An Investigation of the Intercultural Sensitivity Levels of Summer Work and Travel Programme Students

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Abstract

A variety of programmes and schemes make travel more affordable and attractive for young people. They provide opportunities to experience intercultural communication first-hand to those who could not have imagined without being involved in such institutionalized schemes. One such programme is Work & Travel which is offered in the USA. Young people who gain hands-on experience in the USA can potentially gain intercultural skills. A few studies have focused on to what extent this experience could live up to the expectations (1 reference). There is a lack of research on the impact of Summer Work and Travel (SWT) participants and the factors affecting their levels of intercultural sensitivity, especially in the Turkish context. Therefore, the current study aims to measure the intercultural sensitivity (IS) of the SWT participants from Türkiye and the factors which impact their level of IS. The sequential mixed method was used, and the quantitative data was first gathered via a five-point Likert scale with 129 participants. Semi-structured interviews with ten volunteering participants followed the quantitative data collection phase. It was concluded from the data analysis that the participants in the SWT experience had a high level of IS. While some participants had less confidence due to their insufficient language proficiency, they reported that they became more confident as they improved their language skills and adapted to the intercultural environment. The researchers also concluded that the high IS might have resulted from the participants' high level of daily interaction with people from different cultures and at the social events they attended.

Keywords: culture, intercultural communication, intercultural sensitivity, summer work and travel

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Introduction

The SWT has been a popular exchange programme for many years among university students worldwide (Wattanavorakijkul, 2020). Each year, approximately 1.5 million international students join the SWT. Students joining the programme mostly apply through Work and Travel (WAT) agencies. They can choose from various job positions and housing options around the United States offered by these agencies.

Once the students arrive in the US, they start living and working with people from different countries. Therefore, it could be said that the participants of the SWT experience intercultural immersion (Carpio et al., 2018), which has been stated as one of the purposes and benefits because it helps students to "be exposed to the people and way of life in the United States." (US Embassy & Consulates in Türkiye, n.d)

In line with the purpose of this scheme, students join the programme to gain different life experiences, experience another culture, develop their English skills, build relationships from different cultures, live with other people, earn money, and travel (Lin et al., 2012; Manadee, 2010; Thaokhamlue, 2012). Although saving money is a benefit, it should never be mistaken as the primary purpose for joining the SWT (Foster, 2017). While many young people do it for its thrill and adventure, work experience abroad would also look extremely good on a young person's CV (See also https://www.instagram.com/p/Ch-Ppz3A7iA/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=ef3c57a1-b2b2-4088-b6a5-5f4636f8c76d).

Cultural exchange can be defined as one of the most beneficial aspects in the context of this experience (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). Additionally, our ability to work effectively in a given setting is dependent on our ability to recognize and adapt to the values and expectations of those around us (Anderson et al., 2006). Furthermore, intercultural sensitivity is essential for enabling people to live and work with people from other cultural backgrounds (Landis & Bhagat, 1996). It is an important sign of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Işık, 2019; Taşkın 2020). Accordingly, Hammer et al. (2003) point out a positive correlation between ICC and IS.

It is a challenging task to work with people from different cultural backgrounds (Karatepe & Dal, 2020, Wujiabudula & Karatepe, 2020). SWT participants will be living in a country that is different from their home culture and will be required to take part in work-related activities soon after they arrive in the USA. Therefore, how prepared they are to take on different challenges is a crucial issue because ICC and IS are required to collaborate and work well in a multicultural setting.

Realizing the importance of IS and ICC and how they are related in multicultural settings, Chen and Starosta (2000) put emphasis on these two terms in their study. According to the researchers, intercultural competence is the ability to "communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations" (p.12). on the other hand, Intercultural sensitivity is defined as successfully dealing with people from various cultural backgrounds (Wu, 2015). In their study, Chen and Starosta (ibid.) explore IS under six factors: self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and non-judgmental attitudes.

Along with the effect of long-term stays in other countries, short-term stays have also attracted the attention of scholars in terms of IS. Therefore, the impact of study abroad experience on the participants' intercultural sensitivity has been studied extensively (Çiftçi et al 2022; Kitsantas, 2004; Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Williams,

2005). Williams (2005) claims that without concrete evidence of outcomes, the experiences of students who join short-term study abroad programmes, for example, on a four-month programme, will lack the credence afforded. Therefore, she compared two student groups in terms of the change in IS levels over a semester. The first group had not joined the Erasmus programme, a short-term study abroad programme, while the other group had joined the programme. The results indicated that students who had joined Erasmus showed a significant change in their IS compared to those who had stayed on campus. The study highlights exposure to various cultures as the most important predictor of intercultural skills.

Similarly, Anderson et al. (2006) investigated whether joining a short-term study abroad programme improves students' IS levels. The researchers conducted a pre-test and post-test with the same group of student participants. The results showed no significant change in the students' IS level, regardless of the length of their study abroad. Although staying abroad through certain programmes may help improve students' IS levels, some scholars suggest that foreign travel is not always a must and may not guarantee an increase in IS (Altshuler et al., 2003; Pruegger & Rogers, 1994).

Another study regarding this topic conducted by Yürür et al. (2021) analysed the factors affecting the IS level of employees working in the hospitality industry. The study analysed, in particular, the relationship between 443 hospitality employees' level of IS and the factors affecting it. The findings showed that exposure to other cultures through participation in student exchange programmes such as ERASMUS and SWT programmes, and spending a long time abroad boosted IS.

Although there has been a scarcity of research investigating the effect of attending the SWT programme on IS, Wattanavorakijkul (2020) conducted a study investigating the issue with 30 Thai English, major students who had joined the WAT programme utilizing the 'Intercultural Sensitivity Scale' developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) to collect data. The study showed that Thai students had a high level of English; however, their IS level was low compared to their English proficiency, so it was difficult to conclude that there is a high correlation between language proficiency and level of IS. Furthermore, students were not very confident or motivated to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Consequently, the study suggests that the SWT programme may not be beneficial in increasing IS for Thai students.

Significance of Study

Even though several studies have focused on the factors affecting IS level, such as short or long-term studies abroad, there has been little research analyzing the effect of participating in an SWT programme on IS. To the best of our knowledge, the study conducted by Wattanavorakijkul (2020) is the only research focusing on how the SWT experience might impact the IS level of the participants. Using the 'Intercultural Sensitivity Scale' developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) to gather data, the researcher looked into the problem with 30 Thai English major students who had enrolled in the WAT programme. The study revealed that the SWT programme did not help the Thai students in Wattanavorakijkul's (2020) to enhance IS levels.

Although several studies have investigated the impact of SWT experience on the participants' development in various aspects such as language proficiency and intercultural

sensitivity of various groups of people in different contexts separately, to the researchers' knowledge, there has been only one study focusing on the combination of the two. However, taking the number of participants in this study, which was 30, and the context of the study, the results are not generalizable to other contexts. The findings of the study presented a mixed picture of the students' IS level even after having SWT experience. Furthermore, considering the number of participants and their reasons for taking part (including gaining IS), it is important to find out to what extent participating in the SWT scheme contributes to the students' IS. In other words, how far the experiences participants have can contribute towards cultivating interculturality so that it can impact participants' intercultural sensitivity.

Moreover, there is no study on the impact of participating in the SWT on the IS level of the participants from Türkiye. Therefore, the current study aims to fill this gap in the literature and investigate to what extent attending SWT influences the IS level of participants.

Purpose of the Study

SWT programme enables participants to be able to be involved in multicultural environments in which they have to interact with people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, IS plays a crucial role in their relationship in these encounters. However, there have been limited numbers of studies analyzing the relationship between IS and SWT. Keeping the problems mentioned in the previous section and the gap in the field of intercultural communication in mind, the current study tries to investigate the link between SWT and IS. Therefore, the current study seeks to address the gap mentioned above and poses the following research questions (RQs):

1. What are the current IS levels of Turkish 'Summer Work and Travel' programme students?
2. How do the following factors affect Turkish SWT students' IS level?
3. Are there any significant differences between the IS levels of the students having attended the 'Summer Work and Travel programme' in terms of the following variables?
   a. Gender
   b. Having been abroad before for various reasons

Method

Research Design

The pragmatic research paradigm, on which this particular study was built, presupposes that the researchers will use whichever methodology works best to address the research interest and questions. This study employed an explanatory mixed-method design recommended by Creswell (2012) in light of this research paradigm. As Creswell (2012) states both quantitative and qualitative data analysis in mixed methods will lead the researchers to "better understand the research problem and question than either method by itself" (p.535). Therefore, the researchers adopted a mixed-method research design to have an in-depth

insight into the data collected. Figure 1 below shows how this mixed method design is implemented in detail.

Figure 1

Research Design
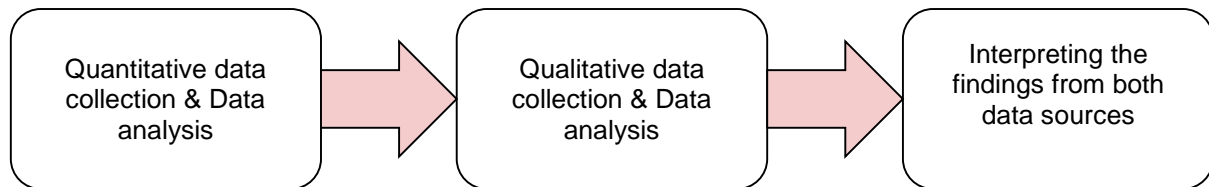
As can be seen in Figure 1, the main data gathering process began with a quantitative instrument, the IS scale, which was followed by the quantitative data analysis. To further clarify the results discovered in the first step, a set of qualitative data (i.e. semi-structured interviews) were gathered. The results of the analysis of the qualitative data were then interpreted following the quantitative results and the study questions.

Participants

The participants of the quantitative phase were 129 Turkish individuals (39 females and 90 males) from various parts of Türkiye, all of whom had participated in the SWT in previous years. Some demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1 below. The participants were selected using convenience sampling, a technique from the non-probability sampling methods, which is considered to be appropriate when participants are expected to meet certain criteria (Dörnyei, 2007). The researchers accessed the participants via a Facebook group, through which SWT participants from all around Turkey connect. As part of the criteria, the researchers asked only those who had joined the programme in previous years to fill out the survey, and all participants joined voluntarily.

The participants are between 19 and 22 years of age and have participated in the SWT programme after completing at least their first year of university studies. The participants come from different regions in Türkiye. Participants are students at universities in the most populated cities in Türkiye: Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara, Trabzon and Bursa. Almost half of them come from the Western and central parts of Türkiye. Almost one-third of the participants stated that they had been abroad before participating in the SWT for various reasons at least for a few months. Half of the participants who had been abroad traveled to other countries for touristic purposes.

Some other reasons are training in relation to their field of study and work-related activities apart from being a dual citizen.

Table 1

Demographic information of participants

		N	%
Regions	Marmara Region	44	34.11%
	Aegean Region	26	20.16%
	Mediterranean Region	19	14.73%
	Central Anatolian	16	12.40%
	Black Sea Region	9	6.98%
	Southeastern Anatolian Region	8	6.20%
	Eastern Anatolian Region	7	5.43%
	Total	129	100%
Experience abroad before SWT	Yes	46	35.66%
	No	83	64.34%
	Total	129	100%
Time spent abroad before SWT	0-6 months	26	57.78%
	7-12 months	6	13.33%
	1-3 years	8	17.78%
	4-6 years	1	2.22%
	More than 6 years	4	8.89%
	Total	45	100%
Reasons for being abroad	Tourism / Travel	30	55.56%
	Education	14	25.93%
	Work	5	9.26%
	Citizenship	4	7.41%
	Erasmus Internship Programme	1	1.85%
	Total	54	100%

For qualitative data collection, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 participants (two females and eight males) who were selected using convenience sampling, a common method among researchers. Since the participants in this type of sampling are willing to participate in the interview, it enables the researchers to collect a rich dataset (Dörnyei, 2007). The researchers assigned pseudonyms to each participant for ethical considerations, and these were P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, and P10.

Data Collection Tools

As part of the quantitative data collection, the researchers used the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) developed by Chen and Starosta (2000), which was later adapted and translated into Turkish by Üstün (2011) to measure the participants' IS level. Chen and Starosta (2000) conducted several tests and pilot studies to create factor categories and to match the items with the appropriate factors. From their results, they developed a scale based

on five factors: "Interaction Engagement, Respect for Cultural Differences, Interaction Confidence, Interaction Enjoyment, and Interaction Attentiveness" (p.8). The factor of interactional engagement looks at whether people value opportunities to explore cultural differences, enjoy speaking with people from other cultures, and want to interact with their fellows. The items under the heading of the Respect for Cultural Differences factor try to find out whether people respect cultural differences and the practices that are observed in other cultures. The Interactional Confidence factor and items under this factor are intended to gauge individuals' level of confidence when confronted with those from different cultures. The interaction enjoyment factor examines whether individuals find the experience of engaging with individuals from different cultures to be enjoyable or discouraging. Finally, interaction attentiveness examines whether the participants are ready to discover new cultures, notice cultural variations, and exchange cultural elements (Chen & Starosta, 2000).

Chen and Starosta (2000) state that the scale has an overall Cronbach's alpha of "0.88," which proves high internal consistency (p. 11). Although the original scale includes 24 items, Demir and Üstün (2017) discarded one of the items following confirmatory factor analysis due to the low factor load of the item. The overall Cronbach alpha reliability of the instrument was .90 in their study. Similarly, in the current study, the researchers used 23 items because the meaning of the discarded item had little value when translated into Turkish, and so the overall Cronbach alpha score was found to be .866, which is considered to be highly reliable (Dörnyei, 2007).

The scale used in the present study consisted of 2 parts: the demographic information part (Part 1) and the Intercultural Sensitivity Survey (Part 2). The aim of Part 1 was to elicit background information that might affect the IS of the participants, while Part 2 included the scale consisting of 23 close-ended five-point Likert scale items.

The Qualitative data in the present research were collected through semi-structured interviews to help gain a deeper understanding of the factors affecting the IS level of the participants. Certain initiation and follow-up questions were directed at the participants to gather data, for example, "How has SWT experience changed your perspective towards other cultures?" and "Did you have any prejudice before you attended the programme?". The interviews were audio-recorded for research purposes and each volunteering participant who took part in semi-structured interviews was informed about it. Also, their consent to be part of the study was taken before the researcher started the interviews.

The researchers used peer debriefing before the interviews to enhance the validity of any interview questions that the interviewer might pose and to define the questions that might be most relevant to the purpose of the current study, as the researcher is "an instrument of qualitative research designs" (Patton, 2001, p.14). For higher reliability, the researcher refrained from using questions that would direct participants to a specific response, instead providing ample details to explain the questions. Member checking was utilized to raise the validity of the data collected during and after the interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The volunteering participants were asked questions to further clarify the information elicited via questionnaire items. In the interviews, participants mentioned the positive or negative experiences they gained during their stay in the USA. The interview sessions gave the interviewees a chance to reflect on these experiences. The interview protocol aimed to elicit information from their personal perspective (Cohen, Manion & Marrison 2007).

Data Collection Process

The data used in the current study is collected in the spring semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. The qualitative data were collected through an online questionnaire in one month. Following the quantitative data collection on Google Forms, the researchers collected the qualitative data. One of the researchers collected the qualitative data through interviews on Google Meet. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study before each interview, were asked to give consent forms to participate in the study, were informed that the questions that the researchers would ask did not have a correct or incorrect response and that there would be no time limit for the interview. The researchers asked the participants which language they preferred during the interview. Subsequently, all the interviews were conducted in Turkish based on the participants' preferences. The data collection took two weeks, and each interview lasted approximately 15 to 30 minutes. The video-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English by the researchers for coding.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analysed via SPSS. As a result of the normality test, the skewness and kurtosis values of the scale were between -3.201 and 20.006, respectively, which indicated a skewed distribution as the values fell outside the range of -1 and +1 (Hair et al., 2013). Therefore, the data in the current study were not normally distributed. As a result, non-parametric tests, including the Mann-Whitney U Test and descriptive statistics, were employed to investigate the data.

For a thorough analysis of the factors affecting the participants' IS, the researchers employed a thematic analysis of the qualitative data using MAXQDA 2020. The researchers analysed the data inductively; in this way, codes and themes emerged during the data analysis (Miles et al., 2018). One of the researchers analysed the data by developing emerging codes from the interviews. Once the interview data from the participants were coded, the researchers crosschecked and negotiated the codes and identified the themes. The researchers formed a codebook that included the names of the codes, a short description of when to use them, and the examples corresponding to the codes to prevent bias in the coding process.

All participants, who were also volunteers, were sent a message which contained detailed information about the aim of the study before one of the researchers sent the questionnaire link online, as well as the assurances of the anonymity and confidentiality of data before the interview sessions. All volunteer participants were interviewed by the same researcher separately in order to avoid the influence of personal differences which might impact the elicited data. Moreover, the researchers avoided having a group interview lest the participants might have influenced one another. Following the interview data collection, all the researchers analysed the interview data individually and as a team. The ISS questionnaire was sent to the WAT participants online to be able to reach as many participants as possible. Online communication with the participants was preferred for practical reasons. A transparent and reliable basis was developed by ensuring the contribution of all researchers in the analysis processes. In reporting the research findings, the participants and their quotations are taken from transcriptions of the recordings that have been anonymized for ethical reasons.

The researchers in the current study obtained ethics committee approval from Bursa Uludağ University Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee. The participants in both quantitative and qualitative data collection phases were informed about the confidentiality of the information, and they were referred to as participants throughout the study. The researchers also used pseudonyms for each participant in the qualitative data phase for ethical considerations.

Findings

The current study aimed to analyse the IS level of the participants who had joined the SWT. The purpose of RQ1 was to determine the current IS level of SWT students from Türkiye. The researchers conducted a set of SPSS analyses to find an answer to the question. The items in the questionnaire corresponding to the participants' IS were categorized into factors by Chen and Starosta (2000). Table 2 shows the mean score of each factor.

Table 2

SWT Attendants' Perception of the IS Factor Results

	N	M	SD
Intercultural Engagement	129	4,43	.49
Interaction Confidence	129	4,24	.70
Interaction Enjoyment	129	4,44	.62
Respect for Cultural Differences	129	4,48	.43
Interaction Attentiveness	129	4,49	.63

The overall item total mean score was high (M=4.41), which implied that most participants who had attended the SWT showed a high IS level according to the data obtained from the questionnaire. Consequently, the second research question aimed at analyzing the effects IS factor. Therefore, each factor was analysed individually to answer the second research question and semi-structured interviews guided the researchers in making an in-depth analysis.

Interactional Engagement

The factor of interactional engagement focuses on whether the participants enjoyed communicating with people from different cultures, appreciated opportunities to experience cultural differences, and would like to communicate with their compatriots. The quantitative results gathered from the ISS are presented in Table 3, and the data from the interviews are categorized and presented in Table 4.

Table 3

Item Frequencies of Interaction Engagement

	Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %	*M*	*SD*
1. I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.	97.7	1.6	0.8	2.96	.21
13. I am open-minded to people from different cultures.	96.9	0.8	2..3	2.94	.31
22. I often show my culturally distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues.	93.8	3.1	3.1	2.90	.38
23. I have a feeling of enjoyment towards the differences between my culturally distinct counterpart and me.	92.2	5.4	2.3	2.89	.37
21. I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally distinct persons.	5.4	7.0	87.6	2.82	.50
20. I often give positive responses to my culturally different counterparts during our interaction.	79.1	18.6	2.3	2.76	.47
11. I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally distinct counterparts.	56.6	31.8	11.6	2.44	.69

Table 3 shows the item frequency for the interactional engagement factor. According to the statistics presented in the table, many of the participants felt open to interacting with people from different cultures and can show understanding when they encounter cultural differences. They also use verbal and non-verbal signals in their interactions with people from other cultures. Furthermore, they have a positive attitude towards interacting with people from various cultural backgrounds.

The main themes that emerged from the interviews were found to be the opportunities to interact with people from different cultures and to avoid communicating with people from their home country. These themes are presented in Table 3. In line with the data obtained from the ISS, all of the interviewees emphasized in their interviews that they had the opportunity to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds thanks to the programme. For example, P2 explained this situation by stating that he did not have to put extra effort into meeting people from different cultural backgrounds as the programme brings many people from other places together.

Table 4

Themes Related to Interactional Engagement

Themes	The number of participants agreeing with the idea	%
Interacting with others	10	100
Not interacting with Turks	5	50

Furthermore, the participants showed different tendencies in terms of socialization in their new multicultural environment, depending on their expectations from this experience. Those who wanted to focus on developing communication skills in English preferred not to interact with Turkish SWT participants as they tried to interact more in English. For instance, P3 preferred to stay with a Mexican family rather than in SWT accommodation. While he expressed that this was not racially motivated and that he respected the Turkish culture, he opted to interact with the other cultures more. He grabbed the opportunity as soon as he realised that more options were available. P1 clarified this by stating that he told the SWT management that he would like to spend longer time with people from different countries long before he arrived in the USA. On the other hand, some participants appeared more confident and did not want to be in the circle of non-native speakers (NNSs). P9 rented a house on Airbnb for four months to interact with American culture more instead of staying in the SWT accommodation with other NNSs. However, P4 criticized this and defined it as an egoistic idea. Therefore, he interacted with Turkish students as well as other international participants.

The participants also mentioned that they needed support from Turks when they had problems that they could not explain because of their insufficient English level (P5, P6, and P10). P10 also mentioned that she felt safe when she met someone from the same cultural background and shared similar feelings. For this reason, she interacted with Turkish SWT participants, particularly at the beginning of their stay in the USA. However, in some cases, the participant was not so fortunate. For example, P7 stated that he had to interact with Turks as the other international students with whom he shared the flat did not look friendly and did not interact much with him.

Respect for Cultural Differences

Another factor affecting the IS level of the participants is called respect for cultural differences. This questionnaire factor aims to investigate if the participants respect other cultures, values, and practices. Table 5 shows the frequencies regarding respect for cultural differences.

Table 5

Item Frequencies of Respect for Cultural Differences

	Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %	*M*	*SD*
8. I respect the values of people from different cultures.	97.7	0.8	1.6	2.96	.26
18. I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.	97.7	1.6	0.8	2.96	.21
16. I respect the ways people from different cultures behave.	96.1	3.1	0.8	2.95	.24
2. I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.	3.1	10.1	86.8	2.83	.44
7. I don't like to be with people from different cultures.	10.9	2.3	86.8	2.75	.63
19. I think my culture is better than other cultures.	58.1	31.0	10.9	2.47	.68

Table 5 shows that the majority of the participants tend to respect cultural differences. However, 10% of the participants showed a perspective somewhere between neutral and narrow-mindedness towards people from other cultures (item 2), as they may have abstained from making a clear judgment regarding the different cultures. On the other hand, more than half of the participants demonstrated a more ethnocentric perspective for item 19. Furthermore, 31% of the remaining participants were more neutral to this ethnocentric view.

Regarding respect for cultural differences, the interview data were categorized into three main themes: ideas related to the USA, trying different food, and attending social events. As the data presented in Table 6 shows, most participants claimed that they had some negative ideas about America because of the misleading images created in the media. The participants realized that their initial thoughts and worries were unfounded. These ideas included:

Racism and discrimination against Turks,

Unsafe environment,

Fear of street gangs and robbers,

Lazy local people

Table 6

Themes Related to Respect for Cultural Differences

Themes	The number of participants agreeing with the idea	%
Ideas related to the USA	5	50
Trying different food	4	40
Attending social events	7	70

When the participants were asked if they had tried traditional food from other cultures while in America, the majority of them said that they were open to new experiences and had tasted food from other cuisines. However, they also honestly stated that they had not enjoyed them as they were very different from what they were accustomed to. For example, P9 stated that she enjoyed a few foods from different cuisines. Similarly, P2 stated that he remembered one of his bad memories of Philippine food, which is totally different from Turkish food. Also, P5 shared his hesitations about eating pork, halal meat, and the oil used in the food, so he was cautious about his food choices.

Additionally, some participants stated that they had attended some social events and celebrations, such as Halloween, 4th of July celebrations, local concerts and events, NBA matches, etc., to learn more about celebrations in other cultures. P7 stated that he had tried to attend as many social events as possible during his stay in America to understand how people from different cultural backgrounds feel and how they have fun. P5 stated that he was curious about the local events or organizations. P4 shared that he enjoyed the 4th of July celebrations more than any American as the company where he worked had planned numerous activities for that day. additionally, the same participant stated that he was lucky because the company had organized intercultural events weekly, and he enjoyed attending them.

Finally, the participants were asked if they had observed any similarities or differences between Turkish and other cultures. P9 stated that she was not expecting to receive a warm welcome like in Turkish culture when she stayed with her host since Turkish and American cultures are different in many aspects. However, she said she felt at home because her host was amicable and helpful. Furthermore, the participants also stated that they were open to sharing information about Turkish culture and learning new things about different cultures. They were eager to find out about the cultural differences (P5, P1, P3, and P4).

Interaction Confidence

The items under the Interactional Confidence factor aimed to help understand whether or not the participants felt confident when interacting with people from other cultures. The analysis of each item is presented in Table 7. Overall, it is observed that the participants had a high confidence in intercultural interaction.

Table 7

Item Frequencies of Interaction Confidence

	Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %	*M*	*SD*
10. I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.	89.9	8.5	1.6	2.88	.36
3. I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures.	89.9	7.8	2.3	2.87	.39
6. I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.	82.9	14.7	2.3	2.8	.45
5. I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.	72.1	23.3	4.7	2.67	.56
4. I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures.	13.2	16.3	70.5	2.57	.71

When the frequencies of the items are analysed, it can be concluded that the majority of the participants felt confident when interacting with people from different cultures, as the mean score for each item is above 2.5 (see Table 7). Although most of the participants showed a high sensitivity to the factor of interactional confidence, the number of participants who had neutral responses for items 6, 10, and 3 was higher when compared to other items. This may result from some factors such as personal traits, language proficiency, and the social encounters they may have had with native speakers (NSs) and NNSs.

To further analyse the factor, the interviewees were asked if they had felt confident or not during intercultural interaction. The main themes which emerged from the interviews and percentages are presented in Table 8.

Table 8

Themes Related to Respect for Interactional Confidence from the Interviews

Themes	The number of participants agreeing with the idea	%
Not feeling confident at the beginning of the programme	5	50
Gaining confidence through the programme	5	50

Although the participants said that they were more confident towards the end of the phase half of the participants from the interview (N=5) initially experienced a lack of confidence due to their self-perceived unsatisfactory English proficiency or lack of confidence in speaking English, so much so that they were initially reluctant to interact with people and avoided eye contact. Fortunately, they gradually gained confidence as they got used to their environment and the local accent.

Furthermore, those with more confidence turned their focus from basic language skills to socio-cultural issues. Three participants observed cultural and behavioural differences that made them a bit nervous, and they worried about the issues related to privacy and personal space. Their raised awareness about these issues made them hesitant about petting their host's dog or displaying affection towards someone's baby.

Interaction Enjoyment

The interaction enjoyment factor focuses on whether the participants enjoyed interacting with people from other cultures or felt discouraged when interacting with them. To find out to what extent interacting with people from other cultural backgrounds made participants pleased the researchers employed some descriptive statistics to the items under this factor and the results are presented in Table 9.

Table 9

Item Frequencies of the Factor of Interaction Enjoyment

	Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %	*M*	*SD*
12. I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures.	4.7	7.8	87.6	1.17	.48
15. I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures.	4.7	5.4	89.9	1.14	.46
9. I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.	7.0	8.5	84.5	1.22	.56

The mean scores for each item under this factor tend to lean toward 1, which shows that the participants enjoyed interacting with people who come from different cultural

backgrounds. They are not discouraged, upset or demotivated when they interact with people even if their cultures differ.

All interview participants (N=10) claimed they enjoyed interacting with people from different cultures. The participants were also asked about their reasons for attending the SWT. Among the major reasons participants decided to take part in this scheme were to meet people from different cultures and experience life in the USA.

Interaction Attentiveness

The final factor affecting the IS of the participants is interaction attentiveness. This factor analyses if the participants are open to learning about different cultures, observing differences, and sharing aspects of their cultures. The data analysis results are given in Table 10.

Table 10

Item Frequencies of Interaction Attentiveness

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	*M*	*SD*
	%	%	%		
17. I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures.	93.8	5.4	.8	2.93	.28
14. I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.	79.8	14.0	6.2	2.73	.56

According to the data obtained from the questionnaire, the participants showed interest in learning about new cultures. They stated that they tried to pinpoint cultural differences when they encountered any. Also getting as much information as possible about other cultures was one of the aims of the participants when they communicate with people from different cultures.

Similarly, according to the qualitative data obtained from the interviews, almost all of the participants (N= 8) stated that they were eager to learn about different cultures and had enjoyed determining the cultural differences (P9, P10, P8, P5, P3, P4, P7, and P6). The emerging themes from the interviews and the statistics are presented in Table 11.

Table 11

Themes Related to Respect for Interaction Attentiveness from the Interviews

Themes	The number of participants agreeing with the idea	%
Observing other cultures	8	80
Asking questions about other cultures	4	40
Sharing own culture	2	20

For example, P8 said he always enjoyed learning about different countries, histories, and cultures and searched for such information online. However, he also stated that the information on the internet could be misleading. That is why interacting with people and asking them questions about these topics was more helpful and provided him with more accurate information. Some participants stated that they had asked questions about the food culture, traditions, and everyday life of the local people so that they could feel part of the crowd.

Finally, the participants were asked to evaluate the overall change in their IS after participating in SWT. The participants mainly stated that the way they perceived intercultural experiences had greatly changed by the time they returned home. Likewise, P5, P10, P2, P8, and P9 think that they have become more open-minded as a result of this experience. P7 felt that he could empathize with people from different cultural backgrounds better. Thanks to his experiences in SWT, he has developed a new view of cultural differences.

The third RQ aimed to determine if the participants' IS scores correlated with their gender and their previous experiences traveling abroad. The data is not normally distributed. Therefore, some nonparametric tests were applied to answer this research question. RQ3a aimed to determine whether gender caused any statistically significant differences in the IS levels of the participants. Therefore, Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted for the scale for each factor and the scale as a whole (Table 12).

Table 12

Mann-Whitney U Test Results for Individual Scale Factors

	Interaction Engagement	Respect for Cultural Differences	Interaction Confidence	Interaction Enjoyment	Interaction Attentiveness
Mann-Whitney U	1051.5	1426.0	1376.5	1526.5	1451.5
Z	-3.635	-1.705	-1.96	-1.227	-1.66
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.024	.05	.235	.097

The results showed a statistically significant difference between male and female participants on the overall scale (*U*= 1117.500, *p*= .001, *z*= -3.274). There was a statistically significant difference between male and female participants in terms of Interactional Engagement (*p*= .00). The mean ranks were found to be 88.04 and 57.18 for female and male participants, respectively, which shows a higher IS for female participants in the Interactional Engagement factor. Moreover, a statistically significant difference was also observed between males and females regarding Respect for Cultural Differences (p= .02). While the mean rank of females was 76.21 for the Respect for Cultural Differences factor, it was found to be 60.14 for male participants. This shows that females APPEAR TO BE more interculturally sensitive to cultural differences and have more respect for these differences.

RQ3b aimed to understand if having been abroad previously for various reasons had any significant effect on the IS level of the participants. To find an answer to this question, the researchers conducted the Mann-Whitney U test and statistically compared the data of those participants who had been previously abroad with those who had not. The results are given in Table 13.

Table 13

Mann-Whitney U Test Results for Experience Abroad

	Experience Abroad Before SWT	N	Mean Rank	*p*
Overall IS the level of the participants	Yes	46	65.63	
	No	83	64.65	. 886
	Total	129		

While 46 of the participants stated that they had been abroad for various reasons, for 83 of the participants, this scheme was their first experience abroad. Although it was the first time that the majority of the participants had been abroad, there was no statistically significant difference between these two groups (*p*= .886).

Conclusion, Discussion, and Implications

The current mixed-method research provides significant insights into understanding the IS of the participants and their perceptions of the factors affecting IS. The results show that the participants' IS was high despite the short time they spent abroad. Furthermore, data elicited via semi-structured interview protocols were employed to further analyse the factors affecting their IS, and thematic analysis was used to evaluate these factors in-depth.

To answer the first research question and determine the current IS of the participants, the mean item score for each factor in the questionnaire corresponding to the IS of the participants was analysed. It was concluded that the participants demonstrated a high level of IS. Therefore, it is possible to suppose that participating in the SWT and being exposed to other cultures contributed to their intercultural sensitivity. This finding is in line with the findings of the previous studies (Jackson, 2008; Salisbury, 2011; Yürür et al., 2021), which concluded that short-term study abroad or work abroad positively affected the students' IS levels (Çiftçi et al 2022, Gürkan 2021).

The second research question in the current study focused on individual factors and each factor was analysed separately. When the interactional engagement of the participants was analysed, it was found that the majority of the participants were eager and had the chance to communicate with people from various cultural backgrounds. As well as being willing to have intercultural communication on a personal level, the participants regarded this as the most advantageous aspect. The interview data revealed that some participants did not want to limit their experience to the circle of NNSs (including Turks) in the programme. They felt more confident and adventurous about renting a room so that they could be exposed to the local cultures and people. They appeared to have minimized their contact time with their compatriots depending on their needs. The high level of the interactional engagement factor is in line with the results obtained in the study conducted by Wattanavorakijkul (2020), in which the researcher concluded that the willingness of SWT participants to engage in intercultural interactions might result from their daily experiences in intercultural contexts. This may imply that the Turkish SWT participants were open to interacting with other cultures and that their perspective was not ethnocentric.

Chen and Starosta state (2000) that the Respect for Cultural Differences factor aims to evaluate self-acceptance level, which is related to having positive attitudes while interacting in

interculturally varied contexts. The quantitative and qualitative data in the current study demonstrated that the participants respected and welcomed cultural differences. Their experiences have broadened their perspective and boosted their self-confidence in terms of being more open to the cultures and practices of others. Although some of them had prejudices regarding American culture or other cultures early on, their opinions altered positively after their visit (cf. Wattanavorakijkul, 2020). Similarly, Rust and Morris (2012) concluded that interacting with people from another culture would help recognize and understand cultural differences, even for a short-term period.

The quantitative data analysis in the present study showed that the majority of the participants had the confidence to interact with people from different cultures. That is, the participants claimed that their confidence level in interacting with people from different cultures had dramatically increased thanks to the SWT. Unlike the participants in Wattanavorakijkul's (2020) study, some participants claimed that they had some difficulties because of their low level of language proficiency at the beginning of their stay in the USA. However, they could confidently interact with people from various cultural backgrounds after becoming more competent in the language. Additionally, the present study participants stated that they could meet participants from other countries, learn about their and American cultures, and socialize in international contexts.

Chen and Starosta (2000) claim that the interaction enjoyment component measures people's positive or negative reactions when engaging in intercultural communication. In the current study, the participants had a high level of interaction enjoyment. Both the quantitative and qualitative data revealed that the SWT participants from Türkiye enjoyed interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. The interview data further demonstrated that improving language proficiency, interacting with people from other cultures, and finding opportunities to learn about those cultures were among the most popular reasons why the participants decided to join SWT. Similarly, some researchers claim that learning a foreign language and developing intercultural communicative competence are significant gains irrespective of the programme objectives (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Engle & Engle, 2003; Fidan & Karatepe, 2021; Pınar, 2016).

According to Chen and Starosta (2000), interaction attentiveness explains people's effort to understand and respond to what is happening in intercultural contexts. In response to the first research question, the analysis of this final factor and interview data showed that all the participants were interested in observing people from different cultures, learning about their practices, and sharing information about their culture, unlike in Wattanavorakijkul's (2020) study. The participants in the present study stated that they preferred learning about other cultures by attending social events, traveling around the USA, and talking to people rather than carrying out research on the Internet.

The aim of RQ3 was to investigate whether certain background features of the participants created any significant differences between the IS levels of the participants. In response to RQ3a, it was found that there was a statistically significant difference in terms of the IS level of the male and female participants. The female participants were found to be more interculturally sensitive compared to the males. This result corresponds with the previous studies in which male participants were found to be more ethnocentric than female participants (Dong et al., 2008; Neuliep et al., 2001; Yürür et al., 2021). When the difference was analysed at a factor level, the statistical difference was observed in the Interactional Engagement and Respect for Cultural Differences factors. The differences in these factors imply that the female

participants of the present study tended to be sensitive to intercultural differences and open to interacting with people from various cultural backgrounds.

Finally, regarding RQ3b, the quantitative data showed no statistically significant difference between the participants who had, for various reasons, been abroad previously and the participants who had not. The majority of the participants stated that it was their first experience abroad, but the IS level of the participants was found to be high overall. When the overall changes in participants' IS levels were questioned, the participants stated that the time they spent in the USA contributed to them positively as they had the opportunity to have hands-on experience in interculturally diverse environments where they could live, work, and share information about their cultures which provided a culturally immersive experience for the participants. The participants expressed that as well as feeling that they had become less prejudiced, they also thought that they had become more unbiased, and open-minded towards other cultures and cultural differences.

Briefly, the data collected via the ISS developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) showed that the IS level of the participants who joined the programme was very high. Furthermore, the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews revealed that the participants had opportunities to interact with people from various cultural backgrounds, learn about their customs and practices, share their cultures, and create a better understanding and respect towards cultural differences. Most of the participants in the interviews stated that they had enjoyed interacting with people from other cultures and chose to interact with them as they wanted to improve their language and learn about others. However, they also interacted with the other Turkish SWT participants in their community, albeit in a limited way. Additionally, although some participants regarded their language proficiency level as a barrier to interacting with people from other countries, their confidence in communicating increased due to their exposure to the intercultural environment and language use. Moreover, the experiences some of the participants gained appear to have helped them overcome the prejudices they previously had, and they stated that they have become more open-minded as a result of their daily interactions with the local people. As a result of positive experiences and affirmative thoughts individuals can be helped become more aware of intercultural issues. Taşkın (2020) showed that it I possible to achieve even in Turkish university classrooms.

Furthermore, the data revealed that the female participant showed a higher level of IS Finally, although the majority of the participants in the current study had not been abroad, their IS level was relatively higher in comparison to the male participants. This means that the SWT can potentially boost IS, irrespective of having been abroad previously. It seems that IS is impacted by the kind of experiences one has during his/ her stay and other individual factors such as willingness to communicate and being an extrovert or not (Fidan 2021).

The present study is significant as it fills a gap in the literature. To the researchers' knowledge, this is the first study to investigate the impact of attending the SWT on the IS level of the participants from Türkiye. Nevertheless, the current research is not without its limitations. The main limitation of the study is that the researchers could not conduct a pre-test and a post-test with the participants to compare the IS level before and after the programme because the SWT had been canceled in the summer periods of 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 outbreak when the research was being conducted. Therefore, the researchers employed ISS and semi-structured interviews with programme participants from previous years to investigate how their experiences in the USA had affected their IS level. For further studies, the researchers may consider conducting an experimental study in which they can highlight the

impact of the SWT by comparing the pre-test and post-test results of participants. Another option might be to conduct a comparative study in which the researchers compare the IS levels of students who have participated in the programme and those who have not.

Contribution Rate of the Researchers

Researcher 1 and Researcher 2 conducted the study under the supervision of Researcher 3. All researchers contributed to both the data collection and data analysis processes.

Statement of Conflict of Interest

The authors of the article declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this article.

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