

# The Experience is the Objective: Notes on Cultural Intelligence and my Fulbright Experience at the Universidade Estadual de Feira de Santana

A Experiência é o Objetivo: Notas sobre a  
Inteligência Cultural e a minha Experiência com o  
Programa Fulbright na Universidade Estadual de  
Feira de Santana

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*Recebido em 31 de agosto de 2022*  
*Aprovado em 18 de fevereiro de 2023*

**COMO CITAR:**

MILACCI, Andrew F. The Experience is the Objective: Notes on Cultural Intelligence and my Fulbright Experience at the Universidade Estadual de Feira de Santana. *Légua & Meia*, Brasil, v.14, n. 2, p. 247-258, 2022.



## Introduction and Overview of Cultural Intelligence

Every so often, modern society is reminded of the interconnectedness of our world. In very recent memory, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a sense of common ground as we grapple with the effects of a microscopic virus that has had consequences on a worldwide scale. The globalized reality in which we live brings us in contact with peoples and cultures that are different than our own, and as a result, cross-cultural interactions are common, perhaps more now than ever. At the turn of the twenty-first century, a new field of research—Cultural Intelligence—grew out of this modern society, seeking to study culturally diverse interactions in a way that not only understood human behavior in such situations, but also shed light on how we might facilitate a more sensitive and adaptive approach when engaging with those who might be from another culture.

Cultural Intelligence (abbreviated as CQ and referred to hereafter as such) started out closely linked with the business world, though now we see its relevance in a wide range of contexts and disciplines. Earley and Ang begin their pioneering volume on CQ, stating, “Given the global nature of work people increasingly work in international teams and divisions” (2003, p. 1). The premise and promise of a more efficient way of working or managing people in a globalized society, however, quickly developed into a new form of understanding intelligence, one that expanded upon other concepts of intelligence “separate from the cognitive skills often thought to underlie general intelligence” (EARLEY AND ANG, 2003, p. 2). Despite growing bodies of research in intelligence studies, such as emotional and social intelligence, in developing the model of cultural intelligence, Earley and Ang seek to address “a large gap ... in the examination of the nature of intelligence from a cultural viewpoint” (2003, p. 4). To that end, the authors propose “a construct of intelligence that reflects adaptation to varying cultural contexts, or what we call *cultural intelligence*” (EARLEY AND ANG, 2003, p. 4, original emphasis). Along with the need to recognize a different kind of intelligence, the authors also built upon Howard Gardner’s “idea that there are multiple facets to one’s intelligence” (EARLEY AND ANG, 2003, p. 2). What is more, in addition to having various components, like other forms of intelligence, cultural intelligence is not static: “An individual’s CQ may be relatively stable in the short run but can be learned and developed in the long run” (HOON LEE AND TEMPLER, 2003, p. 192). CQ, however, must not be understood as mere acquisition of knowledge or facts about a culture: cultural intelligence involves knowing about other cultures, having the desire to interact, and then interacting and adapting (EARLEY AND ANG, 2003, p. 63).

In understanding CQ, it is necessary to have a clear picture of what is meant by culture. José M. Causadias notes that culture is not easily defined or agreed on and states that disparate metaphors abound in referring to culture (2020, p. 310). He settles on the following definition, however: “Culture is a system, a dynamic whole that creates and is created by people, places, and practices. ... People create culture through shared practices

in places, and culture shapes how people engage in practices and build places” (CAUSADIAS, 2020, p. 311). One complication of defining culture, then, is precisely the fact that it is a product of human practices at the same time that it informs human practices.

Since individuals living in the same place will often share the same practices and take part in the same system, it is normal, then, for a place—specifically a country—to be equated with culture, as is the case with Earley and Ang. For example, the authors state that CQ is “[a] person’s capability for successful adaptation to new cultural settings, that is, for unfamiliar settings attributable to cultural context” (EARLEY AND ANG, 2003, p. 9). In their work, examples of “new cultural settings” are oftentimes described as occurring between individuals from different countries, which is to say that the authors generally refer to culture and cultural diversity in terms of nationality. In reality, culture and cultural settings encompass more than inter-national interactions. David Livermore, a co-founder of the Cultural Intelligence Center and author of multiple books on the topic, describes CQ as one’s “*capability to function in intercultural contexts*, including different national, ethnic, organizational, generational, and many other contexts” (2015, p. ix, original emphasis). While his focus is, once more, on the organizational aspect of leading and managing people, his specific inclusion of organizational and generational factors as separate cultural contexts is helpful, as it avoids the idea of culture as being tied to national identity. With this in mind, a high level of CQ would serve one well when interacting with others from different age groups or work environments, or between someone from a large city and another person from a rural upbringing.

Given the increasingly globalized nature of society, it is unsurprising, then, that CQ has garnered much attention in the nearly twenty years since Earley and Ang published *Cultural Intelligence: Individual Interactions Across Cultures*. Indeed, by 2008, organizations and governments alike were looking to understand cultural competency (ANG AND VAN DYNE, 2015, p. vx-vxi). Even religious groups now train volunteers of service-based or so-called “mission” trips in CQ. Livermore’s contribution in this area of research is, again, worth noting, as his *Serving with Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence*, first published in 2006, is written for such purposes: “[the] book is unique in that it applies cultural intelligence ... to short-term missions” (2013, p. 17), as a way to promote a more global perspective of camaraderie and mutual understand within the Evangelical church, worldwide (LIVERMORE, 2013, p. 17). Undoubtedly, CQ has been shown to be a valuable resource in today’s world.

### **My Own Research in CQ**

From a personal perspective, CQ is a significant part of my life. My Brazilian wife and I are raising two bi-cultural children, and we attend a Spanish-speaking church. Also, I am a teacher of Spanish language, Hispanic literature, and Latin American culture at a large, faith-based institution in the United States, and in my department, the Department

of Modern Languages, faculty from multiple countries and linguistic backgrounds—including American Sign Language—interact daily. Our students also witness, firsthand, the relevance and necessity of CQ: a requirement of the Spanish major, indeed many Spanish major programs in the United States, is to study abroad in a Spanish-speaking country. In preparation for a summer abroad experience with our department, then, student participants are trained in CQ. Even with training in CQ and equipped with strategies to facilitate their own adapting and interacting while abroad, nearly all students in our summer abroad program have demonstrated CQ growth when taking pre- and post-trip quantitative surveys measuring cultural intelligence.

In a grant-funded study<sup>1</sup> on CQ growth in study-abroad participants and host families, I, with fellow researchers David Towles, Floralba Marrero, and Fred Milacci, have conducted numerous interviews with students who have spent two months living in rural Guatemala to understand better what the homestay experience is like for study-abroad participants from the United States. Specifically, by using the internationally normed CQ Scale survey instrument, we focused on pre-trip and post-trip levels of CQ, and what factors might have influenced any CQ growth, or lack of it, while living with a family from a culture that is quite different than their own. We found that study abroad participants, in only eight weeks abroad—five of which were spent living in the home of a host family—generally grew, across the board, in the four major CQ categories measured in the survey instrument: CQ Drive, CQ Knowledge, CQ Action, and CQ Strategy. Based on our analysis of student responses to the CQ scale, we selected participants to interview. In total, we interviewed twenty students across three cohort years, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

A common theme that emerged in the interviews was that students were initially driven by their desire to learn a language as well as a sense of purpose that stemmed from their own faith. Students also reported that, prior to travel, they had some understanding of cultural intelligence and the need for adapting and sensitivity in cross-cultural interactions; however, a fear or hesitance to speak Spanish (or making mistakes in the language) often overruled their desire to interact, resulting in low CQ Action. Our data here echoes Krashen's summary of research regarding student confidence in language learning: "Performers with self-confidence and a good self-image tend to do better in second language acquisition" (2009, p. 31). Understandably, then, once the student felt comfortable enough in their own skills or in the kindness of their interlocutors, the student would tend to speak more in Spanish, which then led the student to seek out more interactions, thus bolstering their grasp on the language and their confidence in their abilities. A greater number of interactions means that the student would also learn how to adapt more, ultimately resulting in CQ growth. In short, some of the students' CQ growth is due to growth in their linguistic ability, or at least their confidence in or perception of

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<sup>1</sup> Our study has been funded by a grant from Liberty University's Center for Research and Scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> We had intended to conduct a final round of interviews in 2020, but the trip was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021-2022, we were, likewise, unable to collect interview data, as the university did not carry out the trip to Guatemala for the summer abroad program. As a result, we have decided to close data collection.

their linguistic ability. We believe that our findings support current research in the field of CQ and study abroad experiences and offer practical steps that study-abroad programs can take to not only prepare students, but also continue to support their language learning and cultural intelligence growth while in country.

Our research team has also conducted twenty interviews with families<sup>3</sup> who hosted student study abroad participants. The results of those host family interviews conducted are also fascinating, as we have observed CQ growth in the host families as well. Many families reported a desire to interact with foreigners as a reason why they decided to host a student, yet host family interviewees also described a learning curve of sorts as to how to best interact with their guest. Eventually, families grow very close to the student living with them, with the student often referring to their hosts as “mamá” and “papá.” Families who have housed multiple students over the years revealed that they had developed concrete strategies and procedures for facilitating or “kick-starting” the relationship with their student guest. For example, such families immediately ask about food allergies and teach the student about using the bus. Also, a large number of families expressed some level of concern about student reactions to traditional Guatemalan cuisine, and so they took steps to reassure students that they could speak honestly about their food preferences. The willingness and follow-through to have these types of “hard conversations” with students offers insight into how families demonstrate CQ growth by considering and adapting to the possible dietary demands and differences of their foreign guests.

Though most families reported having a neutral or somewhat positive perception of U.S. citizens, some host families admitted negative perceptions about United States citizens prior to opening their home to U.S. students. For example, one interviewee believed U.S. citizens were proud or even overly picky. Their perceptions changed entirely after the experience hosting a U.S. citizen in their house, though. Indeed, time and again, host families reported they admired the students’ work ethic, their willingness to try new things, and the fact that they did not reject the local culture, but rather tried to immerse themselves in it. What is more, no interviewees reported a more negative opinion of US citizens after their experience; in every interview conducted, the overwhelming takeaway for each host family was that it was worth it and that it was a very positive experience for all.

Summarizing, we have found convincing evidence of CQ growth, not only in US students who live abroad, but also in the families who host them. In other words, in the case of our study abroad program, CQ growth is a two-way phenomenon. Both parties, when willing to learn and adapt, demonstrate CQ growth and play a part in contributing to a positive outcome.

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<sup>3</sup> For many of the host-family interviews, only one family member was present or participated. On occasion, multiple family members were present and participated, and sometimes members from the same family, living in different households and who had had students of their own living with them, all participated in the same interview. For the sake of clarity and brevity, use of the term “host family” will refer to the individual(s) from the family who participated in the interview, even if it is only one person.

As should be apparent, then, CQ helps us to understand that engaging in culturally diverse contexts is not necessarily intuitive, though with some knowledge and a desire to interact and adapt, we can grow in our CQ and have mutually meaningful interactions across cultures. Again, CQ is not always a “one-way street” where the “outsider” to the culture must bear the brunt of CQ growth and adaptability: it is possible for the “outsider” to transmit cultural values and paradigms to the “local” that result in CQ growth.

## The Fulbright Program and CQ

The Fulbright Program is a “flagship international academic exchange program sponsored by the U.S. government, [which] has fostered mutual understanding between the United States and other countries” (“Fulbright Program Overview”). Created in the wake of a second World War in the span of thirty years, the Fulbright Program, in a way, offers an early demonstration of the importance of cross-cultural interactions as a way forward in modern society. Created in 1946, “through legislation introduced by the late Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas” (“Fulbright Program Overview”), the program has sponsored hundreds of thousands of students, scholars, and other professionals from the United States and other countries as they travel and live abroad while working, studying, researching, and ultimately engaging with a culture different than their own. Currently, 160 countries participate in the program by receiving US citizens, sending their own citizens to the United States, or both. Ideally, “the Fulbright Program reflects a shared global vision for peaceful relations among nations” (“Fulbright Program Overview”).

The Fulbright Program takes a citizen-led cultural engagement approach to diplomacy, one that prioritizes cultural intelligence in participants. Its CQ-informed focus becomes especially clear when considering the program’s own description of its history:

For over 75 years, the Fulbright Program's legacy is represented by hundreds of thousands of distinguished and diverse alumni, who are contributing to a more peaceful, equitable, prosperous, and just world. The Fulbright Program has a long record of achievement in promoting diversity and inclusion and of striving to ensure that its participants are fully representative of society in the U.S. and abroad. The Program and its administrators are deeply committed to redoubling efforts to increase and enhance the Fulbright Program’s diversity, equity, and inclusion, working in concert with partner governments, Fulbright commissions, institutions of higher education, participants, and alumni worldwide. (“Fulbright Program Overview”)

The program’s emphasis on diversity, inclusion, cooperation among individuals and governments from different backgrounds, and of course its global perspective, overlaps nicely with the concept of CQ. As a competitive grant, selection committees look for highly qualified individuals with the specific qualities prized by the Fulbright Commission. Indeed, part of the application process mentions one’s ability to be flexible, to adapt. In a way, we might say the Fulbright Program seeks to send/receive individuals

with high CQ in order to foster further CQ growth in grant recipients and in the community with which they engage while abroad. For Fulbright, while it is certainly important that grantees engage in productive teaching, research, or other professional activities while serving, one might say that, in reality, the experience, the cross-cultural exchange, is the objective.

### **My Own Fulbright Experience**

In fall of 2020, I applied for a Fulbright Scholar grant to Brazil. The possibility of living and working in another country for the expressed purpose of cultural interaction and mutual understand was extremely appealing. More specifically, I was interested in working at the Universidade Estadual de Feira de Santana (UEFS), learning more about Brazil, its people and educational system, and developing a research project on the *literatura de cordel*. Equally as important, because my wife is Brazilian, and we attempt to raise our children to appreciate both the culture of the United States and Brazil, the fact that Fulbright allows families to travel with grantees is a major factor. We hoped that, as a family, we would have a once-in-a-lifetime experience; for our children in particular, we hoped they would come to know their mother's home country on a deeper level. When I was notified, in April 2021, that I would be awarded a Fulbright grant, my excitement was only matched by my sense of just how important this moment would be for my family and me.

On a certain level, as a scholar of Latin America and Brazilian *cordel*, I did not expect any major cultural shocks. However, during my time of nearly five months living and teaching in Brazil, I believe that I grew as a person, as a professional, and in my CQ. In the following paragraphs, I would like to elaborate on a few observations about my time as a Fulbright scholar as I wrap up these notes.

### ***Literatura de cordel* and Imagined Communities**

As Benedict Anderson observes in his *Imagined Communities*, with any nation (or community), it impossible to have full knowledge of said group of people. While one might know neighbors and other members of the community, “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (ANDERSON, 2006, p. 6). Despite this impossibility, a concept of unity, nevertheless, exists that brings the people together in a shared imagining of belonging.

In my research in the *cordel*, I have read countless books, articles, and poetry pamphlets about the genre, from its origins, to its development in Brazil, and to its trajectory up to the present day. My academic knowledge on the topic, however, had little experiential grounding. It is true that I understood the links of the *cordel* with the Northeast and the *sertão*; I have even discussed at the Latin American Studies Association's annual congress how the *cordel* has helped shape the way we think of the

Northeastern region in Brazil through its woodcut imagery. I have argued, in a way, for an imagined community of *nordestinos* whose common bond is rooted and expressed in the phenomenon of the *literatura de cordel*. Despite my research, I have never had the experience of taking part in that community on a more significant level.

In living in Brazil, even for only a few months, I became witness to that imagined community. I noticed a shared embracing of the *cordel* as “our” heritage, even if the particularities of that heritage were not well known or understood by all. For the first time, I was able to participate more deeply in something I had mostly known from afar. Still, my participation in the community was a precarious balancing act. On the one hand, I shared my academic knowledge and experience with the *cordel* to undergraduate students; on the other hand, I was a foreigner teaching a class about Brazilian poetry to Brazilians.

The reception and understanding afforded me by the academic community as a whole was itself a lesson in cultural understanding. The university trusted me enough to allow me the opportunity to teach this class, while the students were open minded enough to give me a chance as their university professor. From day one, though, I wanted it to be clear that I did not want to “teach” *cordel* to them; I wanted us to study it together. In my approach, I used my experience with CQ to try to understand the students and their background, as well as what their reactions might be to me, as an “outsider” to the community. I believe this strategy helped immensely, as students responded with enthusiasm and understanding. I never tried to pass to insider status, but I was pleasantly surprised to hear students express appreciation for my efforts to allow the richness of the *cordel* and Northeastern culture to permeate every aspect of our classroom experience. The community came alive in the classroom.

A final observation, one I made for the first time while serving on my Fulbright grant, is that an aspect of the *cordel* that most stands out to me, personally, is indeed its ability to represent a community of people. It is a proud literary tradition that belongs to, at the same time that it stands for, the Northeastern populations. While my own country, the United States, has its own celebrated literary tradition, I am nevertheless attracted to the *cordel* for its ability to bring together an imagined community of people. With regards to where I grew up, I do not know of a literary tradition that would be equivalent to the *cordel* in this sense, yet upon reflecting, I believe that my own endeavors as a woodworker stem from a desire to belong to a community—past and present—of vernacular furniture makers from, interestingly enough, the Northeast of the United States. Combining these interests of *cordel* and woodworking, I incorporated a woodcut carving (*xilogravura*) lesson as part of our class, where students designed and produced their own prints. What is more, even my children have learned how to make *xilogravuras*, which is another way that they can stay connected to this part of their cultural heritage.

### **Affective Filter and Monitor Hypotheses and Pushing Beyond Struggles**

In language learning, Stephen Krashen's hypothesis of the Affective Filter argues that "affective factors relate to the second language acquisition process" (2009, p. 30). One's emotional state can greatly affect the ability to process language input in the acquisition process. Similarly, in the Monitor hypothesis, which views formal learning as a way to ensure accuracy, learners make use of rules to correct their mistakes. Some learners, however, over-monitor themselves, and it stifles their output. The constant use of a Monitor when producing language slows down output. Furthermore, because of the focus on correctness, one must learn the rules before producing output (KRASHEN, 2009, p. 15-16). As a language learner and teacher myself, I attempt to set my own students at ease so that they can push past the stress and nerves of learning a language. My classroom is a place for sharing in a common experience of learning together; I strive to promote an environment of safety where learners feel free to make mistakes. By removing stressors and the need for correctness when participating in my class, I break down barriers to learning.

As a Spanish and Portuguese language learner, I still experience some anxiety when interacting in my non-native languages. During my Fulbright experience, this anxiety came to the foreground when I found out that I would be teaching classes in my third language: Portuguese. Although I was confident in my abilities, I realized that I was feeling somewhat nervous about the first day of classes, in part, because of the linguistic complications that it brought with it. I decided to push beyond my feelings of anxiety and simply confront the challenge head on. I did my best to prepare detailed notes for class beforehand, not only for the content's sake, but also to think of any new words I would need to say in Portuguese. Unsurprisingly, this preparation did not fully assuage my doubts: in a way it only served to crystallize them more, as I was preparing for eventual moments where a lack of knowledge might be apparent and on display. I was living out the reality of the Affective Filter and the need to monitor my language production.

Ultimately, I learned to stop worrying about the perfection of my speech, as that was out of reach for me. Frankly, I am a fairly advanced speaker, and I believe I managed to communicate clearly enough and to an extent that it did not hinder our class discussion. Even so, it is impossible to count just how many times I corrected myself, doubted myself, asked if I was pronouncing something correctly, or even avoided words—using circumlocution—I might not feel comfortable saying. Lost here in the description of this experience is the attitude of my students and colleagues, who never, in any moment, were the cause of anxiety about my language proficiency. Like the students on our study abroad trips who self-monitor to the point of not engaging with others, I, too, was caught in the complications of language acquisition from time to time. Just as those students had host families who were willing to step outside their own cultural paradigm to understand the students and help accommodate their learning, I was surrounded by a community of individuals who were gracious enough to support me in my own language journey.

Perhaps what inspired me the most to push beyond my own uncertainty was the example I saw in my four-year-old son, who, on the first day of school in Brazil, was too scared to speak up, even though he knew some Portuguese. The first day did not go so

well for him, and he did not want to return because he said he could not even say anything. We asked him, however, to give it another try, and in only a few days, he stopped worrying about speaking Portuguese, had made some friends, and was finally enjoying himself. Seeing the courage of my son was all it took for me to know that I could and would press on past my perceived limitations.

### **The Experience is the Objective**

Overall, I do not hesitate to say that the Fulbright experience was one of the best things ever to happen to my family and me. We spent four and a half months in my wife's home country, where we got to experience three different seasons, see the runup to national elections, participate in major cultural festivals (a COVID-delayed Carnaval and São João), become involved in the local community, learn or improve our abilities in Portuguese, get to know the educational system at the elementary and college levels, and meet people who would make a lasting difference in our lives.

On the professional side, I had the opportunity to work alongside consummate professionals who are producing innovative work in the field at the same time they are impacting student lives. As part of my research, I (with the help of my wife) digitized nearly 170 *cordel* booklets on the bandit Lampião for the Museu Casa do Sertão of the Universidade Estadual de Feira de Santana and the Biblioteca de Obras Raras Átila Almeida of the Universidade Estadual de Paraíba. Additionally, having access to the library collection, and even the website Amazon in Brazil, has meant that I have been able to expand my bibliography on the bandit Lampião far beyond what I could have done in the United States. Not to mention, the prestige of the Fulbright grant has brought me opportunities to continue to share my research and experience. In short, it is hard to put into concrete terms what this experience has meant for me, my teaching, and my research. I just have to say that, without fully realizing it until now, the experience of my Fulbright grant was the objective all along.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to express my immense gratitude for Dr. Flávia Aninger and her support during the entire process of my Fulbright grant. Likewise, I am indebted to the Department of Letters and Arts and the Universidade Estadual de Feira de Santana as a whole for hosting me.

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