
Positionality:

Three perspectives on the experiences of Japanese students on a short-term study abroad program in Thailand

Kevin OTTOSON, Robert CROKER,
Mina HIRANO and Brad DEACON

Abstract

This study aimed to uncover both the particular experiences and to explore the specific aspects within those experiences that 24 student participants in the 2017 Nanzan Asia Program (herein: Thai NAP) deemed most meaningful during their four-week sojourn in Thailand. To that end, three different researchers applied their own lens using three different qualitative methods to analyze written reflections taken from a post-program survey that was given to these students. Accordingly, one researcher used a top-down approach applying Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). Another researcher used a bottom-up, grounded theory approach that led to the development of four themes that played an important role in students' experiences. Finally, a third researcher used a bottom-up holistic approach to identify five main steps that the students passed through during the program. Findings from each researcher are discussed within their respective sections and a final group analysis is then offered. It was concluded that using a reflexive approach can provide a deeper understanding of the ways that students constructed meaning during Thai NAP. Suggestions for future research are shared at the end of the paper.

1. Introduction

Recently, short-term study abroad programs are becoming more common and gaining popularity at many universities in Japan. The number of Japanese

participants in short-term study abroad programs has increased steadily from 5, 924 students in 2004 to 31, 432 in 2015. Short-term study abroad programs in Asia constitute the most popular geographical destination with 13, 491 Japanese students (JASSO, 2017). Students at Nanzan University, for instance, are afforded opportunities to participate in several such programs including the Nanzan Asia Program (NAP) in the Faculty of Policy Studies. Through participating in such programs, students experience other cultures first-hand and are able to take advantage of valuable opportunities to grow and develop as cross-cultural beings. This growth and development can be amplified further when students are encouraged to reflect on their experiences within intercultural programs. Holmes and O'Neill (2010) highlight a trend in the research (Deardorff, 2009; Jackson, 2006; Jordan, 2001; Roberts, et al., 2001) that places importance on reflections by the learner on intercultural experience.

Reflections from cross-cultural experiences can benefit the participants themselves, future participants, and other stakeholders (e.g., program administrations, faculty, and the student body). The 2017 Thai NAP program offered its 24 student participants the opportunity to reshape their existing knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs through the four-week fieldwork component of the program. This paper, in particular, looks at the reflections from these participants and provides three different perspectives on those same reflections. The participants' responses from two questions, that is, 1) What meaningful experiences did you have during Thai NAP? (Thai NAPのなかで、どんな有意義な経験ができましたか?), and 2) What did you learn from these experiences? (その経験から、何を学びましたか?) were qualitatively analyzed by each separate researcher. In qualitative research, the researcher shapes the data through their own experiences and beliefs (Dean, et al., 2017). Specifically here, a top-down theoretical approach, a bottom-up grounded theory approach, and a holistic approach were used to understand the responses from the Thai NAP participants. These different approaches were taken from a reflexive posture that acknowledges multiple perspectives to understand phenomena. At the time of analysis and writing, we were not aware of research in study abroad programs that used reflexivity to allow each researcher to analyze the same data. Jackson (2014) advocates and demonstrates reflexivity by acknowledging her own position and background as a researcher in her study abroad case study. However, no

other researchers in the case study provided their analysis of the same data. This paper aims to take a different approach in study abroad research by allowing three different researchers from different backgrounds to share their understanding of the data. By doing so, we hope new understandings will be uncovered by the researchers as well as the reader.

As stated above, a reflexive posture acknowledges that there are multiple ways of seeing phenomena (Byrd Clark & Dervin, 2014). This paper aims to illustrate multiple perspectives from one data set. One researcher used a top-down approach using Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The other two researchers used a bottom-up or grounded-theory approach, which allowed one researcher to identify four different themes in their experience, while another researcher saw the students going through a five-stage process.

This paper will begin by providing a theoretical background that provides a rationale for the reflexive approach that allowed for a deeper understanding of the experiences and learning during the Thai NAP program to emerge. Next, this paper will describe the participants, the NAP program within which they participated, and the data collection. Then, separate sections will illustrate each researcher lens that includes their separate analysis and findings. Finally, concluding thoughts and suggestions for future research that encourage critical reflection and allow for acknowledging a researcher's positionality in the research, as opposed to being a neutral bystander, will be shared.

1.1 Theoretical background

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) highlight a critical turn over the past two decades in research in the social sciences, applied fields, and humanities that challenges the idea of researchers taking a neutral stance in the search for understanding and the analysis of phenomenon. This critical turn rejects the idea of neutrality and asserts that all research is political and interpretive in nature. Often referred to as positionality or reflexivity, it is "the process of reflecting critically on the self as a researcher, the 'human as instrument'" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 83). In the process of data collection and analysis, the researcher is not positioned as a separate entity from that which is being researched. Thus, reflexive subjectivity through continuous reflection and self-critique is essential because the interpretation and construction of meaning are tightly intertwined (Grbich,

2007). As Creswell (2013) says, “How we write is a reflection of our interpretation based on the cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics that we bring to research” (p. 215). This practice of making your perspective and biases clear to the public can help illuminate the lens through which understanding of that which is being researched is formed by the researcher (Maxwell, 2005). Dean et al. (2017) describe a process in which researchers from six different research backgrounds used their own individual research ‘lens’ to analyze the same data set. Rather than a flaw, this diversity of perspectives is a strength of qualitative research.

When analyzing the data in this study, it became clear that we were noticing different themes in the data. Each one of us was using our own interests, biases, and values to try to understand both the experiences and what the students involved with Thai NAP had learned from these experiences. Thus, it was determined that a reflexive study would most effectively offer the best vehicle to share our perspectives of the experiences of the Thai NAP students. This paper contains each of our own understandings of the data collected during Thai NAP. Prior to sharing each of our results and discussion of the data, we will provide an overview of the NAP program in general and Thai NAP in particular. This is followed by a description of the participants together with the methodology used to collect and analyze the data. The paper will conclude with some final thoughts on the results, a reflection on our positionality as researchers, implications, and suggestions for further research.

1.2 NAP Background

NAP has been running since 2001 and offers students a choice of seven Asian countries to choose from as follows: five destinations in summer (China, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and The Philippines), and two destinations in winter (Malaysia and Vietnam). Each of these programs includes a four-week short-term study abroad and students may participate in only one program. Prior to departure, students are given ample support during the academic year through mandatory country-specific lessons that are led by two faculty members per NAP destination. These faculty members also serve as chaperones, each for approximately a two-week period, during the overseas program. In addition, there are several NAP lectures, which all groups collectively attend, to provide further guidance. The purpose of these meetings is to build community while

also focusing on tasks such as: facilitating greater transitional ease into the host cultures, developing fieldwork skills, building autonomous learning skills, and preparing students to otherwise live safely and healthily abroad. Upon their return to Japan, students are required to deliver a presentation, which is attended by all other participating NAP students and faculty, based on a mandatory research project that they conduct through doing fieldwork in their host country.

The core of NAP is the four-week study abroad excursion, and its success largely rests on the efforts of the local hosts. Students who join Thai NAP are hosted by Khon Kaen University (KKU), which is a top-ranked public university located in the northeast of Thailand that provides education to roughly 35,000 students per year. Each year a faculty member from the Japanese Studies section within the Department of Eastern Languages in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at KKU assumes the main role for organizing the Thai NAP stay. This organization involves a wide variety of preparations including the arrangement of: Thai tutors for the Nanzan students, weekly Thai language classes, guest lectures, daily cultural excursions within Khon Kaen and longer overnights in nearby areas, hotel accommodations, transportation, and other coordination matters. Interested readers are invited to see Croker, Pholboon, Hirano, and Sasaki (2017; forthcoming) for a more detailed explanation of the Thai NAP program, in particular.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 24 Japanese sophomore students ($n=24$) who were all 19–20 years old. There were two males and 22 females who were in the Faculty of Policy Studies at Nanzan University. Each of the students in this study had chosen Thailand as their first-choice destination on a mandatory NAP program application form that was used together with a follow-up interview for selection purposes in their freshman year.

2.2 Data collection procedure

In order to more fully understand the students' experiences and interpretations of their experiences abroad, we had originally planned to invite the Thai NAP students to write daily reflections in a log that included several focus questions to guide their reflections. However, we quickly realized, as was quoted in Croker,

Pholboon, Hirano, and Sasaki (2017), that “many unanticipated encounters arise during fieldwork, which the researchers did not see coming” (Bamu, De Schauwer, & Van Hove, 2016, p. 571). Specifically, we noticed that students were far busier than originally anticipated with Thai language classes, time spent with their Thai tutors both formally and informally, and their involvement in other program activities and excursions. Students were also focused on their fieldwork presentations, and practicing dance and other routines as part of the “sayonara” show that is given annually at the end of the program to express their gratitude. We further underestimated the time that students would regularly spend on their own autonomously arranged meetings, which often occurred during evenings when we had imagined they would be reflecting. In addition, several students and one chaperone unfortunately became ill during the program. Collectively, these “unanticipated encounters” which we didn’t “see coming” necessitated a shift in our fieldwork approach and research focus.

Thus, given these constraints we chose instead to provide students with a simple open-ended survey based on the following two questions: 1) What meaningful experiences did you have during Thai NAP? (Thai NAPのなかで、どんな有意義な経験ができましたか?), and 2) What did you learn from these experiences? (その経験から、何を学びましたか?) Students were informed over the remaining few days of the program that they would be given a short feedback survey to complete prior to arriving in Japan that would be used to improve future programs. The Japanese version of these two questions, each written on a separate piece of paper, was given to the students after they had all passed through airport security at Khon Kaen. The instructions given were to write honestly in either Japanese or English, write as much as they liked, not to write their names, and to complete the survey prior to arriving in Japan. Most students completed the survey while waiting to board their plane in Khon Kaen. Others did so during the one-hour flight to Bangkok, or in the Bangkok airport prior to boarding their return flight to Japan. The surveys were collected upon arrival in Japan. One student had forgotten the survey in the airplane and later re-wrote the answers and submitted the survey via e-mail attachment a few days later. Soon after the survey answers, which had all been written in Japanese, were translated into English by one of the Japanese-proficient, English-speaking native researchers and then refined by a Japanese native.

Next, we will share three separate researcher lenses that illustrate various interpretations of the Thai NAP student reflections based on their study abroad experiences.

3. Top-down, conceptual approach [Kevin]

Through initial readings of data translated into English, a common theme of ‘differences in culture’ was present in what students reported as meaningful experiences and what was learned from those experiences. As so much of what is experienced on a study abroad program is due to what is being perceived in the new culture, using an intercultural lens can be a useful way of understanding what is experienced and learned (Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012). Kevin’s analysis used an intercultural competence theoretical framework — one particular lens — in order to understand the experiences and learn from the Japanese students who participated in Thai NAP.

3.1. Models of intercultural competence

Two models of intercultural competence, Bennett’s (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) and Deardorff’s (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence, conceptualize intercultural competence as a process. Bennett’s (1993) DMIS focuses on cultural difference (see Figure 1). The DMIS conceptualizes intercultural development in a six-stage model with ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages. The ethnocentric stages are: 1) denial of difference, 2) defense of difference, and 3) minimization of difference. In the ethnocentric stage, one unconsciously perceives reality as central to their own experience. The ethnorelative stages are: 4) acceptance of difference, 5) adaptation of difference, and 6) integration of difference. In the ethnorelative stages, reality is interpreted through the context of culture (Bennett, Bennett, & Allen, 2003). The DMIS

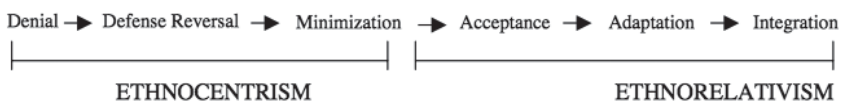


Figure 1. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003)

suggests that a person moves through a series of stages as he/she acquires intercultural competence. Bennett’s (1993) DMIS defines intercultural competence as “the ability to recognize oneself operating in cultural context, the identification and appreciation of cultural difference” (Bennett, Bennett, & Allen, 2003, p. 246).

Much of what can be realistically developed in a short-term study abroad is the knowledge of one’s own culture (Deardorff, 2014). This can be spurred on by encountering differences with other cultures. Deardorff’s (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence conceptualizes this cultural self-awareness as a result of heightened attitudes of curiosity, openness, and respect (see Figure 2). Being culturally self-aware can lead to a transformative change in one’s frame of reference. Deardorff’s (2006) model describes this as an ethnorelative view. This can lead to external outcomes of interacting appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations. The DMIS conceptualizes this stage in development

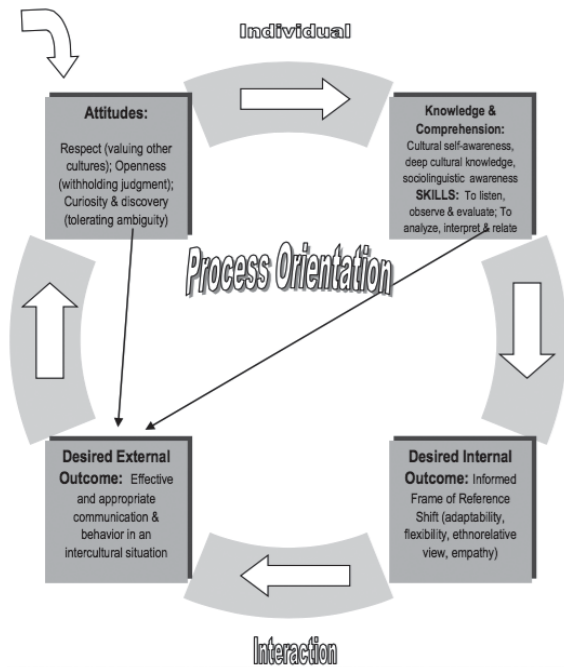


Figure 2. Deardorff’s (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence

through stages of adaption and integration. In adaption, one experiences a shift in their cultural frame of reference, where they are able to look at the world through other lenses. While in integration, one's frame of reference shift can lead to a change in their own identity (Bennett, Bennett, & Allen, 2003). Deardorff's (2006) model differs from the DMIS as it specifically conceptualizes the process of becoming interculturally competent as a lifelong process. The use of a circle assists in understanding this lifelong, never-ending process.

The concept of difference was evident in the reflections from the students on Thai NAP. According to Moran (2001), the perception and response to difference is most central to Bennett's (1993) DMIS. Based on the focus on difference in the student reflections, the DMIS seemed most appropriate to understand the comments on difference that were experienced and learned.

3.2 Analysis

Comments on difference from the students largely seemed to fit within two stages of the DMIS: minimization of difference, and acceptance of difference. This section will provide a more detailed description of both stages. Additionally, examples will be presented of comments from students that appear to illustrate the stages of minimization and acceptance.

3.2.1 Minimization of difference

In the minimization of difference stage, one can recognize and accept superficial cultural differences. In this stage, there is an emphasis on similar aspects of the surface layer of cultures. The following comments suggest a minimization in communication differences in terms of language. Specifically, the terms 'wall' or 'barrier' are referenced and how this wall could not prevent the students from communicating with others in the target culture:

(I learned) There is not a language barrier. (Student 9)

Wall of language can't prevent us from friend making. (Student 13)

(I learned) from the exchange with the Thai tutors that even if a country or language is different there is not a big barrier between us. (Student 16)

Additionally, two comments mentioned ‘barriers’ or ‘wall’ could not prevent their ability to make friends. The latter comment plays down the differences in friendship and social bonds:

Before I went to Thailand, I was worried whether I could communicate or become close to the tutors, but when I actually went to Thailand and hung out with the Thai tutors, I felt that it is possible to become close even if their country is different. (Student 16)

The world is a big place and there are many different things there, but friendship and (social) bonds are the same all over the world. (Student 12)

(I learned) The food, way of eating, and manners differ depending upon the country. They are different but also similar. (Student 13)

The previous comments suggest an acknowledgment of differences. Student 16 was worried about communication issues. Additionally, students 12 and 13 note the differences but also highlight similarities.

3.2.2 Acceptance of difference

The following comments suggest an acceptance of differences. These comments also can suggest a heightened knowledge of one’s own culture and how it differs from the culture(s) they came in contact with on Thai NAP. None of the comments overtly mention accepting differences in communication. This first comment seems to suggest an awareness of how different the world can be:

You cannot take life in Japan for granted as each country has their own culture, so I felt that the world is a big, interesting, and fascinating place. (Student 12)

The following comments suggest a heightened cultural self-awareness:

(I learned) In Japan, surrounded by people, if you put up your hand if you do something different, the people around you will look at you, but in Thailand even if you do something in front of other people, then you don’t feel embarrassed because the Thai people are so welcoming. (Student 11)

I could feel the differences in culture as the temples and sites we visited were very different to Japan. (Student 14)

(I learned) Being able to become close with people from any country. Even if something is the same or different, everything is interesting. The way things are done in Japan are not the only way to do things. (Student 7)

The following comments attribute a heightened awareness of difference due to the fieldwork and tutors:

What I had imagined Thai university students' lifestyle to be like was different and the atmosphere of the town, the kindness of the Thai people - I could understand a different country's culture. (I learned) being not strict with time and coming to understand Buddhism. As my fieldwork topic was religion, I could come to understand the differences in Buddhism. (Student 15)

Also, there were LGBT tutors. At first, I thought that was strange, but that is culture and the Thais thought that it was natural, so I became closer to them. There were no barriers, and because the Japanese students wanted to become closer to the Thai students, I personally became more active, and could better become closer to them. (Student 24)

I could experience many cultural differences. I could hear ideas that are different to my own - about the Thai students' way of thinking about religion. (Student 13)

Another comment from student 24 mentions an awareness of the reality of life in Thailand. This awareness of culture beyond the surface level seems to have facilitated a shift in this student's internal frame of reference:

I learned about Thai culture and everyday reality, and had many experiences that I could not have had in Japan, and because of that my way of thinking changed. (Student 24)

Student comments that fit in the 'acceptance of difference' ranged from noticing how different the world is, to a reflection on their own culture, to an eventual change of reference.

3.3 Discussion

Comments suggesting a minimization, for the most part, dealt with minimizing differences in language or communication. This might be due to the relative lack of experience with learning the Thai language, or their Thai tutors' efforts to communicate in Japanese. A longer sojourn in Thailand or longer experience learning Thai may raise awareness of differences in communication. In the minimization stage, according to Bennett, Bennett, and Allen (2003), one acknowledges differences in cultures, but believes the similarities are greater. The students lack a cultural awareness that biases their characterizations that the similarities are greater than the differences. The students' comments about there not being a barrier are still from their own perspective or judgment, not the perspective or judgment of their Thai interlocutors.

A majority of comments that mentioned or suggested a difference in cultures seemed to more appropriately embody Bennett's (1993) ethnorelative stage of acceptance of difference. In this stage, cultural differences in behaviors and values are recognized and appreciated. Cultural relativity describes this stage where differences in culture are seen as acceptable alternatives (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). Additionally, comments in Bennett's (1993) ethnorelative stage of acceptance tend to be self-referential in nature. Three student comments mentioned Japan specifically in their comparisons with Thai culture. The acceptance stage also suggests curiosity and respect for differences. Moreover, there also may be comments questioning the cultural absolutism. In the comments the students made, there was a level of respect shown, yet an overt showing of curiosity or questioning of absolutism was not monitored.

Comments from the students need to be drawn out and explored in more detail. Knowledge of culture, according to Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence framework, is characterized by the knowledge and comprehension of deep culture. As Deardorff (2015) says, "Deep cultural knowledge entails a more holistic, contextual understanding of that culture, including its historical, political, and social contexts" (p. 132). Some student comments suggest only conventional surface-layer knowledge of Thai culture. This is not to say that the students do not possess a deeper knowledge of Thai culture, but rather our research methods did not provide a way to draw out that knowledge in greater detail.

4. Bottom-up, grounded theory approach [Mina]

In this section, the data were analyzed by a grounded theory approach in order to understand the students' experience from a bottom-up perspective. First, the data were carefully read through. From the data, the following categories were created: differences/comparison, acceptance, self-cultural awareness, relationship with Thai tutors and students, friendship, team, willingness to communicate, non-verbal communication, communication in general, language use, and joy of learning language. These categories were then developed into four larger categories: A) *intercultural experiences*, B) *relationships/emotional connections*, C) *communication*, and D) *language*. After determining these four categories, the reflections were coded thematically. Next, the frequency of themes in the data was recorded. These themes and their topics are illustrated in Table 1.

4.1.1 Theme A. Intercultural experience

The first theme is *intercultural experience*. The Association of American Colleges and Universities defines intercultural experience as “The experience of an interaction with an individual or groups of people whose culture is different than

Table 1. Intercultural Development Themes

Themes	Keywords
A. Intercultural experience	1) Differences/comparison 2) Acceptance 3) Self-cultural awareness 4) Other
B. Relationships/Emotional contacts	1) Relationship with Thai students 2) Friendship (友情) 3) Team (仲間) 4) Other
C. Communication	1) Willingness to communicate 2) Communication in general 3) Non-verbal communication 4) Other
D. Language	1) Language use 2) Joy of learning a language

your own” (AAC&U, 2013, p. 1). The theme of intercultural experience was the largest with a frequency of 24 over the span of 13 participants. Within this theme, there were six mentions of *differences or comparing culture*. In particular, comments compared life in Japan with life in Thailand. The contents of the differences differ from the surface cultural differences which were described as “eating with hands, the way of using bathroom, and so on” (Student 24) or “... there are many different points about various temples and ruins, and I could feel the cultural difference in my bones.” (Student 14). Some of the comparisons that students mentioned were related to cultural norms such as the following: “In Japan, if you raise your hand or do something actively, you would be looked down upon, but after I came to Thailand, Thai people accepted me to the point that I felt no hesitation to do something in front of everyone.” (Student 11)

Next, there are six mentions suggested an *acceptance of the differences*. All of the comments show that students found the differences and accepted them in a positive way. For instance, there were comments like the following: “The differences and the commonalities are all wonderful,” (Student 7) and “Because each country has its own culture, the world is wide, fun, and interesting.” (Student 12)

Finally, there were three mentions that showed *self-cultural awareness*, being aware of one’s own culture through intercultural experiences. All of the comments were awareness about living in Japan as a developed country, which Student 20 described as “wealthiness of Japan” and they indicated, “I should not take it for granted about the lifestyle in Japan.” (Students 7, 12) There were also other things that were mentioned that fit the theme of intercultural experience, but did not appear to the researcher as fitting within a particular keyword.

4.1.2 Theme B. Relationships/Emotional connection

The next largest theme was *relationships/emotional connections* with a frequency of 15 over the span of 11 students. The categories that fit in this larger theme were: 1) relationship with Thai students, 2) friendship, 3) team, and 4) other.

Nine students mentioned the relationship between Thai students as their most meaningful experience. Six of these nine students mentioned their relationship with their Thai tutors. Some examples of their comments involving the Thai tutors are the following: “I could get along with tutors to the point that I felt no

language barrier” (Student 12), and “We became close, we went on trips together, went out to eat together, and all tutors were friendly and I felt the warmth everyday” (Student 14).

Three students used the word “*yuiyo* (friendship)” which shows more serious nuance compared to the daily used word “*tomodachi* (friends)” when they described their most significant experience of Thai NAP. Two students used the same phrase, “Friendship can overcome the walls of language.” (Student 8) Other comments, such as, “I thought that friendship is strong and deep” (Student 12) and “There are many differences but the friendship and the bond is world common!!” (Student 12), show that these students felt that they succeeded in building relationships or emotional connections in an intercultural setting.

Two students used the word *nakama*. The word, *nakama*, carries a sense of belonging to the same group which shares common things. Student 8 mentioned, “joy which I shared with *nakama*” and student 20 referred to the “importance of *nakama*” in their important experiences. There were also other things that were mentioned that fit theme of *relationships/emotional connections*, but they did not appear to the researcher as fitting within a particular category.

4.1.3 Theme C. Communication

The next theme, *communication*, had 14 mentions by eight students. The keywords that fit this larger theme were the following: 1) *willingness to communicate*, 2) *communication in general*, and 3) *non-verbal communication*.

Four students indicated the significance of a *willingness to communicate*. For instance, student 14 mentioned, “Even though there is a wall of the language, you can communicate if you have the willingness to do so”. Also, student 22 said, “The important thing is to try to communicate.”

Four student comments were categorized under *communication in general* with mentions of “communication skill” (Student 1), “how to choose the topic” (Student 1), and “communication with foreign people.” (Student 11).

Two students indicated the importance of *non-verbal communication* in the following comments: “to communicate by feelings though it’s difficult to do so by words, such as gestures” (Student 1) and “If you smile, you can communicate.” (Student 11).

4.1.4 Theme D. Language

The last theme, *language*, had five mentions by five students. The categories that fit this larger theme were the following: 1) *language use*, and 2) *joy of learning language*.

Three students mentioned language use in their meaningful experiences. For instance, student 12 mentioned, “The joy of using Thai and communicating with it is so great.” Student 18 also wrote, “Because I did my best to use Thai language in daily lives, the connection of people such with a driver, the clerks and students was broadened.”

Two students mentioned the joy of learning new language. Student 8 mentioned “the attractiveness of experiencing the new language.” Student 22 wrote, “I could learn language with joy (through) speaking and learning Thai language.”

4.2 Discussion

From the students’ perspectives, the most significant experience through participating in Thai NAP was the intercultural experiences. Through such intercultural experiences, students encountered cultural differences and compared such differences with their own culture and values. Allport’s (1954) contact theory places importance on intercultural experiences. Contact theory views contact with other cultures as a catalyst for developing intercultural competence. This contact with the host Thai culture through Thai NAP may have promoted a higher sense of self-cultural awareness. Furthermore, some students mentioned how they came to accept and appreciate the differences. This acceptance and appreciation of differences is important in order to develop intercultural understanding.

In addition, it was clearly shown that students believed they succeeded in building good relationships or emotional connection both with Thai students and among themselves despite the short-term nature of this program. According to their comments, this bond covered their weakness of language proficiency. Further research is needed to investigate if this result is unique to students with collectivistic cultural backgrounds compared to more individualistic cultures. Communication and language were also part of the significant area of students’ experiences through Thai NAP. Further investigation is needed to explore the connection between these areas and relationships/emotional connection.

Overall, the Thai NAP students described their experience and learning in

four areas, that is, intercultural experience, relationships/emotional connections, communication, and language. Even though this analysis is limited and may not be generalizable to other short-term intercultural programs, it is essential for teachers to understand the significant areas of students' learning from the students' perspectives in order to give appropriate and effective preparation and support.

5. Bottom-up, holistic approach [Robert]

The main analytical process in grounded theory is to 'code' data — that is, to read the data carefully and group similar data together into categories using the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher then labels each category, assigning codes. These codes can come from the data or be created by the researcher, possibly based upon previous research. Using software such as NVivo, the researcher can code a data set and then easily bring all of the data together from each category and analyze them. Similar categories can then be grouped together to indicate larger themes, and in this second stage the researcher is once again applying the constant comparison method to cluster together similar categories and separate dissimilar categories. Such an approach provides a relatively straightforward and powerful way of grouping together related data.

However, a grounded theory approach faces two shortcomings. The first is that the coding process breaks the data up, sometimes into relatively small chunks. It is assumed that splitting up the data in this way does not reduce the integrity of the data; for example, what a participant writes in the second part of an answer to a question can be analyzed independently of what he/she wrote in the first part. However, this is not necessarily the case; feelings and experiences often situated in a broader context lose their meaningfulness when taken out of that context. The second shortcoming of a grounded theory approach is that the logic of the entire coding process is to group similar data together and separate dissimilar data. However, once the data have been broken up in the coding process, it can be difficult to stitch them back together again in a coherent way to provide a more holistic account of the phenomena being explored. This is particularly apparent when the focus of the study is a set of experiences that change over time as participants develop deeper awareness and understanding.

To provide a more holistic account that emphasizes the flow and development

that occurs when participants share a set of experiences as in a study abroad program, an alternative approach is not to break up the data but rather to emphasize the connections within the data. The researcher stands back somewhat from the text, consciously seeking to understand the stories of growth and development of each individual participant while at the same time developing an overall narrative that represents the central experiences of all of the participants. Such an approach seeks to understand the fundamental essence of the study abroad experience; it is akin to a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

There are three basic steps to this process. The first step is simply to try and understand the data deeply by reading over the text many times, and underlining or marking its significant parts. The second step is to make notes in the margins about the topics that are appearing in the data, similar to coding in a grounded theory approach. However, in a holistic approach these topics can be much broader. Moreover, whereas in a grounded theory approach the main goal of coding is to divide the data into categories, in a holistic approach this process of noting topics is simply preparation for the final, most important step. Here, the researcher notes the connections between the different topics as a way of bringing together the data and providing a more holistic perspective that identifies both the common narrative and the fundamental crux of the shared experiences.

One limitation of this approach is that the data set should be relatively small — it cannot be too big or complex, as then it might be difficult to step back and see the data holistically. A further limitation is that not all of the data are necessarily included in the analysis; in focusing upon the main connections that shape participants' experiences, more marginal or less common experiences may be put aside.

In the following sections, the Japanese students' study abroad experience in Thailand is represented using a holistic approach. Five main steps emerged from the data that will be shared below together with illustrative student excerpts and comments on each.

5.1.1 First step: The Japanese students first sought to create supportive social networks

A short-term study abroad fieldwork program like NAP can be very

challenging, as the students simultaneously learn a new, unfamiliar language and complete a group fieldwork project in a foreign country far from home. Moreover, they do this without their usual established social network of family and friends. As they faced these challenges while studying abroad, most of the Japanese students' first step was to create new social networks to provide emotional support, and this in itself helped the Japanese students develop. When asked what their most important learning experiences were, three students noted:

...the importance of supporting each other (Student 17)

Meeting many people. ... The importance of close friends. (Student 20)

I could become a nicer person. (Student 7)

The Japanese students first sought to create these connections over the initial two weeks with the other Japanese students and then increasingly with the Thai tutors, first their own assigned tutor and then with the other tutors. Developing these emotional connections served to make it safer for them to take risks: to learn another language, to go out and explore the world together, to do fieldwork together, to acknowledge discomfort, and to share the joys of everyday life together. The following three comments illustrate that the visiting Japanese students valued becoming close to the Thai tutors:

On Thai NAP, there are many tutors, so we could have a lot of cultural exchange with them. I could become close not just with my own tutor but also with other tutors as well ... (Student 14)

Before I went to Thailand I was worried whether I could communicate or become close to the tutors, but when I actually went to Thailand and hung out with the Thai tutors, I felt that it is possible to become close even if their country is different. (Student 16)

The world is a big place and there are many different things there, but friendship and (social) bonds are the same all over the world!! (Student 12)

5.1.2 Second step: The Japanese students created emotional connection through shared daily experiences

In Japan, most of the Japanese students live with their families in or near Nagoya; a few whose hometown is far from Nagoya live by themselves. When in primary school, these students had walked to and from school with the children living nearby and played with them in the evening and on weekends, but now in university these students live much more independent lives. Thai NAP allows students to deeply bond through myriad shared experiences including: spending a month together living in the same guest house, sharing a room with another Japanese student; catching the school bus to class together and then sitting in the same classroom studying Thai all morning; having most of their meals together; conducting fieldwork about Thailand in small research groups; preparing the volunteer activities such as teaching Japanese games and language at a Thai primary and high school; and then hanging out together in the evening at the night markets and on the weekends on fieldtrips. All of these experiences served to help the Japanese students create emotional connection with each other, as these comments illustrate:

For one month, it was my first time to spend time with my Japanese friends so close, and there were good things and bad things, but together we found ways to solve our problems, so together we could grow together. (Student 10)

...honestly expressing the difficulties, things you enjoy, and the present feelings to each other and sharing (Student 8)

Similarly, spending time with the Thai tutors was also significant for the Japanese students:

Every day the Thai tutors — not just my own but all of them — created a casual, home-like atmosphere, as we went on trips together, ate together and so on, so we become very close. (Student 14)

5.1.3 Third step: In sharing their daily lives, the Japanese students developed communication skills and meta-cognitive skills

Some Japanese students were initially worried whether they would be able to communicate with the Thai tutors and the local Thai people. However, the Japanese students noted the resemblances in communication styles:

The way that Thai and Japanese people communicate is similar, and that was very fun.
(Student 14)

This helped the Japanese students foster their ability to interact in Thailand:

Before I went to NAP, I wasn't sure whether I could function in another country. However, the tutors tried very hard to speak Japanese, they understood what we were saying, so language was not a problem. When we went shopping, using gestures and simple English we could communicate, so I felt that the important thing is to try and communicate your ideas. (Student 14)

Moreover, some of the Japanese students enjoyed this very much:

It was a great pleasure when we could actually communicate in Thai. (Student 14)

The narrowing emotional distance between the Japanese and the Thai students came to represent the reduced language distance between them — as the emotional distance became shorter, the language distance was also seen to disappear:

Friendship overcomes the barrier of language. (Student 8)

We become so close to the Thai tutors that it didn't feel as though language was a barrier, as our friendship was strong and deep, I felt. (Student 12)

Sharing new experiences every day and engaging in fieldwork, some Japanese students also began to notice that they were thinking more carefully:

I felt that it was essential to be clear about my own ideas and be able to express them ... that I should think for myself, putting out my antenna. (Student 8)

I think that my way of thinking changed. (Student 24)

In addition, the following comment is illustrative of a shift towards appreciating the role of motivation more:

(I noticed) The importance of motivating yourself. (Student 21)

5.1.4 Fourth step: The Japanese students developed the confidence to step out of their comfort zone, becoming more emotionally open to experiences

Wanting to step out of their comfort zone was one reason that some Japanese students chose to join NAP. The Thai tutors helped the Japanese students to behave very naturally and show their feelings openly. This is in contrast to the way the Japanese students often feel that they cannot openly show their feelings:

Until now, there was a part of me that was closed, but that is not necessary any more, and so I learned that I should be more active. (Student 18)

I could behave naturally and show my feelings in ways that I usually don't show to my Nanzan University friends ... (Student 5)

I behaved naturally and reached out to people In Japan, ... if you put up your hand or if you do something different, the people around you will look at you, but in Thailand, even if you do something in front of other people, you don't feel embarrassed because the Thai people are so welcoming. (Student 14)

Each day just being myself I felt that my life was enriched, and I could think that it was very worthwhile. (Student 12)

This openness was fostered by the Japanese students' interaction with Thai culture:

I was very moved by the warmth, kindness, and consideration of the Thai people's humanity. (Student 10)

5.1.5 Fifth step: The Japanese students began to question how they saw the world

On a four-week study abroad program, it is perhaps too much to expect students to experience a shift in the way that they see the world. But perhaps when they return to their own country they might be able to look at their own culture through a different lens. The following two excerpts illustrate the shift that some Japanese students made, taking a more critical perspective on their own country and culture:

You cannot take for granted that the way things are done in Japan are the only way to do things. (Student 7)

You cannot assume that life in Japan is the best as each country has their own culture so I felt that the world is a big, interesting, and fascinating place. (Student 12)

This shift is further illustrated by the following longer excerpt:

At first, I had various problems, but slowly I came to understand the meaning of 'culture'. I felt that only thinking about the world that oneself thought and saw is wrong, so I began to actively engage with the local Thai people. Then, without really thinking, somehow the wall that I imagined disappeared. (Student 24)

5.2 Reflection

This holistic approach identified five main steps that the Japanese students passed through in their four weeks in Thailand: first seeking to create supportive social networks; creating emotional connection through shared daily experiences; developing communication and meta-cognitive skills; developing the confidence to step out of their comfort zone and becoming more emotionally open to experiences; and beginning to question how they see the world. These five steps represent the crux of the experiences that most of the Japanese students had in this short-term program. However, it is not claimed that all of the students went through these five steps; rather, these five steps characterize the fundamental

elements of the Thai NAP study-abroad experience. Furthermore, given the unique nature of the Thai NAP program, particularly the intense interactions that the visiting Japanese students have with the local Thai tutors and the fieldwork dimension of the program, these five steps may not characterize the experiences of students in all study abroad programs. Nonetheless, they provide a useful framework for helping future Thai NAP students to understand their experiences in Thailand, and also for accompanying teachers to effectively facilitate the growth and development the students undergo.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper shows how multiple perspectives can uncover different understandings of the same data. Research in study abroad tends to take too narrow of an approach to understanding intercultural experiences (Twombly et al., 2012). Consequently, other important developments or understandings can be missed. As the third researcher, Robert, mentioned earlier, not all experiences or developments can be analyzed by taking a holistic approach. However, each of our three approaches did not capture the entirety of the learning and meaningful experiences the students had during Thai NAP.

In the case of the first researcher, Kevin's background and interest in intercultural competence tuned him in to Thai NAP students' experience with difference. Applying solely a top-down theoretical framework through Bennett's (1993) DMIS to understand the data may have missed the themes of emotions, support, relationships, communication, and confidence. These themes were discovered through Mina's grounded theory approach and Robert's holistic approach. Mina's lens as a Japanese female with multiple experiences in studying abroad influenced her emerging identification of four themes from what students consider meaningful experiences and what they learned from those experiences as: A) *intercultural experiences*, B) *relationships/emotional connections*, C) *communication*, and D) *language*. Finally, Robert's role as a Thai NAP program coordinator and chaperone gave him a different perspective to understand their experience. Robert saw five steps that students passed through during their sojourn: 1) finding support, 2) finding emotional connection from shared experiences, 3) developing communication and meta-cognitive skills from sharing their lives, 4) developing

confidence to new experiences and being open to others, and 5) questioning one's own worldview. To sum, we saw more together than on our own, yet there is still much more to see.

A more encompassing look at the data, particularly study abroad, can highlight different developments that students make prior to, during, and following their sojourn. Communicating developments and themes that were noticed through this data analysis (e.g., relationship-building, communication, and self-confidence) may open up more intercultural experiences to a wider population of students within a university, for example, by attracting students who may not initially be interested in the often-described intercultural benefits of studying abroad.

In order to draw out more of what students experience, learn, and develop, guided reflections and critical reflections are necessary. Byrd Clark and Dervin (2014), Jackson (2011), and Savicki (2012) advocate for critical reflection to be a core component of experiential learning (as is found in Thai NAP) in intercultural education. Reflecting on intercultural experiences is not easy, clean, or quick (Jordan, 2001). It is also important to note, as John Dewey (1916) said, that we do not learn from our experience; we learn from reflecting on experience. Going forward, we hope this Thai NAP program will provide continual learning and reflection for the participants, for us as researchers, for the other stakeholders, and for you, as readers, as you bring your own unique perspective to this paper.

6.1 Future research

Future research on Thai NAP students should be geared towards learning more about their previous intercultural experiences and intercultural competence prior to their sojourn. Better understanding of their prior experiences, and intercultural competence can provide more insight into how their experiences on Thai NAP affected their intercultural competence. Comments from students following a study abroad can often mention a transformative change. Study abroad researchers do not doubt the honesty of comments suggesting a transformative shift; rather, evidence of prior knowledge, attitudes, and skills via a questionnaire or quantitative instrument may be able to cite this change with more certainty (Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut, & Klute, 2012). Student 24 reported experiencing an internal frame of reference shift, but this student had some years of experience at a young age living in Thailand prior to joining Thai NAP and that might account

for the eventual building up to a change in internal frame of reference or change in perspective.

In addition to understanding students' intercultural experiences prior to Thai NAP, an understanding of their experience on Thai NAP long after their sojourn could provide us with a better understanding of the role that Thai NAP played in their overall university experience. Communication of intercultural experience immediately after a sojourn is not always a neat or organized process (Jordan, 2001). Understanding and reflection takes time. Change or development can be affected by a series of events long after a sojourn (Twombly et al., 2012). Transformative learning, where an internal frame of reference occurs, can take years to occur. In this study, stakeholders (e.g., students, educators, and administrators) may feel a sense of frustration if development is not communicated immediately following a study abroad experience. However, intercultural development is a lifetime process, so patience is of the essence.

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