

研究ノート

Student Growth in Intercultural Competence in Two Overseas Study Programs

—Group Project Based Intensive & Independent Study—

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Contents

1. Introduction
2. Description of the programs
3. Focus & method of the study
4. Discussion
5. Conclusion and future study

1. Introduction

University study abroad language programs have often been designed to facilitate growth in students' Intercultural Competence (IC), (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2009) as well as to increase their foreign language skills. This study examines the post-study abroad written reflections of students from two very different English language study abroad programs at Hokusei Gakuen University and Junior College: one group project based intensive class with intercultural training for non-English majors, and another where students individually searched, with teacher guidance, for an overseas study program that met their needs but had minimal pre-departure activity.

The programs were quite different. Both programs, however, contained a short (two to seven week) overseas language and homestay component. We were interested in exploring how these two very different programs might influence self-perceived student growth in IC and whether it would be possible to find evidence of growth from written self-reflections completed after students' return from overseas. In particular, would there be patterns in students' reflections that might be helpful in the process of changing the programs or developing new programs.

Most experts in the field of IC recognise that it is impossible to assess IC with only one instrument (Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Dervin, 2010). The authors were not

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attempting to assess students, only to explore the kind of information students might include in the reflective essays both teachers were asking them to write after returning from overseas. The hope was that this study would facilitate the improvement of both the reflective essay process and syllabus revision in the future.

Students were asked to write about their experience in the programs, what they had learned from living overseas and how they felt they, themselves, had changed from their experiences in the program. Student essays were coded for responses that met some of the concepts in Byram's (1997) model of knowledge, skills and attitudes or Deardorff's (2009) Process Model of IC.

2. Description of the programs

The two overseas study programs were quite different but did share a focus on language learning overseas. The group project based intensive class program ran for five months with only three weeks overseas. The independent overseas study program was an English language study and homestay of between three to seven weeks. However, the intensive class' three week program included a homestay and language learning experience similar to the independent class' programs.

2.1 Group project based intensive overseas study program

The first program in this study, Kaigai Jijo (English), was a three week study abroad program offered by the university's Foreign Language Education Department for second year non-English majors: Psychology and Applied Communication (7), Economics (7), Management Information (1), Law and Economics (3), Psychology for Well-being (4), Social Work (1). It offered intensive pre-departure intercultural training centered on project based learning which focussed on leadership, teamwork, developing proactive attitudes, conflict resolution, a trial and error approach to problem solving and scaffolded student autonomy in communicating and designing events with Australian university professors and business people. Students also took part in intensive English language training before departure. In Australia they continued language training during their two week visit at language schools which attracted students from many countries.

There were two teams in the group project based intensive class.

- Fourteen students focussed on international business. Many of the students in this team were studying at the School of Economics. They arranged two events with Brisbane business people, one with local business people and one with Japanese business people working in Brisbane. Students searched for speakers that were related to their fields of study or personal interests on the internet and decided which speakers to invite. They also took charge of event management, logistics, timetables,

acting as chairpersons for the events and other management tasks during the visit. Students also freely formed small groups who contacted and arranged visits to local businesses related to the particular interests of the small student group or to others such as Japan's Consulate General for Queensland.

- Ten students focussed on a study of multicultural society in Australia and Japan, with a special focus on LGBT issues, as the study tour took place at the same time as the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade. Most of the students were from the Schools of Social Welfare or Humanities. They freely formed groups, searched for faculty members from the University of Sydney and University of Technology in Sydney who had a background in identity and diversity, multiculturalism, or gender and sexuality research, arranged for them to give lectures and prepared questions to ask. Before departure the groups also visited the Sapporo Rainbow March and took part in discussion meetings at the finish of the March.

2.2 Independent overseas study program

The second program in this study, Kaigai Kenshu A, was an independent overseas study program offered by the Department of English of the Junior College for first year students. Although the Department offered several overseas programs for credit, more and more students were using school vacations or taking a gap year to study or work overseas on their own. Essentially, Kaigai Kenshu A offered students credit for what they had been doing all along, designing and participating in programs that more closely met their needs.

Each student designed a personal program of language study, volunteer, or other activities. There was minimal pre-departure training: individual consulting with the teacher about syllabus requirements or program content, and two classes assisting students with paperwork and discussing safety and health issues overseas.

Nineteen students participated in the independent overseas program going to Canada (10), Australia (5), the United Kingdom (1), New Zealand (1), Singapore (1) or the United States (1). Programs were from three to seven weeks long, involved from 60 to 140 hours of classroom study and up to 300 hours of class and outside of class experience including language practice in local communities. One student volunteered as an English guide at a local zoo. Another participated in an eight country English language student tour of Europe after completing language school study.

3. Focus & method of the study

The authors were interested in exploring how these two very different programs might influence students' self-perceived growth in IC and whether it would be possible to identify

evidence of this type of growth from written self-reflection essays completed after students' return from overseas. In particular, would there be patterns in students' reflections that might be helpful in the process of changing the programs or developing new programs. Students were asked to write about their experience in the programs, what they had learned from living overseas and how they, themselves, had changed from their experiences in the programs.

Student essays were uploaded to Google Drive and given a related filename that identified the student's department. The filenames for the two groups, Brisbane and Sydney, in the group project based intensive program were also marked. Personal information (names, student numbers, etc.) was deleted.

Two coders, one of the authors and a research assistant, examined the reports and used the Google documents to highlight relevant text and comment on its relation to growth in IC. The coding process was generally informed by concepts taken from Byram's (1997) model of IC (knowledge, skills and attitudes) and Deardorff's (2009) Process Model of IC. Specific codes were also created with reference to the *Intercultural Competence Self-Reflection* checklist (Berardo and Deardorff, 2012, p. 50).

This study was not intended to assess student IC growth but to explore the patterns related to IC that might emerge from student reports. A list of keywords based on the three models listed above was created and the coders used these keywords to make Google Comments on the essays. The keywords and student file name codes were also listed on a Google spreadsheet. The coders copied and pasted the relevant text from each student's essay to the spreadsheet. Since both coders had access to the documents through Google, they could review and discuss each others' coding.

4. Discussion

Some patterns and problems became evident even before the coding was completed. Students had been asked to write about their experience in the programs, what they had learned from living overseas and how they felt they, themselves, had changed from their experiences in the program. However, the programs were very different and as a result, the focus of student essays in the two classes was also very different.

This broad difference in student essay content meant that data from the essays was not as useful for comparison of the two classes' student overseas experiences as the authors had hoped. While the study could not compare students' experiences, it was possible, however, to describe the content of student essays and compare essay content in the Brisbane, Sydney and independent group.

4.1 Differences in essay content

In their reflective essays, the independent overseas study group students tended to focus on learning English and experiencing communication in English as a global language. They reflected more on their experiences of communicating with non-native speaking (NNS) fellow students or NNS host families, especially with their NNS immigrant host mothers. The main themes in their essays were related to language acquisition and communications skills, which was natural, because the main purpose of the study programs they chose was to better their English language skills.

The group project based intensive class students tended to focus on what they had learned in their intensive group project experience, not so much on their language acquisition, relationships with students from other countries in language school or homestay relationships. This was also natural because of the importance of project work both before and after their overseas study. They tended to focus on what they learned about teamwork, life skills that had improved, the content of the classes they participated in before departure and in Brisbane and Sydney or the relationship of their experiences in making them more effective global citizens or workers (*glo-baru jinzai*).

The group project based intensive class students also wrote a longer and more detailed reflection essay assignment based on the *The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (Byram, 2008). Students from both the Brisbane and Sydney groups reported significant, “life changing” encounters with some of the individuals they chose to interview and others connected to the program. These encounters seem to have had a major influence on their attitudes related to IC growth.

4.1.1 Essay content related to students’ IC attitudes

Both Byram (1997) and Dearsdorff (2009) describe attitudes, knowledge and skills as being important in developing IC. Attitudes can include respect (valuing other cultures and cultural diversity), openness (openness to learning and people from other cultures or withholding judgement) and curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity and diversity). All student essays reported a positive change of attitude as a result of their experience in the programs.

Most student essay content reflected an appreciation of the multicultural diversity of their host communities. They all mentioned an openness and excitement about meeting people from other cultures and learning with them. They were tremendously curious about the cultural backgrounds of the people they met.

In particular, the Brisbane group project based intensive class’ essays listed the importance of understanding one’s own and others’ values deeply and dealing with others individually and not through the image or filters of “us” and “them.” Some of the members talked

explicitly about IC and the importance of trying to clearly decide one's own values as well as understanding and considering others'.

The Sydney group project based intensive class' essays, to a great deal, focussed on changes in attitude based on their study and meeting with people related to the LGBT Mardi Gras event. Their essays listed respect for LGBT people fighting for their human rights and diversity, questioning of gender discrimination, and a positive surprise at the number of non-LGBT people who participated in the Mardi Gras event. Students also reported respect for Australian cultural diversity and the importance of recognizing the points of view of minorities and majorities in society.

The independent overseas study group member essay content showed the strong influence of the host community or country that they visited. They also reported changes in attitudes because of the people from many cultures apart from their host culture that they met or made friends with in language school or in their homestay families. In general they appreciated the multicultural aspects of their host communities. Many students focussed on differences between Japan and their host communities. For example, one appreciated that Canadians didn't seem to let work encroach on their family or leisure time. Another observed that people in London showed more kindness to mothers with babies in prams when they were using public transportation. Another recognised a love of country in the display of the Canadian and Quebec flags at her homestay family's front door.

4.1.2 Essay content related to students' IC knowledge

Deardorff (2009) mentions the importance of knowledge in the development of IC. Knowledge can include cultural self awareness, deep understanding and knowledge of cultures and culture specific information.

Many of the student essays reported a change in self-awareness, often facilitated by experiencing culturally expected differences in communication styles or in the case of the group project based intensive class, from the influence of an unforgettable "intercultural encounter" (Byram, 2008). For example, one student wrote that in Japan it is considered rude to clearly state your preferences especially to someone higher in social status but in Canada it is necessary to do so clearly. Several students reported that they had started or hoped that they would be able to express their feelings and ideas more clearly in the future. Other students talked about addressing their shyness, narrow mindedness or fear of making mistakes.

Many students reported that they began to view Japan in a different light. Another strong trend in student reports was an awareness that they needed to understand Japan more deeply, especially in order to explain their culture to foreign friends. Others were critical,

such as of Japanese government treatment of LGBT people. Others realized good things about Japan from seeing it from the outside. Some of this appreciation of Japan also reflected students' problems in their host communities. For example, we can imagine the student who appreciated the fact that in Japan one can take a bath or wash clothes anytime without worrying about hot water may very well have had a restriction on the use of hot water during her homestay.

Most of the student essays reported culture specific information — mostly every-day, common things that at first surprised or irritated them because they were different from situations that they had gotten used to in Japan. Some of these were:

- To go to a counselor means that you are really strange in Japan but in Australia it's as ordinary as catching a cold and going to a doctor.
- The Canadian system of bus passes is different from Sapporo but necessary to adjust to.
- A student became interested in French because notices in Canada are bilingual.
- Classmates from Central America often interrupted the teacher's lecture with questions but they could understand the lesson more deeply as a result.
- In Korea English is very important in business and promotion in companies is commonly connected with English.
- In Vancouver, the teachers and students in her class ate, drank and left or entered the classroom freely which she thought was a good system.

4.1.3 Essay content related to students' IC skills

Deardorff (2006) mentions the importance of skills in the development of IC. Skills can include the abilities to listen, observe, interpret, analyze, evaluate or relate. Student essays did not directly comment on IC skills. Of course, one can see evidence of their ability to listen, observe, interpret, analyze, evaluate and relate from the content related to IC attitudes and knowledge but the format of the reflective essays did not seem suitable for collecting this type of information.

4.1.4 Essay content related to IC desired internal and external outcomes

Some of the desired internal and external outcomes mentioned by Deardorff (2006) are adaptability (to different communication styles and behaviors); flexibility (selecting and using appropriate communication styles and behaviors; cognitive flexibility); ethnocentric view; empathy and behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately. Again, students showed some evidence of growth but the format of the reflective essay assignments was not suited to facilitating this kind of description.

The exception to this was student writing that demonstrated growth in empathy and ethnocentrism. The strongest sense of empathy could be found in the Sydney group's

responses to LGBT people in Australia and Japan. Students were moved deeply by their experience of the Mardi Gras event. However, a good deal of evidence was also found in both the Sydney and Brisbane groups' *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (Byram, 2008) essays. They described encounters that they felt were deeply moving or life changing and stimulated students' empathy or lead them to a wider acceptance of "the other" in interpersonal as well as intercultural communication. The independent overseas study group students also described experiences that demonstrated growth in empathy and ethnorelativism but not with the same intensity found in the *Autobiographies*.

5. Conclusion and future study

Although this study was not intended to assess student IC growth but to explore differences in the patterns related to IC that might emerge from student reports in two very different overseas study programs, it was not able to compare student experiences because of the difference of content in the reflective essays written by the group project based intensive and independent overseas study programs. It was, however, able to describe the content of the essays. Student reflective essays from both groups showed evidence of growth in IC attitudes and knowledge. Their description of this type of growth also suggests an increase in empathy and ethnorelativism. The group project based intensive student reports focussed more on their pre- and overseas project experience in their reflections. The independent overseas study student reports focussed more on their experiences in their host communities.

The study has also been useful in making changes in both authors' approaches to facilitating the student reflection process and future curriculum design. One of the most productive parts of the reflection essays was *The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (Byram, 2008). This would be a useful addition to the independent program's assignment. It also might be useful for the independent program to add to its pre-departure preparation, to ask students to carry out a research project during their time overseas or to use the *Intercultural Competence Self-Reflection* checklist (Berardo and Deardorff, 2012, p. 50) as a stimulus for pre- and post-overseas reflection.

The group project based program's reflection process might benefit from adding explicit questions about students' interpersonal relations and experiences with their homestay family, language school and in their host communities apart from project-related experience.

In response to student needs, the Foreign Language Education Department will be adding an independent overseas study program to its curriculum in 2019. Having both types of programs in the same department opens up opportunity for more coordinated research using several different instruments for assessment as well as investigating the effect of overseas programs on students later in their course of studies and even several years after graduation when they

have been working in various companies.

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