to Chinese and this hurt me because it was a kind of discrimination. (diary, female, 11)

### Confounding Humor

Another area that proved perplexing and disquieting for the students was the frequent use of humor by their hosts and other members of the local culture. This form of communication does not translate well across cultures and several students revealed how confused and bored they felt when they did not understand what their hosts found so amusing. Some students made no attempt to conceal their boredom, which likely served as a barrier in their attempts to develop a relationship with their host families.

My host family's English humor constantly fails to interest me. When my host mother and host father are amused by their jokes and keep on laughing (even crying out merry tears), I fail to satisfy their 'vanity' by keeping silent and not laughing at all. Actually, I even do not notice they are making jokes! So many times I do not laugh or applaud for their English humor; it seems that I am rather rude by reserving my lovely smiles." (diary, female, 6)

### Fear of Losing Face

After the first karaoke party hosted by the English Centre, many of the students wrote about how ill-at-ease they felt in that social setting even though they were used to Hong Kong-style karaoke. They noticed that the international students from other countries were much more active. While several of the SES students wanted to sing, they were afraid to stand out in their group and risk embarrassing themselves or their classmates.

The social coordinator asked us SES students to sing. All of us were reluctant to sing so we did not give him any response... It is embarrassing for us to be listened to by strangers because we are worried the strangers may criticize how we sing. (diary, female, 12)

Instead of mixing with the other students at the Centre, the SES huddled together as a group and watched as the others laughed and sang

### **Evidence of Personal Growth and Emerging Intercultural Communicative Competence**

In their diary entries as well as in the post-sojourn debriefing sessions, the students also revealed some of the strategies they employed to adapt to this unfamiliar sociocultural setting. Through their writings, they provided evidence of their personal growth and attainment of some of the goals of the sojourn.

#### **Mastering the Art of “Breaking the Ice”**

The analysis of the diaries showed that many of the students had made good use of the participant observation skills that they had honed in Hong Kong prior to the sojourn. Many paid close attention to the discourse of locals and gradually began to recognize patterns. For example, the following student noted that a common conversation starter in England is a comment about the weather.

It is interesting the English like to talk about the weather, something like Chinese like to ask if you have taken your meals whenever we met. Every morning when I see my host family in the sitting room, they comment on the weather. If it is sunny, they will say, “Isn’t it beautiful?” or “Isn’t it gorgeous?” or they will say, “I adore it, don’t you?” If the sky is gloomy, or the concrete ground outside is soaked in rain, they will ask if I have any outdoor activities that day, if I say yes, they reply, “Shameful, isn’t it?” ... Sometimes I find it boring to talk about the weather all the time. But soon I understand it is an art to talk about the weather in Britain. It is necessary to master this skill if you want to have a good communication with the English people. (diary, female, 3)

Like many of her fellow sojourners, this student recognized the potential benefits of adjusting her speech to enhance her interaction with locals.

#### **Critical Cultural Awareness**

The students noticed differences between the ways in which Hong Kong and English people relate to each other in certain social settings. For example, in the following narrative, the diarist observed that her host mother addressed

and interacted with her children in ways that differed from what she was used to. While her first reaction was to consider her host family “weird,” she was able to step back and demonstrate awareness and acceptance of different norms of politeness and communication styles.

My host mother picked me up from the English Centre on the first day. When I reached her home, she told me that my room was on the first floor. Since my luggage was very heavy, neither she nor I could carry it upstairs. My host mother then called, ‘Tim, could you do me a big favour? Could you help me to move the luggage upstairs?’ Tim appeared. When the luggage was on the first floor, my host mother said, ‘thank you very much.’ The boy said, ‘you’re welcome.’

My host mother then started introducing the family members to me. She told me that Tim was her eldest son. I was puzzled because I had misunderstood that he was an international student living in the house. It was because in my mind, a mother did not have to say, ‘could you’ or ‘thank you very much’ to her son. They had been too polite to each other, which gave me an impression that they did not have close relation. In a Chinese family, the status of a person in the family is determined by how he/she is related to other people. Since ‘mother’ is considered to be more powerful than the ‘son’, most mothers will only order the son to finish the tasks instead of asking them for help. It is then rare to hear a Chinese mother says phrases or words like ‘thank you’ to her son. As I am used to the Chinese family relationship, I think that it is odd for my host mother to thank her son.

At the very beginning, I found that they are odd to say ‘could you’, ‘would you’, ‘please’, ‘thank you’, ‘excuse me’, ‘pardon me’, ‘sorry’ frequently to their family members. However, after thinking about it carefully, I understand them more and they are not weird to me anymore. They were strange to me at first because I had been affected by the Chinese belief. (diary, female, 8)

While this entry provided evidence of the keen observation and analytical skills of this student early in the sojourn, many of her classmates took much longer to notice these differences. Those who were not aware of or sensitive to these nuances encountered more problems making connections with local people as well as international students from outside Asia.

## Coping with Difference

In the first few weeks of their stay in Oxford, it was common for the students to react negatively to anything they encountered that was different from what they were used to or was not what they expected.

On the first few days after my arrival, I found the ticketing system on bus not very efficient. People kept queuing up at the door and the passengers on the bus kept waiting for the bus to go on. As a Hong Kong citizen, I was not very satisfied with that. I kept protesting at heart for this system doubling the time that I should have spent on transportation. However, this shortcoming gradually becomes a treasure in my eyes. I find that the Oxford people interact with the bus driver in a very friendly and polite way whenever they are dealing with the tickets. In this way, people become refreshed at the beginning of the day. I love this kind of interaction and so I join the English people to say “good morning” when I get on and “cheers” when I get off to the bus driver. (diary, female, 11)

As they became more comfortable in their new surroundings, most began to see their situation in a more positive light. Realizing that their return to Hong Kong was imminent, most exerted more of an effort to understand and appreciate different ways of doing things. In fact, as the above excerpt reveals, some irritations even became “treasures” in their eyes.

## Acceptance of Displays of Emotion

Early in the sojourn, most of the students were very uncomfortable and embarrassed by the open displays of affection and emotion by their hosts — both verbal and nonverbal. Many of their later diary entries, however, provided evidence of a gradual shift in attitude and response to this mode of behavior.

Before I left the host family, I left them a gift, a tablecloth. I thanked the host parents for taking care of me. The host mother was so happy that she hugged me and said “I love you.” I knew that was a part of Western Culture. I often saw the host mother hugging her sons. But at the time, I could not help myself feeling embarrassed. Because we would hardly do that in the Chinese culture, even not between mothers and sons. It was my first time to experience a hug. Though embarrassed, I could feel the expressive love she had given to me. (diary, male, 10)

In the above excerpt, one of the male students described his reaction to the emotional displays of his host mother. When she embraced him on his last

day in Oxford, he revealed that, while still uncomfortable with the gesture, by this stage he was able to accept it as a genuine expression of affection in this context.

### **Growth in Social Skills and Self-confidence**

At the beginning of the sojourn many of the students attributed their reticence to their cultural background, shyness, or their fear of losing face; however, as they became more at ease in their new surroundings and had more exposure to a variety of social situations their communicative and social confidence increased and they began to take a more active role.

Before I arrived, I was afraid that I would be too shy to talk to strangers. However, this trip has made me more outgoing and independent. I no longer have to depend on others to start conversations for me nor did I stay quiet during a gathering. (diary, female, 13)

At the farewell barbecue hosted by the English language Centre, instead of staying together as one group, some of the SES students took the initiative to move to other tables and converse with international students from other countries. Three of them even surprised their hosts by getting up to sing karaoke in front of everyone. This was a dramatic departure from their behavior at the first barbecue.

### **Engaging with the New Environment**

The idea of living with strangers for five weeks was frightening and, in the beginning, many had felt like “intruders” and were reluctant to converse with their host families. Instead, they made creative use of avoidance strategies such as coming home late and hiding in their rooms.

At the beginning of my stay in Oxford with my host family, I felt a bit uneasy at home every day... When the family was chatting very happily among themselves about their own things or sitting closely together to watch TV, I myself would sit at a corner because I felt I was like an intruder to their family life. When the kids were playing on the carpet, I just sat far from them on the sofa to see them play though I did want to play with them. Because of this feeling of uneasiness, I would go back to my room very early... A few days before I left Oxford, I passed an unforgettable night at home. I asked the kids to come to my room and we played with my recorder. They were very excited when they heard their voice. They kept laughing and laughing... I felt regret because I

could have had more unforgettable nights with my host family. But I missed out because of my passiveness. (diary, female, 12)

As the return date approached and their self-confidence grew, many of the students made more of an effort to participate, recognizing that their initial reticence had held them back from fully benefiting from the homestay experience. In fact, when invited to offer advice to the next cohort of SES students, they urged them to take part in host family activities early on instead of sitting on the sidelines

### Openness to the Discovery and Application of New Ideas

Diary entries in the last few weeks of the sojourn furnished more evidence that many of the students had shown both a willingness to learn and an openness to new ideas. Their writing revealed that they had gradually become less concerned about what people would think and had embarked on new experiences. In particular, those who had led a very sheltered life in Hong Kong took pride in their accomplishments.

My host family has transformed me into a person who likes to try out new things since I have contributed a lot of “firsts” in Oxford. In the past I hated animals a lot, I stayed away from dogs and cats most of the time because I was afraid. After living with three young boys, the two cats and one dog in the family, I have become comfortable with animals; I even want to have a cat at home now! As for the food, to me yogurt was the only thing that I would not eat as the texture was very strange. However, under my host mother’s strong urging, I tried yogurt the first time and it was great! This trip taught me not to be afraid of trying new stuff and only by trying would you able to gain more. First impressions are never the real judgment of things. (female, interview, 13)

Since it is not common for Hong Kong students to be exposed to pets at home, not surprisingly, most of the SES sojourners were afraid of animals and harbored very negative feelings towards them before departing for Oxford. Gradually, with exposure to pets in the safe confines of their homestays, many of the students became more aware of and accepting of this social practice in England. In some of their entries, the students also demonstrated newfound respect for animals. Immersion in the host culture resulted in personal growth and a widening of their horizons.

## Conclusion

In this study, diaries were found to be well-suited to promote my students' awareness of and reflection on their intercultural learning during their sojourn in England. The review of their entries revealed that they were very candid and capable of deep reflection on both positive and negative elements of their experiences. While I was initially concerned that they might write simply to please me and get a good grade, these fears evaporated when I read their entries. Most were very clear about their likes and dislikes and recounted in detail critical incidents that they had experienced.

Their writings were useful in pinpointing aspects of English culture that had caught their attention. Their recounting of their "culture bumps" also provided insight into the challenges they had encountered (e.g. lack of familiarity with local norms of behavior in social situations); many also wrote in detail about their personal triumphs (e.g. the accomplishment of many "firsts"). Their introspective accounts facilitated a comparison of the initial aims of the sojourn with the students' own perceptions of their achievements. Thus, the diaries provided a window into the learning processes generated by the sojourn and helped me to better understand the quality of personal change that had taken place.

Despite the criticisms of this mode of research (e.g. lack of control, anecdotal nature) (Bailey 1983, Bailey and Ochsner 1983), unlike many other forms of data-gathering, the diary study makes use of a "a real insider instrument" (McDonough 1994: 63) which permits a closer look at what is actually happening to learners. In my study, for example, the introspective accounts of the SES students provided unique insights into the sojourn through the eyes of the students themselves. Furthermore, the act of analyzing the diaries recognized the importance of the actual perspectives of the participants and reflected the nature of the learning experience.

To gain a fuller picture of the sojourn, with the help of NVivo, excerpts from the students' diaries were triangulated with data from other sources: interviews, ethnographic conversations, pre- and post-sojourn surveys, and my fieldnotes (based on participant observation throughout the sojourn). This helped to construct a more complete and thorough picture of the students' experiences and their reactions to them. As well as providing evaluative information about the learning of the first cohort, this mixed-mode data helped inform the preparation of the next pre-departure program by identifying the intercultural situations for which future SES students needed more preparation.

While not the complete solution, diary studies, such as the one described in this paper, offer a valuable means of addressing the problem of assessing intercultural learning on study and residence abroad programs. Personal analytical narratives can be used to gain insight into aspects of the learners' experience "that observation could never have captured, and that no one would have thought of including as questions on a questionnaire" (Allwright and Bailey, 1991: 4). If one of a study abroad program's primary missions is to help participants develop their intercultural communicative competence, this form of assessment can provide a measure of the students' level of involvement with the host culture as well as their awareness and acceptance of cultural difference.

The act of keeping a daily log can have other benefits. It can encourage participants to reflect more deeply and critically on the nature and meaning of their sojourn experiences. With both cognitive and affective dimensions, this process can be therapeutic for sojourners. This critical reflection and self-scrutiny can have a profound effect on the diarists both during the residence abroad and in the debriefing sessions that follow when they are back on home soil.

Post-sojourn, the personal writings of sojourners can provide the stimulus for thoughtful, substantive discussions when shared anonymously with fellow sojourners. As well as feeling positive about their achievements, with the guidance of a sensitive, supportive facilitator, the participants can be encouraged to identify areas of weakness in their intercultural communication skills so they can set realistic goals for future intercultural encounters.

While not without limitations, diaries are one of the best tools that I have encountered so far to provide insight into the learning processes of sojourners. They accommodate the personal and complex nature of study and residence abroad and encourage students to monitor their own development and progress. The analysis of diaries is time-consuming, and yet, given the benefits for participants, administrators, and future sojourners, they merit serious consideration by program planners.

## **A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s**

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## **Appendix A**

### **Abridged Syllabus for Special English Stream (SES)**

#### **Course Description**

Fieldwork will consist of a range of integrated activities that build on your pre-sojourn SES courses and provide background for the Research Essay (SES) course that you will take in the semester following the sojourn. The sojourn activities will take place in Oxford, England in a five-week term. You will participate in literary, linguistic, and cultural studies coursework at an English Language Centre, guided ethnographic research, cultural enrichment activities and visits to sites relevant to your special interests. During the sojourn, each of you will live with a host family to more fully experience English culture.

#### **Course objectives:**

After this course, you should have:

- a better understanding of English literature and culture;
- improved linguistic proficiency in English (especially if you follow the “English only” policy);
- improved intercultural understanding and communication skills;
- enhanced interpersonal communication skills;
- enhanced ethnographic research skills.

#### **Evaluation:**

Reflective diary on your sojourn experience/ fieldwork	40%
Ethnographic fieldwork (e.g. fieldnotes, draft material)	30%
Literature fieldwork	30%

#### **Participation**

*Active participation in the program is essential.* You are expected to attend and actively participate in all classes, activities and excursions.

#### **Diary**

You will be required to keep a reflective diary in which you record your reactions to experiences in England that you found interesting, puzzling or otherwise significant. Entries about fears or expectations, rewarding or frustrating experiences or events, cultural observations, the “English only” policy, your own cultural adjustment, your coping strategies, and/or any other thoughts and feelings you have during the sojourn will be useful. You could also provide insight into your ethnographic data collection across cultures. Your entries will form a record of your language and cultural learning and your impressions of your new environment. Please provide enough

details to contextualize your “stories” and short narratives. Your diary should provide insight into what you learned about yourself and your hosts/ host culture while you negotiated the sojourn — and your life — in England.

Keeping a personal log can help you remember the details of your experiences. The process of writing and reflecting should help deepen your understanding of events and your reactions to them. Your diary should be both descriptive *and* thoughtfully analytical, providing your interpretation and understanding of events. Your final entry will be a bit longer as it should provide evidence that you have reflected on your personal goals and your overall sojourn experience. You could respond to questions like the following: What has changed most significantly about your perception and attitudes toward the host culture since your arrival? Look back at your journal entries. Were you able to achieve the personal and academic goals that you set for yourself prior to the sojourn? Were you able to follow the “English only” policy? Why or why not? What has been your greatest accomplishment? What do you wish you had done differently? What did you gain from the sojourn?

There should be a minimum of *three entries for each week* of the sojourn; each entry should be numbered and dated. Please number your pages. You could also use headings and sub-headings to organize your entries. Each entry should be typed and a minimum of two double-spaced pages in length. You will be required to email your diary to me a week after the sojourn.

### **E t h n o g r a p h i c   f i e l d w o r k**

You will investigate a cultural scene of your choice (e.g. engage in participant observation, audiotape ethnographic conversations/ interviews, draw sketches of the scene, take photographs, keep detailed field notes). In some cases, it may be useful to do a small-scale survey to ask several people similar questions; however, the emphasis should be on developing a “thick, rich description” of the cultural scene so that you develop a better understanding of the perspectives of the participants. Remember to use a consent form to gain permission from your informants to use their interview data (and perhaps photographs) in your report. In the first few weeks I will meet with you several times to discuss possible topics for your research and offer support and guidance. Once everyone has settled on a topic (by the second week!), I will hold regular individual or small group advising sessions/ informal discussions.

### **L i t e r a t u r e   f i e l d w o r k**

Since you will take literary courses at the Language Centre, this component of your grade will be determined by the work that you do on site. Each week you will be assigned literary tasks; all of your work will be kept in a portfolio to be submitted at the end of the course.

**Appendix B**  
**Grading Criteria for Diary Entries**

A (Excellent)	<p>Your work is excellent and considerably exceeds the criteria for a “B.” Your diary entries are very detailed and highly contextualized; they include both descriptive and interpretative elements. You present an original, comprehensive and critical analysis that shows ample evidence of reflection. Both the organization of your work and your writing style are outstanding. This grade honors an excellent piece of work that goes well beyond expectations. It recognizes that you have made a special effort and that it has succeeded.</p>
B (Good)	<p>Your diary entries include both descriptive and interpretive elements but lack the depth and outstanding quality of an “A.” Your writing is generally well organized and provides some evidence of reflection and critical thinking. This grade recognizes that your entries include some original, independent thought and that you have tried to do a job that exceeds the minimum requirements.</p>
C (Fair)	<p>Your diary entries do little more than give a basic description of events; they provide little evidence of reflection and analysis. In some entries your writing may not be well organized. This grade is given for acceptable but non-exceptional work that doesn’t show much effort to do more than meet the minimum requirements.</p>
D (Pass)	<p>Your diary is barely sufficient and reveals a less than adequate effort to describe and interpret your sojourn experiences. There is very little evidence of reflection and analysis; your writing may be poorly organized or incomprehensible in some places. Your entries do not adequately meet basic expectations.</p>
F (Fail)	<p>Your work does not meet the most minimal standards. Your diary entries reveal no evidence of reflection and analysis and the writing may be incomprehensible in many places. All in all, your work is not acceptable.</p>