

Value of Experiential Learning for International Students in Study Abroad Programs in Japan: Intercultural Competence Outside the Western Paradigm

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Introduction

This paper attempts to present the value of international experiential learning in the host culture in students' study abroad experience as part of developing students' intercultural competence with the understanding of cultural specificity. Fifteen years of my pedagogical experience in developing experiential learning for international exchange students in Japan has demonstrated the fact that cultural specificity of intercultural competence in a host culture becomes crucial in promoting intercultural interactions while studying abroad. Once international students with their foreign cultural backgrounds are out of their accorded guest positions, they are not directly accepted into Japanese society, especially when there is no educational intervention that attempts to connect the foreigners and local people (Tsunematsu, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a). International students cannot be integrated into the local culture naturally unless a "paradigm shift" of mindset occurs between them and the local people. The value of experiential learning in study abroad programs is significant if students want to learn the culturally specific elements in the host culture.

Internationalization is currently a critical issue for Japanese universities; yet important educational issues such as development of intercultural competence have not been sufficiently examined. For example, the internationalization framework based on Western hegemonic rationale does not necessarily fit into the Japanese cultural context. Therefore, the Western notion of internationalization and intercultural competence needs re-examination by incorporating into it the culturally specific factors of Japanese society. However, the intercultural competence required in Japanese society has not been adequately researched in English studies, which tend to develop discussions within the Western cultural paradigm.

Deardorff (2016, pp.86-87), by referring to Bok (2006), claimed that there is much work to be done to improve intercultural assessment, and it is essential to determine whether students can think and act interculturally, by referring to students' lifestyles, actions, and interactions with others from intercultural perspectives. Deardorff (2016, p. 88) suggested the significance of shifting the paradigm of outcomes assessment to be learner-focused if higher education institutions are serious about internationalization, assessment, and student learning. When we closely observe real intercultural interactions of students with local people in the host culture,

educators could specifically identify overlooked issues that education needs to work on in developing intercultural competence.

The issue relating to both the internationalization of universities and local society in Japan has been publicly raised, although the actual challenges and difficulties in their development have not been sufficiently analyzed. Strategies in implementing the internationalization of local society and development of multiculturalism in Japan by the Japanese government have been ongoing; however, in order to capture the reality of how these official policies have been implemented, we need further contextual analysis based on the observation of human interactions in local contexts in non-artificial settings.

Under this circumstance, the experiential learning of international students in Japan identifies important issues that have been underestimated in the discussion of internationalization of universities and local society. Kolb & Kolb (2009, p. 43) described that learning is a holistic process of adaptation and involves the integrated functioning of the total person, which is thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving. They further highlighted that the process of experiential learning is portrayed as an idealized learning cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situations.

This paper examines the meaning of experiential learning in study abroad experience and the significance of intercultural competence outside the Western paradigm based on my pedagogical experiences for international exchange students from North America, South America, Europe, Oceania, and Asia, who participated in the one-year Hiroshima University Study Abroad (HUSA) Program¹ International students' actual experiences have provided insight into the gap between public policies and realities, and the important issues to be addressed in developing intercultural competence in study abroad experience.

Discourse on Internationalization of Universities and Intercultural Education in Japan

Howe (2009, p. 386) argued that “Japan’s internationalization has been largely driven by government rhetoric and market economics.” In the discussion on the internationalization of

¹ Henceforth, I will refer to “Hiroshima University Study Abroad Program” as “HUSA Program.” Hiroshima University has concluded exchange agreements with 88 universities in North America, Europe, Oceania, and Asia in 27 countries and two consortiums (the University Studies Abroad Consortium [USAC] and the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific [UMAP]) in the world (as of November 2017). From October 1996 through November 2007, a total number of 789 students have participated in the HUSA Program and studied at Hiroshima University as exchange students. Approximately 40~50 students attend the HUSA program annually, and a majority of them study at the Hiroshima University for one academic year. I will refer to the participants of the HUSA Program as “HUSA students.” For details of the HUSA Program, see the homepage of Hiroshima University Study Abroad Program.

universities in Japan, topics related to cultivating global citizens and pedagogical development in intercultural education have not been the focal point. We rarely find research that examines actual intercultural interactions in experiential learning, and cultural dilemmas and incongruences that international students experience in the host society, Japan. Okano & Tsuneyoshi (2011, p. 2), in their study on the minorities and education in Japan, critically argued that the existing literature does not pay sufficient attention to interactions among individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds and to inter-group multicultural interactions. They further highlighted the growing need to focus on the interactive processes of the changing landscape as Japan's multicultural landscape has become more complex because of immigration (Chan-Tiberghien, 2004; Graburn, Ertl, & Tierney, 2008; Liem, 2000; Willis & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2008).

Similarly, multicultural interactions of international students with various cultural backgrounds with reference to the complexity of intercultural interactions in the Japanese cultural context have not been examined sufficiently. Intercultural inter-group interactions between multinational students and local people can entail quite complex factors, and understanding this complexity requires analysis of correlations between cultural identities and power relations, including social, educational, and political meanings behind the scenes. In the research of international education in Japan, intercultural interactions between international students and local people in real life contexts have not been analyzed sufficiently.

Contrary to the tendency of the research focus over the years, the importance of developing intercultural competence cannot be overemphasized today. Intercultural sensitivity will be a prerequisite for effective global citizenship in the twenty-first century (Westrick, 2005, p. 105), and to ensure the success of global leaders, the ability to co-exist with other individuals from different cultures is required (Ninomiya, Urabe, & Almonte-Acosta, 2015, p. 46). Whitsed & Volet (2011, p. 146) highlighted the limited attention towards the intercultural dimensions of the internationalization of higher education in Japan, compared to its emphasis in the Anglo-European discourse. Under intensified globalization with multinational work and multicultural university environments, the number of people from various cultures establishing contact within Japan will inevitably increase (Whitsed & Volet, 2011, p. 163). However, the central issues of the internationalization of universities in Japan are often not about developing intercultural communicative competence that aims at enhancing interpersonal skills to promote mutual understanding among people from various cultural backgrounds.

There is a tendency to discuss the internationalization of universities in Japan mainly from the perspective of increasing global competitiveness (Ninomiya, Knight, & Watanabe, 2009, p. 121), and the idea of developing competencies for global leadership has been raised by the

government as a significant agenda in the education field in Japan. Local schools are to be part of this internationalization agenda. In the discussion of the development of internationalization of Japanese higher education, fostering student competences for globalization and developing “global human resource” (“*gorôbaru jinzai*”) have been actively discussed from economic perspectives (Ninomiya et al., 2015; Okada & Okada, 2013).

To foster competencies for global leadership and develop global human resources, policy makers in Japan have strategized to create a competency-based human development model curriculum that can connect university and senior high school curricula and foster global leaders. Thus, the concept to develop global human resource earlier than the university level has been implemented. This, for example, resulted in the endorsement of the new program, the Super Global High (SGH) School (Ninomiya et al., 2015, pp. 39-40). SGHs are expected to conduct multidisciplinary, comprehensive, and exploratory studies on global social and business issues, in collaboration with local and international universities, international companies, and organizations (Ninomiya et al., 2015, p. 37). Regardless of whether high schools are certified in the SGH Program, it is common today to include the development of global competence in the educational agenda of high schools, as we could see in the “Hiroshima Prefecture ‘Reform for Learning’ Action Plan” (Education Board of Hiroshima Prefecture, 2014).

Under this circumstance, pedagogies on developing intercultural competence and how they should be assessed in the context of Japan have not been examined sufficiently, although the education quality, in addition to the quantity of foreign students, has also started to become the focal point of policy makers since the last decade (Ninomiya, Knight, & Watanabe, 2009, p. 121). Howe (2009, p. 386) questioned whether the increase in international students, international faculties, and courses taught in English have benefited students, institutions, or the nation, since many Western efforts at internationalizing higher education are merely a commodification of English-language programs. Increasing the usage of English language, the number of international students on campus, or the number of English-taught courses does not influence students’ worldviews unless they are given the educational opportunities to evaluate their core values and worldviews. Students with different cultural backgrounds do not usually mingle, and they typically form homogenous groups regardless of the increase in international students.

However, one thing is very clear —English language acquisition remains an important agenda in the internationalization strategy. Patel (2017, p. 65) criticized Western hegemony in international higher education from the perspective of social responsibility, justice ethic, and sustainable long-term development of learning as well as the development of a holistic

perspective for interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary level. The examples Patel (ibid.) raised pertain to the following: (a) focus on student recruitment and retention (Welikala, 2011), (b) lack of attention to quality of learning (Nokkala, 2006), (c) focus on revenue generation, and dominance of English Language as a defining feature, and (d) disregard for indigenous knowledge and language as a reciprocal exchange of cultural wealth (Patel, Li, & Sooknanan, 2011).

Besides internationalization of universities, the reality of internationalizing the local society also needs to be examined. Part of the Japanese government's implementation of its educational and social policies to face the required social changes in today's global world emphasizes the internationalization agenda of the local society. The "Multicultural Co-existence Promotion Plan" ("*Tabunka Kyōsei Suishin Puran*") has been implemented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication since 2006 as a part of "the Promotion of the Internationalization of Local Society" (*Chiiki no Kokusaika no Sokushin*) that aims at expanding international exchange from the national level to the local and grassroots level by promoting cross-cultural understanding (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2017).²

The way it has been implemented by public offices has been criticized for its inclination towards supporting foreigners' assimilation into Japanese society by focusing mainly on offering support for Japanese language acquisition, and the implementation has been lacking the initiative to develop intercultural understanding among the people in Japanese society (Onishi, 2016, p. 59). The critical issue is the lack of examination on the reality of cross-cultural understanding on both sides — the foreigners and local people in Japan. This corresponds to the lack of analysis on the actual development of intercultural understanding in the internationalization agenda of universities in Japan.

Empirical Research on Intercultural Interactions in the Context of Japanese Culture

Berwick and Whalley (2000, p. 326) cited Byram (1995) in highlighting the concept of "exchange pedagogy," which is "a way of bringing second culture/language learners into a meaningful, goal-directed relationships with a host culture/language." The value of study abroad experience is evidenced in students' exploration of opportunities to meet real people and interact with them in non-artificial life settings while they are exposed directly to the host culture. Through real-life intercultural interactions outside the classroom, which can be

² For further details of the Multicultural Co-existence Promotion Plan promoted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, see the proposal by the Ministry on its homepage.

unpredictable and unexpected, students actually begin to experience how they can connect theoretical knowledge with real life, and it often creates dilemma and slippage.

There has been scarcity of research on the cultural difficulties faced by international students in non-artificial settings in Japan. Suematsu (2017, p. 102), in her research on international coeducation, highlighted the underdevelopment of pedagogy, such as theme setting, selection of teaching materials, choice of instructional language, forms of educational interventions, effective group work, assessment, and motivating students' voluntary participation. Empirical research on intercultural pedagogies needs to be developed further, by incorporating the analysis of cultural specificity in Japan. The implementation of public and institutional propaganda does not function ideally in isolation, and the outcome of its implementation requires detailed qualitative analysis.

Spitzberg & Changnon (2009, p. 7) defined intercultural competence as “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world.” In the Western paradigm, various models and frameworks of intercultural competence have been developed (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Byram, 2009; Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). However, general concepts are not sufficient to explain culturally specific concepts in human interactions in Japanese society. For example, as intercultural competence elements scored 80-100% agreement among top international scholars, Deardorff (2006, p. 249) highlighted the importance of competencies such as the “ability to shift frame of reference appropriately” and “ability to identify behaviors guided by culture and engage in new behaviors in other cultures even when behaviors are unfamiliar given a person’s own socialization.” These concepts depict well the critical ability in intercultural context; however, it is still difficult to conceptualize what a person should be able to do in concrete ways to be interculturally competent in a specific cultural context.

Arasaratnam-Smith (2017, p. 14) argued that “competence” remains a challenging word as the Westernized concept is closely associated with skills and performance and that intercultural competence remains heavily influenced by the developed world although there has been increasing input from multiple cultural perspectives. There has been significant development in the research of intercultural competence in the English language; however, those abstract and broad concepts are not often sufficient in explaining the cultural, social, and linguistic aspects of Japanese culture that international students found so difficult to understand and apply in practice.

We need to pay more attention to the way intercultural communication occurs in undecorated real-life contexts. Intercultural interactions can be stimulated in classroom

settings; however, these pedagogically doctored forms of communication cannot cover the various elements inherent in daily natural interactions outside the classroom. Therefore, more empirical research is needed on the daily intercultural interactions of multinational students. La Brack and Bathurst (2012, p. 207) explained that interculturalists and anthropologists share a desire to help students deepen their culture-specific knowledge and understanding of a host culture. La Brack and Bathurst (ibid.) contended that anthropologists generally believe that an intimate and complex understanding of a culture, including detailed culture-specific knowledge, makes effective interactions in a host culture possible. In addition, the researchers (2012, pp. 207-208) highlighted that anthropologists expect to gain knowledge of complex cultural systems based on mainly first-hand interactions within the cultural system. Therefore, to achieve this, conducting an ethnographic-based study abroad and participant observation in longer-term experience in one location is valuable as immersion in one culture can result in increased cross-cultural understanding.

Research on the Japanese way of defining oneself and how to relate oneself to others, such as identities, situated self, *uchi/soto* (inside/outside) relationship, and power relationships, has attracted the interest of Western anthropologists (Bachnik, 1994a, 1994b, 1998; Kondo, 1990; Rosenberger, 1992, 1994) due to the uniqueness of its complexity and subtlety. Rosenberger (1992, pp. 3-4) highlighted the close links between self, culture, language, relations, and power, and the emergence of meaning and power in the “multiplicity of relationships” in Japanese society.³ International students can conceptualize these cultural concepts realistically only through their situated learning within the culture.

In order to be able to relate to the people in Japan, it is crucial to understand the concept of *uchi/soto* (inside/outside), social hierarchy, identity, and power relationships that are defined by multiple factors, such as age, profession, gender, educational level, social status, and relationships, amongst others. These concepts are expected to be expressed in appropriate speech levels and tones in Japanese language usage and behaviors. A person becomes culturally incompetent if she or he cannot apply these concepts in daily human interactions. Thus, generally presented concepts of intercultural competence in the Western paradigm is not sufficient to assess the specific intercultural competence required in the Japanese cultural context.

Furthermore, the different encounters in Japanese culture as well as the resulting cultural dilemmas and incongruences faced by international students with diverse cultural backgrounds

³ For details of the complexity of identity construction and power relationships, situated self, and its expressions in language and behavior in Japanese society, see Kondo (1990), Bachnik (1994a, 1994b, 1998), and Rosenberger (1992, 1994).

have not been researched sufficiently. Depending on the cultural, social, religious, institutional, and personal background, international students experience different kinds of cultural dilemma in Japan. Each student undergoes different kinds of cultural adjustment and re-adjustment in their entry and re-entry process, including culture shock and reverse culture shock; furthermore, such experiences critically influence the students' decision about their future association with Japan (Tsunematsu, 2017b).⁴

Experiencing the Host Culture: Students Cannot Simply Put Theory into Practice

In international experiential learning, international students are required to integrate their resources and find ways to associate themselves with real people in the host culture, Japan. Experiential learning creates valuable opportunities for students to act, feel, and interact with local Japanese. When students need to relate themselves to people in the society, they need to holistically understand how they are socially and culturally positioned in their association with people whom they are interacting with. In the internship course that I have developed for international exchange students in the last fifteen years, I have repeatedly observed scenes where even students with advanced Japanese proficiency initially do not have the courage to speak formal Japanese and use the appropriate honorifics (*keigo*) when communicating with public officials or industry representatives due to their fear of sounding “impolite” (Tsunematsu, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a). The fact that these students are aware that they have to analyze in-depth the intertwined multidimensional factors and speak appropriate and formal Japanese according to specific social context made them become more apprehensive in speaking Japanese in formal settings. I have also observed that students can become hesitant to speak Japanese just because of the initial incomprehensible interactions.

The above responses are due to the students' fear of acting wrongly or rudely in formal situations, which require appropriate manners and courtesy as well as appropriate usage of formal Japanese language based on the social positions and hierarchy of the speakers. Even if the students have learned these concepts in class, they cannot simply apply them in real-life situations, which require various factors to be spontaneously examined prior to determining the appropriate speech and behavior. International students are usually very cautious in speaking Japanese in formal settings. Unless they have had situated learning experience, students are

⁴ I am currently conducting research on “Holistic Research on the Influence of Adjustment in Japan through Study Abroad Experience and Re-Adjustment in Home Countries among Multinational Students.” My interview with international students from North America, Europe, Oceania, and Asia have revealed that students' cultural backgrounds can be strong influencers in their re-entry experiences including their re-adjustment, reverse culture shock, and their future relationship with Japan.

often hesitant to use Japanese honorifics (*keigo*), and unless they are given opportunities to feel safe about trying to use them and taking risks in a protected educational environment with an educator, they do not usually explore the use of honorifics in real official settings due to the lack of confidence (Tsunematsu, 2016a, 2016b).

Experiential learning is effective when multicultural meanings are made explicit and literary knowledge of abstract thinking for logical reasoning is practicalized” (McDaniel, McDaniel, & MacDaniel, 1988, p. 31). Johnson and Johnson (2014, pp. 154-156) highlighted people’s stronger belief in knowledge they have discovered themselves rather than in knowledge presented by others and the effectiveness of active learning compared to a passive process. Students’ active learning through their experiences as subjects helps them discover their own truth and knowledge for their intercultural applications.

In order to help students make sense of their learning in and about Japan and to create meaningful students’ intercultural experiences, both theoretical and experiential knowledge is needed. On their own, information-based cultural training and first-hand experience provide limited experiences (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001, p. 264); however, when they are combined, students can gain valuable and comprehensive learning. Lave & Wenger (1991) argued that learning in practice is the acculturation of joining a community of practice, rather than the application of skills or principles. Furthermore, they highlighted that although specific skills are important by themselves, various kinds of skills, knowledge, and experiences need to be combined.

Students’ intercultural interactions with the local people in the host culture require their integrative work as situated learning, and this becomes intense intercultural experiences for them, as Li, Mobley, & Kelly (2011, p. 34) emphasized that overseas work experience is one of the most intense intercultural experiences. When students initiate interactions with locals, such exchanges create quite dynamic and rich intercultural experiences in which they figure out how theories actually mean in words and actions, and how to convert theories into practice.

Conclusion: Deconstructing Internationalization from Non-Western Culture

The discourse on the internationalization of universities tends to center on the Western hegemonic idea; however, aside from the context-appropriate issue of its implementation, the localized geographic location of Japanese universities also means that they cannot simply deviate from the Japanese cultural paradigm in which Japanese society operates. Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov (2010, pp. 338-339), in their analysis of cultures and organizations, highlighted the lack of awareness of national limits that causes the ideas and theories of

management and organization to be exported without considering the context of values. They argued that analysis of previous research on the organizational theories and the characteristics and achievement of the organizations are influenced by implicit assumption specific to the nationality of the authors; therefore, these theories and assumptions may not be applicable to a broader or case-specific context. International students can become culturally and socially ignorant in the host culture if they rely on their own cultural frame of reference.

In Japan, the internationalization of education and local society, in general, appears to have been actively promoted; however, how the internationalization strategy has been managed within social, political, and educational contexts in Japan need to be re-examined. We cannot equate internalization with Westernization and English usage. Kelly (2000, p. 163) pointed out that because of the absence of indigenous and non-English speaking perspectives in the discussion of cross-cultural communication whose resources tend to be Anglo-American, culturally specific intercultural competence has tended to be overlooked in research in English.

Patel (2017, p. 64) critically deconstructed the romanticized notion of internationalization and exposed the inherent development communication model of Western hegemony in international higher education. On the whole, Western values and knowledge seem to be valued; however, the Western paradigm does not necessarily fit into the way communication occurs in the majority of daily interactions among the local people in Japan. Identity conceptualization and concomitant power relationships are directly or indirectly expressed in daily interactions and Japanese language usage (Tsunematsu, 2016a), and these elements form the fundamental communicative functions in Japanese society. Therefore, universities in Japan, whose location and operation are contextually specific, cannot simply ignore this cultural paradigm.

Bennett (2012, p. 92) contended that a “[p]rograms with a positivist base that are focused on knowledge acquisition and simple cross-cultural contact cannot legitimately claim an outcome of intercultural learning, which is based on constructivist assumptions of intentionality and self-reflexiveness.” In addition, based on the belief that “[o]ne must know what to do with the information to make it useful,” Bennett (2012, p. 945) argued that, although information about nonverbal behavior, communication style, or cultural values may be useful concomitant of intercultural competence, “it does not in itself constitute competence.” I have repeatedly observed the students’ difficulty in applying theory into actual practice in my internship course for international students in Japan. Students cannot take action in real scenarios merely based on logical and verbal explanations. Theoretical explanation is not enough for students to interpret the multi-faceted complexities in real-life situations, and they cannot make sense of the verbal explanations without situated learning in the host culture.

Internationalization of universities cannot be measured without evaluating how students are developing their intercultural competence by understanding cultural sensitivities, and how they are developing interpersonal communication skills to make their way to the real global society. Complex cultural systems cannot be learned only inside classrooms, and students need to be exposed to real people's lives that are socially, culturally, and personally embedded in complex ways in the cultural context. Experiential learning matters since it enforces international students to be exposed to the value systems in the host culture, and helps them make sense of the acquired knowledge about the host culture. Experiencing value systems maximizes the value of study abroad experience, which digital technology cannot simply simulate.

Study abroad loses its meaning if students do not meet the people in the host culture. If educators are to create connections between international students and local people in the host culture and integrate diverse groups effectively, certain mechanisms are needed, such as building legitimacy, providing access, and ensuring influence (Moran, Abramson, & Moran, 2011, p. 184). Students can understand these mechanisms and recognize their true meanings only through their experiential learning by being associated with actual people. Furthermore, the experiential learning of international students in my course has consistently revealed that intercultural competence in Japanese society cannot be assessed by using the Western paradigm.

Lastly, in the future, research on international students and their intercultural competence in their study abroad experience needs to be developed more by qualitatively examining the students' specific cultural backgrounds, their different cultural standpoints, and how they relate themselves to the host culture differently. Performing such an investigation is crucial as each student is positioned in different social, cultural, and personal standpoint in his or her relationship with the host culture and its people.

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