**Developing intercultural awareness from short-term study abroad: Insights from an interview study of Japanese students**

Developing intercultural awareness among participants is an objective of many short-term study abroad (SA) programmes. However, such programmes often focus on essentialist ‘target’ national culture learning. Moreover, simplistic evaluation of intercultural development risks the decontextualisation of personally meaningful learning in experiences abroad. This qualitative interview study investigated intercultural development, conceptualised through intercultural awareness (ICA), among fifteen students who took part in programmes in diverse locations. Thematic analysis revealed varying experiences and highlighted the importance of multilingual and multicultural programmes for meaningful ICA development. Preparation for short-term SA needs to recognise linguacultural diversity and move away from essentialist target culture learning.

Keywords: intercultural education, short-term study abroad, intercultural awareness

**Introduction**

Short-term study abroad (SA) experiences are increasingly promoted within university curricula on the perception that they can lead to important linguistic and intercultural developments (Trede, Bowles & Bridges, 2013). Correspondingly, there has been an expansion of associated SA research, including around culture learning on short-term programmes (Beaven & Borghetti, 2016). Traditionally, this research has viewed contexts of learning abroad as ‘optimal’ for language skills development and culture learning based on the opportunities available for intercultural interaction (e.g., Cubillos & Ilvento, 2018; Hernández & Alonso-Marks, 2018). However, SA research and practices frequently assume these experiences should lead as the primary objective to experiences of local cultures following interactions with local individuals. Such approaches overlook the learning potential of intercultural communication with other international students. Furthermore, they risk essentialism in treatment of local culture as fixed knowledge to be learnt, neglecting variation among individuals, as well as, the multilingual and multicultural realities of many programmes in international university settings.

Short-term SA is popular in Japan, the setting for this research, where it was reported by the Japan Student Services Organization that 96,641 students participated in 2016 (www.jasso.go.jp/). However, programme success tends to be measured in terms of numbers participating and there are few universities establishing measures to evaluate intercultural learning on their SA programmes (Koyanagi, 2018). As such, the extent to which these short programmes can be linked to intercultural developments becomes relegated in importance and is under-investigated. Given the popularity of short programmes, finding ways to understand how these can lead to intercultural development is useful for Japanese contexts and beyond.

**Study abroad and intercultural education**

There are assumptions in SA practices that learning overseas should refer to knowledge and experience of local cultures through interactions with individuals from the destination countries. Relating these assumptions to English language use, on some programmes students may engage with local individuals in Anglophone settings, but even in such settings there is likely to be variability in English use and diverse cultural frames of reference, especially in multilingual and multicultural international campuses. Other programmes take place in countries where English is not the dominant language but is used as a lingua franca in communication with local individuals. Interactions involving English in many SA contexts are, thus, more likely to take place with other international students on their programmes (Kubota, 2016). However, research has often viewed the amount of contact and interaction with local ‘native’ English speakers as responsible for differences in student attainment based on the assumption that more such contact results in more learning (e.g. Cadd, 2012). Research and practices may also imply that intercultural learning as a goal of language learning may not be successful without contact with ‘target’ language users from ‘target’ cultures (e.g., Cubillos & Ilvento, 2018; Weier, 2009). Within SA practices, a focus on ‘native speakers’ and local destination culture in association with national languages and national cultures neglects significant intercultural and within-culture variation (Lie, 2001). Such focus may compare different traits and characteristics along national lines; however, comparisons along such fixed lines can result in ‘reductionistic’ essentialism in which culture is conceived simplistically on assumptions of homogeneity among people (Kramsch, 2001, p. 205).

In specific relation to English use (the focus of this study), national cultural representations and the perception that local cultures are the references for learners dominate the thinking of ELT (Baker, 2015), and by extension, many SA perspectives. Based on these perspectives, self-criticism may emerge among students if they do not develop relationships with local individuals, highlighting this as a ‘failure’ on SA (Çiftçi & Karaman, 2018). SA participants may, however, feel more drawn to other international students than local individuals since communication may be perceived as more accessible (Csizer & Kontra, 2012). Indeed, connections made with other international students may be more meaningful than those with individuals from the host setting given the potential for more substantial interactions and socialisation (Schartner, 2016). There is, therefore, intercultural learning potential from multicultural and multilingual SA contexts.

In SA research, there is recognition of the potential for insight from variability in individual outcomes in a recent shift towards social approaches which highlight processes of overseas study and examine individual trajectories (Coleman, 2013; Kinginger, 2009). To capture variability, research may need to account for individual differences in disposition, personality, motivation, and previous intercultural experiences mediated by aspects of identity, and affected by individual actions taken before, during, and after a sojourn (Jackson, 2020, p. 444). Specific features of a programme may also be represented including type of programme, extent of intercultural interaction enabled, availability of pre-departure training and ongoing support (ibid.). Indeed, the quality of institutional support is shown to be important for intercultural learning outcomes from SA (Byram & Feng, 2004; Jackson, 2020; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012). However, it may be problematic if such courses adopt a sole focus on ‘target’ language use and ‘target’ culture of the host institution’s country (Baker, 2016), which would not reflect the interactions taking place on SA programmes.

While more intercultural development is associated with longer programmes, short-term SA has been linked with positive developments, including in: cross-cultural sensitivity (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen & Hubbard, 2006); ‘global’ awareness (Chieffo & Griffith, 2004); cross-cultural knowledge and competence (Kurt, Olitsky & Geis, 2013); personal growth towards global and cultural awareness (Gaia, 2015); cross-cultural awareness and open-mindedness (Shiveley & Misco, 2015); and, expanded worldviews (Koyanagi, 2018). Nonetheless, given the brevity of these programmes, lasting from a few days to a few weeks, it may be more appropriate to look at intercultural learning outcomes as occurring over time. This gives participants longer for reflection on what was personally meaningful (Beaven & Golubeva, 2016; Messelink, Van Maele & Spencer-Oatey, 2015) with short-term SA experiences providing a foundation for subsequent approaches to intercultural experiences and development (e.g., The IEREST Project, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial that short-term SA enables meaningful intercultural interactions. Moreover, programmes of a clearer multilingual and multicultural character may lead to more substantial interactions through contact with students from different backgrounds. However, in sum, previous studies have often been limited by their use of research models or tools. This includes adopting essentialist ‘target’ culture and language models of intercultural education and development, as well as, methodologies that focus on direct experiences but miss-out on longer term personal reflections and development.

**Intercultural development and intercultural awareness**

The model adopted for characterising intercultural development in this study is intercultural awareness (ICA) (Baker, 2011; 2015). While there are numerous models of intercultural communication and development (considerably more than can be discussed in one paper), ICA was selected as it specifically addresses contexts in which there is no defined target culture or community. Furthermore, ICA is related to English language use, but this is a variable use of English as a lingua franca alongside other languages in multilingual scenarios. The focus on English used as a lingua franca in multilingual and multicultural contexts makes ICA especially relevant for the settings explored in this study. ICA is defined as, ‘a conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices and frames of reference can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in communication’ (Baker, 2015, p. 163).

[Figure 1 near here]

ICA can be further expanded into twelve elements (Figure 1) in an order which builds from basic cultural awareness (level 1), to cultural awareness (level 2), and finally to the most complex and dynamic level of intercultural awareness (level 3). Although the three levels can be used to track intercultural development, it is important to stress that individuals are not necessarily expected to neatly follow the three levels. For example, individuals may demonstrate awareness at level 2 or 3, and at other times revert to more basic level 1 awareness. Some may never progress beyond level 1 or 2. Others may begin with an awareness related to level 3, for example, if they grew up in a multicultural and multilingual environment. A number of empirical studies have explored the relevance of ICA in ELT and intercultural education including Baker (2015) in Thailand, Yu and van Meale (2018) in China, Kusumaningputri and Widodo (2018) in Indonesia, and Abdzadeh and Baker (2020) in Iran. Findings suggest the usefulness of ICA in accounting for development, typically between level 1 and 2, with the exception of Kusumaningputri and Widodo whose participants demonstrated elements of level 3 in which cultures and cultural identities were seen as fluid and adaptable (2018, p. 59). Nonetheless, these findings are preliminary and more research is needed exploring the relevance of ICA in a range of settings. This study aims to contribute to this through applying the model to short-term SA.

**The study**

The research adopts a process orientation (Kinginger, 2009) to accommodate the participants’ engagement in intercultural learning and reflects the trend in SA research towards complexity of ‘individual trajectories’ (Coleman, 2013, p. 25). The study outlined here is qualitative and interpretive (Richards, 2003; Silverman, 2014). It was situated within this paradigm in order for a complex and detailed description of the research area to develop (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). The study was guided by two research questions:

1. To what extent (if at all) was intercultural awareness developed among students who took part in short-term SA programmes?
2. To what extent (if at all) was intercultural awareness development influenced by different SA contexts?

In seeking answers to the research questions, an examination was required of data from different points in time. Firstly, there was focus on students’ intercultural perspectives and experiences pre-SA. Secondly, it examined reports of intercultural communication during their programmes and the factors which contributed to perceived successes or failures of these interactions. Finally, it looked at the students’ perspectives towards intercultural communication post-SA and any changes between the post-SA interviews. It was also necessary to explore the perceived qualities of the intercultural learning opportunities during their programmes and the extent that their programmes influenced the development of skills associated with ICA.

***Research methods***

The study involved data collection over a one-year period with 15 student participants, via pre-sojourn interviews, two post-sojourn interviews, and post-sojourn focus groups, conducted by author A who was also teacher on site. The interviews were supported by interview guides which ensured focused yet flexible discussions. Most interviews were conducted in English although participants had the option of responding in Japanese. Two participants selected to be interviewed in Japanese and their accounts were translated. The interviews were supported by two post-sojourn focus groups which enabled an exploration of topics emerging in discussions (Edley & Litoselliti, 2010). Although all fifteen students were invited, five were unable to attend. Before they took place, the participants received a topic overview. They were conducted in English (largely) with trained student moderators present. The researcher set up the focus groups but was not present for the discussions.

***Analysing the data***

The interpretive analysis is based on subjective views of reality to recognise that individual perspectives may not be adequately captured by statistical measures (Silverman, 2014). This approach was in line with a shift towards qualitative SA research (Coleman, 2013; Kinginger, 2009). To identify where intercultural developments occurred, or did not occur, examples were sought of changes in student discourses occurring over time in how students conceptualised relationships between language, culture, nation, and identity. 19 hours 45 minutes of recorded and transcribed data were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, 2013). The longest interview was 52.59 minutes and the shortest was 16.47 minutes. The average length was 32.36 minutes. One focus group lasted 56.12 minutes and the other 57.37 minutes. All those data were transcribed (and, where necessary translated). Given the focus on themes and content in the participants’ accounts, the transcribing did not require significant prosodic detail. To assist with the thematic analysis and data management the qualitative analysis software NVIVO 11 was used.

The data were first approached with predetermined codes relating to the research questions and conceptual background; however, a number of data driven codes were allowed to emerge (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). This combination aimed to ensure clarity in the data in its conceptual closeness to the overall research areas while also remaining open to new directions (Silverman, 2014). Through these analysis processes, the thematic framework developed with integrated data from the interviews and focus group analyses. Several checks were made on the individually coded items to ensure they were appropriately represented on the framework and adjustments were continuous throughout the analysis to reflect emergent data. Fifteen students may be considered a low number but the analytical aim was to build detailed individual accounts documenting their experiences (Dörnyei, 2007) from which thematic connections could be made. This number does not support generalisation but the cross-participant comparison to identify common thematic threads supported the in-depth and pluralist perspective the study sought (Silverman, 2014). Emerging theory in this research may, therefore, be generic, in its basis on thematic connections to other accounts within the set. Rigour in the study was also supported by time engaged in the longitudinal collection of data which supported the in-depth description in the data presentation (Richards, 2003). While there is a risk that interpretations may emerge from research biases, conceptual awareness among the researchers of the research areas can strengthen claims made (Talmy, 2010). Ethical procedures approved by the university were observed.

***Research setting and participants***

The setting for the research was a non-language major university in Japan where students in the first two years attend two mandatory 90-minute English language classes per week. There were seventeen English language teachers of Anglophone backgrounds, and two Japanese learning advisors. The setting is typical in ELT where language and cultural input is provided by teachers from the Anglosphere (Baker, 2015). The university was active in its promotion of short-term overseas student exchanges and there were several student exchange programmes available. In the academic year 2016/2017, 148 students selected to take part in SA. Among these, 15 students were purposively sampled for this research (see Table 2, names are pseudonyms). The study was concerned less with representativeness than by the need to see several detailed descriptions of intercultural communication experiences on student exchanges. Therefore, the study sought to obtain varied and individual data among a small number of SA participants from which connections could be made in their experiences. Notable differences among participants were in gender (8 females students, 7 male), age range (19-24), stages of university study (1st-year students to 5th-year), past international travel experiences (9: Yes, 6: No), and to represent different examples of study programmes.

[t]Table 1 near here[/t]

**Findings**

The findings begin with an overview of the data. Qualitative data extracts are then related to the ICA framework from different points in the data collection. The extracts are selected as representative examples from across the accounts following thematic coding and connections, linked to the framework used. There follows a differentiation of programme type to highlight the extent ICA development was enabled on different programmes. There is then a focus on the individual intercultural learning trajectories of 4 students (Mayu, Yuki, Noriko, and Miki). Data from the different points in the longitudinal collection are provided sequentially to clarify intercultural developments relating to particular SA experiences. This clarification of intercultural learning among these 4 students represents the differentiated programme types highlighted in the findings.

***Data overview***

Table 2 displays the overall spread of coded items from the students’ accounts across the data collection period. The ten codes represent the accumulated data and are derived from the 12-stage ICA model.

[t]Table 2 near here[/t]

Seventy-eight items from the accounts were connected with level 1 on the ICA framework, sixty-seven examples at level 2, and two at level 3. Items relating to level 1 and level 2 were both significant in this study, supporting past research findings in educational settings in which levels 1 and 2 are shown to be more relevant (Abdzadeh & Baker, 2020; Baker, 2015; Yu & van Maele, 2018). The table makes clear that some items in level 1 remained significant post-sojourn particularly in how culture was conceptualised. However, the number of examples of cultural stereotyping and generalising decreased, indicating some developments towards level 2. In coded items from the final interview and the focus groups, there were twenty-four items at level 1 and thirty-nine at level 2 suggesting a reduction in references at level 1 linked to an increase in those at level 2. There were also developments shown in acceptance and awareness of cultural differences among individuals. Although the line of questioning may have contributed to this change, it may also suggest that following more reflection on their intercultural experiences abroad, items in level 2 became more significant to some students. These changes are consistent with findings that developments from exchanges can be more effectively looked at as occurring over time (Beaven & Golubeva, 2016; Messelink, Van Maele & Spencer-Oatey, 2015).

***Intercultural awareness***

Expanding on the data overview, qualitative data extracts represent the coded items linked to different levels on the ICA framework at different points in the data collection. This helps show how the data has been linked to ICA, before a closer examination of individual developments among 4 selected participants (below).

In the pre-exchange period, there were several examples of cultural essentialism among the participants relating to level 1 (basic cultural awareness). Thematic connections here from across the accounts are represented by Daichi in *Extract 1*. He expressed a simplistic understanding of culture, as static, bounded, and learnable expressed through national labels in talk about his own national culture and ‘target’ culture learning anticipated on his exchange.

*Extract 1 (interview 1)*

Daichi: oh I think Japanese people are very shy in my hope it's my image American people are more active

For some students, using nation-based labels may be a convenient way to talk about individuals and culture, perceived as relevant for the interview contexts in response to the questions asked. This approach to culture may also be appropriate in early relationships between individuals or in short-term friendships. However, it may represent surface-level basic understandings of culture in terms of national characteristics rather than more complex understandings. For some students, developments following their sojourns were limited and essentialist items remained in their accounts. Post-SA coded items in the accounts at this level were represented by Kodai in *Extract 2*, expressing openness to learning about other people but handled by stereotyping, a post-SA theme in several accounts.

*Extract 2 (post-exchange interview 1)*

Kodai: I feel the difference between Japan and another other countries … for example greeting European people hug but Japanese people not hug so I feel very strange and European people European people talk talk very a lot

For other students, there were more post-SA examples of advanced cultural awareness (level 2) in their accounts than pre-SA. There were some differences among those with more intercultural experiences and those going overseas for the first time. However, there were exceptions to this indicating development can be based on the quality of the intercultural encounters rather than past experiences.

For instance, Masa (*Extract 3*) took part in a cultural and study tour to Malaysia which included several days on an international university campus with a diverse student body. He wanted to learn ‘different ways of thinking’ believing this was enabled by communication with non-Japanese people, accepting perceived differences among people and enthusiasm to treat intercultural encounters as learning experiences. Masa also represented a view of Japanese culture in singular terms, stereotyping national characteristics, linking to level 1. With a view of culture in communication as solely determinable by nationality, perceptions of differences among individuals may not be easily expressed.

*Extract 3 (post-exchange interview 1, translation)*

Masa: I’d like to speak with people around the world. If I stay only in Japan, I can only learn the way Japanese people would think. I want to speak with people around the world so that I can take in different ways of thinking

However, across the accounts there were nineteen references to ‘Awareness of differences among individuals’ (level 2), with more coded items in later collection points. In *Extract 4*, Mariko illustrated this view of awareness among individuals post-SA, perhaps attributable to her interactions with other international students.

*Extract 4* (post-exchange interview 1)

Mariko: maybe foreigners have different thinking from Japan so I'd like to learn their thinking and I'd like to learn a lot of knowledge … I spoke about my country and I listened to a lot of countries culture some people were so kind and they wait my speaking I made a lot of friends

There were examples of students accepting differences among people they encountered. Takeshi illustrates this in *Extract 5* in reference to a previous SA experience.

*Extract 5 (post-exchange interview 2)*

Takeshi: I went to some country and before went to the country I I only know . not concrete image abstract image and now I know a little more that country and people so if I hear some news about that country I can judge that news is good or bad or its trust

In sum, Post-SA, in many accounts there remained examples of cultural essentialism, but there were several examples of more advanced cultural awareness. Students may have continued to use national labels in their descriptions of these encounters but their acceptance of differences among people may reflect some effective intercultural learning.

***Contexts of intercultural learning***

Descriptions of SA contexts add detail to SA experiences and are useful as a foundation for the individual developmental trajectories of 4 students (in the next section). Differences in the quality and extent of intercultural learning opportunities could be seen. On one hand there were programmes providing substantial intercultural opportunities with other participants from diverse backgrounds; on the other hand, faculty-led cultural tours, which adopted simplistic ‘target’ culture learning, offered fewer intercultural opportunities. To illustrate the differentiation, Mariko spent time in a multilingual and multicultural environment in Germany. In *Extract 4* (above), she reported her interactions with individuals of different language and cultural backgrounds as a learning opportunity. Kodai’s (*Extract 2*) programme was in a language centre in London where he studied alongside other international students and he indicated learning from interactions with different partners. Takeshi, however, took part in a cultural exchange to the US in which intercultural interactions were described as limited in *Extract 6*.

*Extract 6 (post-exchange interview 1)*

Takeshi: I couldn’t so I’m not satisfied … er we didn’t have opportunity to enough opportunity to talk to American people it’s only twenty thirty minutes … it’s difficult to make friends that few minutes

In *Extract 7*, the limitations of this type of programme are also made clear by Ryota in the sharing aspects of their national cultures in presentation events followed by time limited communication opportunities.

*Extract 7 (post-exchange interview 1)*

Ryota: we only have had little time to do presentation only thirty minutes first we wanted to for one hour but we only have thirty minutes so we didn't do presentation but we did some demonstration for example educational snacks and origami … er I didn't have any chances [to talk to students]

This sharing of culture may be clearly associated with level 1 in terms of learning objectives since it supports basic conceptualisations of culture and risks encouraging stereotypes. It represents a contrived handling of culture, conceptualised around national characteristics and not driving towards deeper intercultural learning through interaction.

***Individual intercultural developments***

To clarify the developmental aspects, sequential data extracts from the longitudinal data collection are provided from Mayu, Yuki, Noriko, and Miki. These were selected as their accounts contained particularly meaningful illustrative data from which comparisons were insightful. Their data were also representative of insight from across the accounts following thematic comparisons in the analysis. Three took part in programmes characterised as multilingual and multicultural contexts while Mayu took part in a US cultural tour. This differentiation of programmes represented in these 4 accounts offers a comparison to support how intercultural development may be linked to particular types of exchanges.

To summarise their data, the four bar charts in *Figure 2* present these students’ individual overview of coding at particular points in the data collection cycle. These points were: (1) pre-SA interview, (2) post-SA interview 1, (3) post-SA interview 2 and FG (combined as the final parts of the data collection were close in time).

[Figure 2 near here]

In *Figure 2*, ICA development was not interpreted as taking place in Mayu’s account. It may be surmised this lack of development related to her cultural tour and the essentialist handling of culture and limited communication opportunities. In Miki’s account from a research-based programme in Hong Kong, there was also limited development. However, her account was characterised by level 2 throughout and she had a previous exchange experience, took classes in a local English conversation school, and engaged extensively in English self-study at the university. Her qualitative data, however, suggests some within-level 2 development took place. For Yuki (study and cultural tour, Malaysia) and Noriko (research-based, Germany), development was most notable through the course of the data collection towards level 2, although points from level 1 remained significant. Neither had been abroad before and both programmes took place in multilingual and multicultural environments. This is indicative of the non-linear development made clear in ICA’s design with students continuing to ‘fall back’ on level 1 characterisations whilst also making more references to level 2 as they develop (Baker, 2015). In part this was directed at perceived differences among Japanese people but it moved towards a view of other individuals as not solely defined by their national cultures. The sequential data extracts which follow aim to clarify the developmental claim, looking first at Mayu.

*Extract 8 (pre-exchange interview)*

Mayu: I want to see abroad abroad views so this this plan this project is /nandelo/(let me see) . er this project is learn I learn American's culture er I visited university and high school so because I do presentation on Japanese culture . my group was educational snack … American students are interested in Japanese culture

*Extract 9 (post-exchange interview 1)*

Mayu: schedule is nothing so the truth is three presentation is high school high school university but this I go to school and university so so I don't like schedule … this project is not recommend because er not schedule … American students are very interested in policy [politics] but we are not not interested in policy … er Japanese policy [politics] is so so …

*Extract 10 (post-exchange interview 2)*

Mayu: I talk with many many countries friends and I have many countries friends so er because I want to know er . a variety of culture so because er food is very difficult many people er many countries I like some food so I want to know many countries food

Mayu took part in the same US cultural tour as Takeshi and Ryota, which in Extracts *6* and *7* was criticised for the limited communication enabled. As shown in *Extract 8*, there was a requirement to deliver presentations encompassing stereotypical aspects of Japanese (national) culture in staged cultural exchange events. This approach framed culture in essentialism with a focus on cultural differences at a national level (*Extracts 9* and *10*). Mayu continued to refer to national labels in her descriptions of experiences, associated with level 1. Intercultural developments in her post-exchange interviews were hard to see. This indicated that the intercultural learning potential of programmes like hers is limited, and this is supported by her post-SA account coded by items in level 1 on the ICA framework. More substantial learning was seen in Yuki’s account. The following examples demonstrate that Yuki’s SA experience was an important learning opportunity.

*Extract 11 (interview 1, translation)*

Yuki: I also always wanted to go abroad. Also, I heard that experiencing foreign cultures and learning different perspectives would change my own way of thinking.

*Extract 12 (post-sojourn interview 1, translation)*

Yuki: It was normal that things were different. When I came across different custom, I tried to ask someone about it, think about it myself and understand. Even in Japan there are people who have different styles. I tended to keep a distance from those people, but I started making effort to approach these people.

*Extract 13 (post-sojourn interview 2, translation)*

Yuki: Mindset towards others. It became less frequent to feel like "Why they can't understand?" and I became able to embrace unexpected, new ideas from others.

Yuki’s programme took place in a non-Anglophone setting and involved interactions with students from diverse linguacultural background (from Malaysia and elsewhere) on an international university campus. He had expressed an openness for intercultural learning pre-SA (*Extract 11*). Post-SA, in *Extract 12*, he acknowledged differences among not only those he met in Malaysia, but also among Japanese people, challenging perceived fixed links between culture and identity. This implied that nationality was not a principal determining factor in individual identity and that he recognised differences among people. It was interpreted as a development to level 2 in how he linked language, culture, and individual identities. In *Extract 13*, Yuki reported adapting to new ideas that he encountered overseas. His multicultural and multilingual SA environment, therefore, provided substantial intercultural communication experiences he perceived as meaningful.

Noriko also participated in SA characterised in this way.

*Extract 14 (interview 1)*

Noriko: some American people er are very kind and they laugh at my jokes very much but in case of England people they didn't laugh at my jokes ((laughs)) for example for example so er fly soup joke I did that I did that to Tom he didn't laugh at it and he said what what mean and I called so I freeze oh I see so however in case of American people Daniel or Sam they laughed at that so it's different between American and England

*Extract 15 (post-exchange interview 1)*

Noriko: it's new thing for me and when I talk with people when I talk when I talk foreign people I could I can know the new thing it's very new thing is interesting and sometimes the culture the thing which sometimes foreign countries knowledge is not similar to us and it's strange sometimes they are strange for me but those knowledges give me new ideas and sometimes my sometime those knowledges well so sometimes those knowledges er broken my obstacles so I like talking with people and I like observe those foreign countries culture

*Extract 16 (post-exchange interview 2)*

Noriko: sometimes we have the other what can I say so fundamental thing so for example I'm Japanese people so I know about Japanese I work or I play with the Japanese moral and we and I think or I we I consider about something with Japanese ethics however in people the foreign people do same so in the case of Germany people Germany people think about something with Germany ethics or Germany moral as a result sometimes the fundamental thing is different sometimes I think the idea will be opposite

Noriko took part in a research-based programme in Germany in which she had numerous learning and social opportunities in which English was used. In her pre-SA interview, she provided data at level 1 interpreted as basic conceptualisations of culture (*Extract 14*). Changes were identified in Noriko’s discourse in relation to acceptance of differences and awareness of differences among individuals in level 2 in *Extract 15*. While not categorical, it seems likely that her varied intercultural communication experiences in study and social contexts overseas contributed to an expanded view. However, Noriko referred to her nationality (*Extract 16*) to explain her own thinking and behaviour, reflecting a limited recognition of diversity in Japan and maintaining an essentialist position by defining individuals encountered by perceived national stereotypes. In the later collection stage, *illustrated by Extract 16*, there was, however, more enthusiasm for such intercultural opportunities, despite continued stereotyping, and a representation of national cultures as defined by perceived conduct of people rather than surface level cultural items.

Unlike Noriko and Yuki, Miki had previous international experiences, including SA.

*Extract 17 (interview 1)*

Miki: sometimes when I talk with foreign country people they have they have very interesting thinking I think so I want to I want to know I want to talk with many foreign country people and I I want to know many thinking

*Extract 18 (post-exchange interview 1)*

Miki: when I took the class in Hong Kong many students often ask the teacher ask them questions in the classroom so I think many I think there are no there are no students who didn't speak in the class so . I think it is very it was very interesting and it was it was good because many students could share the question

*Extract 19 (post-exchange interview 2)*

Miki: the most thing is I was er talking with many people in English er I could talk I could talk with speak with mm many people in English … I could er and I /nandelo/{let me see} mm I could speak er I could talk with people didn’t know I didn’t know so I really er . a ((laugh)) I really mm I became I got a confidence to talk with many people … with people of different nationalities

Miki expressed enthusiasm for intercultural learning opportunities on her Hong Kong research SA as potentially leading to new perspectives in her pre-sojourn interview, shown in *Extract 17*. Post-exchange, she was positive about her meaningful intercultural encounters and friendships with international students on her programme, illustrated by *Extract 18*. Many of her intercultural interactions were outside formal educational settings when reflecting on her experience staying in a student dormitory. It may be that these encounters helped her intercultural perspective to develop as she identified the people she spent time with as influenced by diverse factors from which she could learn as her confidence grew (*Extract 19*). Her interview data tended not to be coded at the lower level of the model as she generally expressed more advanced intercultural positions. Miki’s intercultural learning has been a foundation of other intercultural experiences, but the personally perceived meaning and diversity in communication in which she took part may be interpreted as reinforcing her intercultural perspectives in relation to level 2 and towards level 3.

In sum, as Yuki, Noriko, and Miki progressed through the data collection, it was clear that they were open to engagement with individuals of any background, not limiting their cultural learning by a ‘target’ culture. It implied some movement in learning towards deeper interpretations of culture. Mayu, on the other hand remained focused in the interviews on culture learning in simplistic terms. While it must be recognised that in all the accounts cultural differences tended to be expressed through a location-based approach, examples here offer evidence that multicultural aspects of exchanges can offer important intercultural learning opportunities.

**Discussion**

In answer to the first research question, mixed development of ICA was seen in how students conceptualised language, culture, and identity in communication from short-term SA. Some students simplistically linked between language, culture, and nation pre- and post-SA. For others, there was a shift in perspective towards level 2, beyond the cultural essentialism in conventional ELT and SA practices. These students demonstrated movement away from solely national characteristics towards awareness of diversity in identity. The research supports findings on the relevance of ICA levels 1 and 2 for educational settings (Abdzadeh & Baker, 2020; Baker, 2015; Yu & van Maele, 2018), highlighting level 2 as an outcome from SA intercultural learning in appropriate conditions. The research outcomes here also challenge SA perspectives which focus on contact with ‘target’ speakers from ‘target’ cultures, as outlined in the research framing (e.g., Cadd, 2012; Weier, 2009). Instead, the findings support increasing understandings of the importance of interaction with other international students on SA programmes (Csizer & Kontra, 2012; Schartner, 2016). Additionally, the findings contribute to research on developmental aspects of ICA, highlighting its relevance as a model for SA students as they develop from conventional and simplistic cultural understandings towards more intercultural positions, driven by their short-term SA experiences. The model may be more meaningful for SA students than survey-based evaluative tools, particularly those studying in multicultural and multilingual settings where interactions with ‘target’ culture individuals may be more limited than interactions with other SA participants.

Addressing the second research question, a broad distinction among exchange types was seen in the extent that intercultural learning was enabled. On one hand, there were programmes taking a fixed target culture (and language) approach in which contrived and limited intercultural interactions were framed in essentialism and risked reinforcing links between nation, language, and culture as inseparable (i.e. Mayu’s experience). In these SA practices, recognition of the temporal and constructed nature of ‘nation’ and ‘culture’ (e.g., Baker, 2015) is absent. Furthermore, they tend not to enable explorations among students as to what ‘culture’ may mean to them individually through social interaction. On the other hand, the language study, research-based, and cultural/study tours on international campuses led to more diverse intercultural encounters and more intercultural development, reflecting the accessibility and volume of contact with other international students as more significant than with local individuals (Csizer & Kontra, 2012; Kubota, 2016). Findings, thus, challenge a focus on ‘target’ language and ‘target’ culture learning which typifies much SA research (e.g., Cadd, 2012; Cubillos & Ilvento, 2018; Weier, 2009). Overall, the findings highlighted that opportunities for engagement in communication, and by extension learning, in multicultural and multilingual contexts led to more meaningful intercultural learning outcomes, which were related to the development of ICA (Baker, 2016).

Implications from the research and teaching include a need to re-evaluate the intercultural learning goals of some programmes where intercultural learning is not clearly enabled and where essentialist national ‘target’ culture practice may feature. In addition, given the currently limited understanding of intercultural learning on short-term SA programmes (Koyanagi, 2018), the research has potential implications for programme designers in highlighting where more intercultural learning may take place on different programme types. For all programmes, it may be useful to help prepare students by providing appropriate pre-departure learning support given the lack of a guarantee that exchange experiences alone result in significant intercultural development (e.g., Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012; Byram & Feng, 2004; Jackson, 2020; Messelink, van Maele & Spencer-Oatey 2015). Such learning may be especially beneficial for students on short-term SA programmes to develop from essentialist to more complex understandings in a more limited time-frame. Additionally, less essentialist approaches may more effectively prepare students for the diversity and unpredictability of culture and identity in intercultural communication using English in international contexts. Moreover, this preparation can be foundational for more effective longer-term learning from sojourn interactions and meaningful post-SA intercultural learning.

**Conclusion**

The qualitative research reported in this paper contributes to understanding of intercultural learning from short-term SA. The risk in intercultural research is decontextualisation of student experiences, which may not account for the complexity of individual experiences in diverse contexts. Students in this research were allowed space in the interviews to provide expansive individual data, and thematic connections here have led to insight. It was highlighted that intercultural developments, conceptualised by ICA, can take place as a result of short-term SA. However, the role of context is significant. More meaningful interactions in multilingual and multicultural contexts of learning in Anglophone and non-Anglophone settings led to more ICA development. This development was interpreted in changes longitudinally in the collection points in how students linked language, culture, and identity moving towards new conceptualisations, represented by higher levels of ICA. However, not all students demonstrated such significant developments through the course of the data collection. The research highlighted the need to support students’ intercultural development through adapted SA practices and learning support with greater focus on multilingualism and intercultural communication, rather than ‘target’ cultures and ‘local’ speakers.

Interpretations here are, however, challenged by the subjective and partial, self-reported data as the analysis was built on how students remembered and represented their experiences rather than the experiences themselves. Nonetheless, the research has aimed to be transparent and self-critical in how interpretations have been made and presented, and the detail in different experiences may provide worthwhile insights that ‘resonate’ with readers. In particular, the longitudinal research design and data underscore that ICA development occurs over time. Therefore, further research should examine intercultural development in relation to short-term SA over a longer period to see how intercultural learning may continue to develop and link to initial SA experiences. Additionally, given the importance of context, a wide range of settings and programmes, as well as, a full account of their influence should be provided in SA research.

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Table 1: Information about participants and their programmes.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pseudonym** | **Sex** | **Age** | **Year of****Study** | **Study programme** | **Length** | **Past overseas study?** |
| NorikoMarikoYukiMasaSayakaMayuRyotaTakeshiDaichiTomoMikiKaoriKiyokoMinamiKodai | FFMMFFMMMMFFFFM | 212119192121212321212419212121 | 331133233451221 | Research, GermanyResearch, GermanyCultural & study tour, MalaysiaCultural & study tour, MalaysiaLanguage study, PolandCultural exchange, USCultural exchange, USCultural exchange, USCultural exchange, USLanguage study, USResearch, Hong KongLanguage study, USCultural exchange, TaiwanCultural exchange, TaiwanLanguage study, UK | 1 month1 month10 days10 days3 weeks10 days10 days10 days10 days1 month1 month3 weeks7 days7 days3 weeks | NYNNYNNYNYYNYYN |

Table 2: Coding among students at different points in data collection.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Pre-exchange interview** | **Post-exchange interview 1** | **Post-exchange interview 2** | **Focus group** | **Total** |
| **1. Basic cultural awareness**  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Basic conceptualisation of culture | 4 | 2 | 5 |  | 11 |
| Cultural stereotyping and generalising | 14 | 12 | 5 | 3 | 34 |
| Individuals defined by their nationality | 3 | 3 | 6 |  | 12 |
| ‘Japanese’ as cultural reference  | 8 | 8 | 4 | 1 | 21 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **2. Advanced cultural awareness** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Accepting differences | 6 | 7 | 11 | 6 | 30 |
| Awareness of differences among individuals | 2 | 6 | 10 | 1 | 19 |
| Awareness of others’ culturally induced behaviour | 2 | 2 | 6 |  | 10 |
| Culture in deeper interpretation | 2 |  | 3 |  | 5 |
| Recognising common ground between cultures |  | 1 | 2 |  | 3 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **3. Intercultural awareness** |  |  |  |  |  |
| ICA | 1 |  | 1 |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Total | 42 | 41 | 53 | 11 | 147 |