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Studying abroad and its enhancement on language learning and culture acquisition: the case of Malaysian learners of Japanese

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Student mobility & Study abroad

Student mobility – is any opportunity for students (undergraduate or postgraduate) to work or study abroad whilst undertaking their degree program. It can be bilateral (inbound & outbound) or one-way study abroad.

Study abroad program are one way (inbound only) fee paying program for either short term (one semester) or long term (one academic year)

Global trend

Student mobility programs have been perceived as having **positive impacts** on the student's personal development such as gaining more self-confidence, self-awareness, independence, flexibility and adaptability towards differences

Mobility is an effective way of enhancing intercultural understanding and fostering deeper language learning and improving interpersonal skills among youths

Messelink et al. ,2015

Mobility programs

In Europe, the Erasmus mobility program was introduced in 1987 to enrich opportunities for cultural exchange and for professional and personal experience for students within the European Union (Juvan & Lesjak, 2011).

In Asia, Japan, Korea including Malaysia start to promote student mobility programs.

Example:

The 3rd EU-Malaysia Higher Education Conference (14th March, 2016) in University of Malaya, Malaysia

EU Head of Delegation, Eamon Hickey (Ambassador of Ireland) made a welcome remark:

"Higher education institution around the world are becoming more competitive in vying for the best and brightest minds....International academic mobility is no less a priority for Malaysia than it is for the EU"

Student mobility is one of the strategic priorities for University of Malaya Strategic Plan of 2011-2025.

- Ensure quality incoming students from diverse backgrounds and countries
- Increase opportunities for exchange through the Students Mobility Programme so as to expand student horizon
- Improve employability by enhancing their soft skills and give greater exposure to real-world experiences

The objectives of study

- To understand the development of students who are involved in the outbound program
- To locate which competencies had been acquired the most based on the Global People Competency Framework
- To identify any positive/negative behavioral changes
- To capture any positive/significant outcomes from the program
- To see if the skills students acquired sojourn abroad lead to better employability opportunities.

The significance of study

- To provide relevant insight into how students grow as a person
- What they have benefited from the program
- To provide a guideline for their juniors in achieving realistic learning goals
- To provide guideline for educators in enhancing the positive aspects students acquired from abroad experience and at the same time to provide a platform for understanding those who are in doubt/unsure about their behavioral changes.

Spencer-Oatery and Stadler- Global People Competency Framework

Global people competency framework is a set of competencies derive from actual authentic intercultural situations in professional context (Messelink et al, 2015)

This framework groups the competencies that are needed for effective intercultural interaction under four interrelated clusters

- Knowledge and ideas,
- Communication,
- Relationships,
- Personal qualities and disposition

The 4 clusters of competency

- knowledge and idea competency emphasized on the behavior that is goal oriented and proactive in gathering information while also able to solve problems encountered through creative ways.
- Communication competency refers to a person's communication skills that center around communication management (listening, speaking, perceptiveness skills, choice of words in different settings) and language learning and application.

The 4 clusters of competency- continue

- Relationship competency refers to the ability of building good rapport with new people and understanding the hierarchical and power relationships of their workplace. In short context, they are learning to build on their relational ability/sensibility.
- Personal qualities and dispositions focus on emotional strength (motivate, strong internal sense), well-developed stress coping strategy, resilience and adaptability.

Respondents and data collection

- Self-report narrations based on 12 students major in Japanese language study program in University of Malaya (UM)

- UM is the only university in Malaysia that offers Japanese Language as a major course
- All students are with scholarships
- Since 2008, 1 or 2 students went studying abroad in Japan

| I | 9.10-9.14 | MEET | Taiwan |
|------|------------|------|-------------|
| II | 9.15-9.16 | MEET | Japan |
| III | 9.17-9.18 | MEET | Germany |
| IV | 9.19-9.20 | MEET | France |
| V | 10.1-10.15 | MEET | USA |
| VI | 9.16-9.18 | MEET | UK |
| VII | 9.19-9.20 | MEET | Canada |
| VIII | 9.21-9.22 | MEET | Australia |
| IX | 9.23-9.24 | MEET | India |
| X | 9.25-9.26 | MEET | China |
| XI | 9.27-9.28 | MEET | South Korea |
| XII | 9.29-9.30 | MEET | Indonesia |

Good impression about Japan as a country and its' people

A convenient country-

- Transport (regular & punctual) ,
- cleanliness, *Konbini* ,100 yen shops
- travel websites are informative and up-to-date, follow traffic rules (even without police)
- weather - four seasons and various types of delicious food

Good impression about Japan as a country and its' people

Japanese people:

- Aware of others who are in need of help (e.g. asking directions)
- politeness (to elderly people, teachers and people in higher position)
- don't disturb other people (speaking in a loud voice) attitude
- environmental friendly (bring the rubbish home)

Findings

Personal qualities and disposition competency

- Become more confident, independent (learned how to cook-Cu)
- Language competency improve- listening, reading, writing (A,O,Y)
- Learned to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds
- Learned to plan my trip better (A, O)
- Although we have the scholarship, the way we manage our money, plan for our daily live or entertainment, they way we interact with others is a knowledge that we cannot learn through books or academic paper (Y)
- I can make my own decision for my own(CU)
- I have also come to accept the culture of a different country (CU)

Intercultural communicative competency-1

- learned to be tolerance to others
- become a better listener, wait till the interlocutor finished talking
- can accept others' opinions

E.g.

I think I have learned to communicate with people better through this program.... I feel that I now have a better grasp of how to communicate ideas with different people and miscommunication is kept at a very minimal level or none at all (S)

Interacting with different people from different country and culture background allows you to learn to tolerate people that hold different opinions/thoughts/living practices that are different (O).

Intercultural communicative competency-2

- I found that I became try to consider the others' feeling when I want to refuse someone's invitation (E).
- I greet people more than I ever do compared to the past. Also I appreciate things people do for me more now(S)
- I think through my part time job, I have come to appreciate the hard work of foreign labourers a lot more, and also those who are in the service industry(S)
- I have adopted some of the Japanese thinking, such as to humble myself more and not to talk too straightforwardly towards people. I think have become more emotionally sensitive as I care a lot about people's thinking(CU)

Observations on Japanese people

- They are very respectful to their teacher and someone older than them. They will greet them and speak careful when someone is higher position than them. I think that it is very professional to be able to switch self so fast(N)
- I respect Japanese work commitment – e.g. say thank you to every bus passenger, guard -stand up straight while on work (O)
- Student and lecturer relationship is more formal (S, N)
- Take care of appearance- good appearance is a kind of politeness(Y)
- Japanese students' opinions are rational and coherent supported with fact and statistics(P)
- Japanese people are like others with different body shapes and size (S) – onsen discovery
- Young university Japanese are less punctual and some skipped classes as well (S)

Observations on other foreign students

- My foreigner course mates Japanese level is higher than me... they are very diligent ... They will check out for more info even after Sensei explained it. They have a very strong curiosity in them. **One bad thing** is they like to do their things on their own instead in a group (S)
- Learning attitude of my classmates was that they were very **proactive** in learning and always ask question when they don't understand something. Which makes me so wanted to learn from them... I realised I am not thinking critical enough (Y)

Things/matters that caused confusion

- They have this overly praise culture that i do not like because i could not differentiate if they really mean it or not (N)
- Japanese unfriendliness- feeling being rejected, can't get into the group.
- 'mata asobou'- is a kind of conventional expression -polite way of ending a meeting/event

Awareness- Japan is not a bed of roses – negative impressions

- Get to know the social problem- bully (CU)
- Japanese people do have prejudice against certain people (CU, C)
- Unfriendliness, make distant to others (O, YV, – even have the experience of talking to each other (O), Indirect expression (C, N, Y, E, P) - Japanese people are not communicating their true feelings- hard to understand them (S)
- Attending the activities twice a week for more than half year, doesn't make me feel being accepted as friend even until the end of my exchange program (CH)

Being a Malaysian is great-realization

- Ability to speak at least 3 different languages, thus less language barriers while talking to foreigners either from Asian or European/Americans
- People are often with smiling faces, friendly
- Malaysians are adaptive and open to other cultures
- Malaysia can produce more real food such as fruits, vegetables, peppers for seasoning and flavoring which is different from Japan which can produce chemical food (E)

Behavioral changes- (personal qualities & disposition)

- My friend said I bow too much (C, CU)
- We become a little bit more fashionable and attend to our own appearance more (Y, CU).
- I feel that I became more brave and confident to speak English with others (E)
- I have a more positive impression of my own body. Japanese girls do come in all shape and sizes yet all of them can dress well and look cute. After going into onsens, I couldn't help but notice all the different shapes and sizes, au naturel, makes me feel that there's really nothing to bother about what my body looks like, it's all good that I have a strong healthy one. Weight does not seem to bother me as much now(S)

Behavioral change (knowledge & Ideas)

- *There is definitely a need to get out of my comfort zone to explore more of the world, to know more of the world to understand things that I have only heard of one-sidedly (CU)*
- I become hard working and willing to take responsible after studying abroad. Japan has become a successful country in terms of technology because the people over there are hard work and unite as a group while facing challenge(P)
- I even learned Japanese people's praising skill. This might help me in the future when working and making new friends (N)
- I realized that the world is not perfect and everyone including me is not perfect. Thus I started to be more easy-going(CH)
- Travelling makes me understand myself more; what I want, what I don't like for example (N)

Behavioral changes -(Relationship)

- I have become more respectful towards teachers and parents. But I have become more direct in speech with my close friends (C)
- *When I am aboard, i learnt from my China friends to be more selfish on what i want and not scared of people judging me but not to those over extent still got limit but more free. Those white people taught me on how to enjoy life and be crazy and never afraid to make mistakes and gain more experience. While, Japanese people taught me on how to put on mask and be polite even if i do not like a certain someone(N)*

Behavioral changes -(Relationship)

- living alone make me realized that friends is very important. They are the one that help and comfort you when something happened when your family are not around.(N)

Behavioral changes (Communication)

- The way I communicate with people, I will listen more than talk more now , because I realise the importance of listening to what other tells you (Y)
- I am not showing each and every emotion on my face as I was. . .I think not letting my negative emotion to affect others is important(CH)
- 1 year there makes me afraid of being rejected (I have a failed befriending effort there- I became more quiet.(CH)

The demerits of studying abroad program

- Another year of academic year extension
- Credit transfer is difficult
- Making comparison between Japan and Malaysia - disappointed about Malaysian attitude particularly related to politeness, cleanliness (O)

Conclusions

- Many of them have good impression about Japan and Japanese people.
- The majority of the respondents were happy and said they have benefited from a year of study abroad particularly in the domains of personal growth; language acquisition improvement, intercultural communicative skills
- They become more aware of their behavior during interactions and they observed other people from other cultures and make comparison.
- They feel happy when they discovered something good about their own country.
- The behavioral changes particularly related to relationship and communication competencies they acquired abroad may lead better employability if they put them into practice.

Implications to educators

- Students who went study abroad are observant and sensitive to people/things that are new to them
- They are positives, diligent in learning new things
- They should be trained to be more analytical in any problem/things that appeared weird to them (ask to clarify, find out the reason why)
- Students should make a habit to note down all the language features/ encounters which they have learned
- A sharing section should be held to share their study abroad experience with their juniors to serve as encouragement
- A counselling section should be held for those who are confused or unsure on their behavioral changes



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