Planning, implementing, and evaluating a non-essentialist training programme for study abroad in the Japanese HE context

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Abstract

Short-term study abroad (SA) programmes are often promoted as an effective way of developing English language skills and accessing opportunities for intercultural learning. Whilst pre-departure intercultural training is thought to play an important role in enhancing the potential for meaningful learning, overemphasis on essentialist framings of cultural difference may be counterproductive given the multicultural and multilingual composition of many societies. This paper reports on an action research project triggered by the perceived underdevelopment of SA training and essentialist educational practices observed in a university ELT setting in Japan. The research involved the systematic design, implementation, and evaluation of a non-essentialist SA training e-learning programme informed by research on intercultural awareness, intercultural citizenship, and English as a lingua franca. Findings from a qualitative evaluation of learning on the programme among 22 students revealed some emergent non-essentialist understandings of culture, new awareness of variability in English language use, and a perception that the course was useful for SA training. The paper contributes to understanding of the importance of moving away from essentialist learning in SA training by integrating content which recognises the learning potential of SA experiences in multicultural and multilingual settings.

Keywords: study abroad training, essentialism, intercultural citizenship, intercultural awareness, ELF awareness

Introduction

The importance of research-driven intercultural support for study abroad, such as pre-departure training (Jackson 2020; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012) and post-SA learning (Messelink, van Maele &

Spencer-Oatey, 2015), is now firmly established. However, many institutions and some practitioners still seem to assume that intercultural learning occurs automatically from time spent abroad (Jackson & Oguro, 2018), which means that intercultural support tends to be lacking or constructed in an ad-hoc way. A further issue is that much pre-departure support tends to be focused on acquisition of static cultural knowledge related to "target" national cultures and norms of standard language use (Fang & Baker, 2018). Such approaches, however, may not be conducive to the transformative aims of many SA experiences in terms of appreciating linguistic and cultural diversity and transforming students' self-perceptions and perceptions towards others (Byram, 2008). Given the multicultural and multilingual composition of many societies, it would seem more appropriate and conducive to intercultural learning if training were to place more emphasis on awareness of diversity among individuals in behaviour, values, and ways of thinking (Holliday, 2011), as well as awareness of variability in language use.

In the educational setting in this research in a Japanese higher education (HE) institution, there was an absence of pre-departure training, and SA learning outcomes took a distinctly essentialist orientation in that they were linked predominantly to students' observations about national cultures. Through an action research (AR) process (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014), this paper aims to define and clarify an educational "problem" interpreted in a particular setting and how an innovation was then planned, designed, and implemented, towards an evaluation of student perceptions and learning. Intercultural citizenship (Byram, 2008), intercultural awareness (Baker, 2015), and English as a lingua franca (ELF) awareness (Sifakis, 2019), outlined in subsequent sections, helped frame the innovation. Through reflective and critical engagement in AR involving a qualitative analysis of student learning on the training programme, the research shows how research-driven and meaningful learning can be provided for SA training as some transformation was seen in student perspectives towards both culture and language use. The paper highlights the importance in such training to avoid essentialist educational framings by integrating learning opportunities which recognise the learning potential of SA experiences as multicultural and multilingual. The pedagogical perspective and descriptive detail of the training programme may also offer a useful educational example for practitioners elsewhere embarking on their own processes of curricular change.

Beyond Essentialism in Intercultural Learning for Study Abroad

Within the field of language and intercultural education, essentialism can be seen in terms of the tendency to treat culture in terms of static knowledge of "facts" linked to homogenous national cultures (Fang & Baker, 2018), and to present behaviours, traits and characteristics among people or groups from a particular location as "essential to a particular, bounded community" (Alvaré, 2017, p. 34). Such fact-based learning, however, cannot prepare learners for the diverse reality of the societies in which they live or necessarily help them deal with unpredictable intercultural communication experiences during SA (Baker, 2015). While there are no "miraculous recipes" for intercultural learning (Dervin & Härkönen, 2018, p. 56), these conventional approaches to culture in learning around named destination cultures may be less successful and risk falling into an "essentialist trap" (Holliday, 2018, p. 6). Learning information about specific cultures may still be useful but it is unlikely to "confront or transform the learner's existing identity, practices, values, attitudes, beliefs, and worldview" (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 29). In contrast, a non-essentialist focus goes beyond target culture learning around culturally homogeneous countries to recognise diversity among individuals (Holliday, 2011; McConachy, 2018). SA pedagogical practices may lead to more effective learning, therefore, by shifting from essentialist approaches towards intercultural learning as transformative, conceptualised in this research as "transformational engagement" with learning content aiming to "decenter learners from their preexisting assumptions and practices" (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 29).

To direct learning towards transformation through awareness of the importance of non-essentialist perspectives, training courses may confront students with learning content which emphasises developing new understandings of diversity among individuals in behaviour, values, and ways of thinking (Holliday, 2011), beyond national characterisations (McConachy, 2018). In "decentring" students from existing cultural assumptions and practices, intercultural citizenship education (Byram, 2008) is potentially relevant for SA training. It aims to build awareness among students of citizenship beyond national borders, recognising a "need to respect and value diversity, and participation in and responsibility to communities at multiple levels from the local to the global" (Baker & Fang, 2021, p. 3). Intercultural citizenship education highlights the process of transformation as a "conscious and deliberate personal and social transformation flowing from the critical exploration, analysis and evaluation of self and other" (Porto, Houghton & Byram, 2018, p. 486). Criticality in analysis and reflection, therefore, may lead towards individual changes in self-perception and changes in relationships with other individuals (Byram, 2008). Students may be encouraged to engage deeply with learning content and then reflect on their own assumptions and perspectives (Berti, 2020), thinking about how their perspectives may change following engagement with learning content (Holliday, 2011; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

In this study, intercultural learning is also related to transformation through intercultural awareness (ICA) (Baker, 2015), as an additional and potentially important aspect of learning for SA students. ICA attempts to specify skills and knowledge for intercultural communication through variable language use (Baker, 2015) and is therefore likely to be relevant for communication in multilingual and multicultural SA contexts. The model is organised in three levels: (1) basic cultural awareness; (2) advanced cultural awareness; and (3), ICA. The levels build from a basic understanding of cultural contexts in communication to a more complex understanding of the dynamic role of culture going beyond nationally based cultural generalisations (Baker, 2015). While level three is an important learning aim, level two has been shown as relevant for learning outcomes in other educational findings (Abdzadeh & Baker, 2020; Yu & van Maele, 2018), and an important learning element of some SA experiences among Japanese students (Humphreys & Baker, 2021). Level two is characterised as an awareness of:

> "the relative nature of cultural norms; cultural understanding as provisional and open
> to revision; multiple voices or perspectives within any cultural grouping; individuals
> as members of many social groupings including cultural ones; common ground
> between specific cultures as well as an awareness of possibilities for mismatch and
> miscommunication between specific cultures." (Baker, 2015, p. 164)

Given the potential for SA in diverse contexts to lead towards level two, these items are potentially useful for SA training programmes to help guide course development, as well as helping in the interpretation of learning outcomes.

Language Awareness and ELF Awareness

In the context of pre-departure training for language learners, language awareness forms a particularly important part of intercultural learning. Given that the complexity of linguistic variation and dynamicity of real communication is likely to be far greater than what learners have been exposed to in their classroom-based learning, pre-departure training can help sensitise learners to issues of linguistic variation according to context and different sociolinguistic variables. During SA, it is highly likely that learners will not only interact with locals but also with peers from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In fact, such interactions may turn out to be more frequent as well as more meaningful than those with local individuals (Csizér & Kontra, 2012), and spending

time with other international students over local or co-national students may be preferred among some SA students (Mocanu & Llurda, 2020). In many SA settings, interactions are likely to involve the use of ELF, broadly defined as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often only option" (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7). Jenkins' (2015) recent definition of ELF is also relevant to characterise many SA multilingual communication contexts: "multilingual communication in which English is available as a contact language of choice, but is not necessarily chosen" (p. 73).

However, form-based language learning around Anglophone normative standards remains common in ELT (e.g., Baker, 2015). While such learning may be useful for students, fixing language use on such norms can overlook complexity in language use (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). As a result, student notions of sole legitimacy in native English speaker uses may be "deeply entrenched" (Seidlhofer, 2016, p. 21) based on these conventional language learning experiences. Moreover, students may not be aware of variability in effective communication using ELF in SA multilingual contexts, assuming that effective learning is "optimal" through interactions with local native speakers from destination cultures (e.g., Cadd, 2012). Indeed, SA interactions may be perceived negatively if they involve variable English use with other international students as well as with local individuals (who may themselves not use English in predictable ways) (Csizér & Kontra, 2012). Experiences in contexts of ELF communication, therefore, may present important opportunities for students to reconceptualise their understanding of English use in intercultural communication contexts.

A useful pedagogical aim for SA training would be to build awareness and acceptance of variability in English language use. From this awareness, confidence may also develop in using English on SA, where adaptation, accommodation, and negotiation of meaning in communication can be important. The concept of ELF awareness (Sifakis, 2019) involves forming new perspectives towards both language use and how ELF discourses may be differentiated from traditional normative representations of English language use. Learning about ELF-oriented interactions and some underlying communication strategies (Sifakis, 2019) may then be useful for student approaches to communication in multilingual SA contexts. As SA settings may provide students with opportunities to "cultivate skills and dispositions for dealing with linguacultural diversity" (Kimura, 2019), finding ways to bring ELF awareness into training courses is potentially useful.

Drawing together ELF and intercultural learning, Baker (2012) developed an online course on intercultural awareness in a Thai university setting, including instruction on English use in global contexts. The 15-hour online course led to positive learning outcomes in intercultural learning and awareness of global English use. In a syllabus for SA training, Kural & Bayyurt (2016) set up an 8-week training programme in Turkey to develop awareness of plurality of Englishes in global contexts and intercultural competence through exposure to ELF-aware resources as well as challenging student ideas around global culture and ELF, leading to intercultural learning and ELF awareness. The role of ELF awareness in SA preparation was also significant in findings that SA students developed a view of using ELF as more relevant for communication than attempting to imitate native English speakers (Mocanu, 2019). ELF awareness is likely, therefore, to be important for SA students given diversity among individuals and in English use in multilingual and multicultural SA contexts.

The paper now outlines the AR process and explains how a non-essentialist framework was integrated within a pedagogical innovation.

The Study

Educational context

The research took place at a non-language major university in Japan where intercultural learning through SA participation and English language learning were promoted in university internationalisation policies. SA programmes available included English language study, research programmes, and cultural exchanges, from ten days to four weeks and taking place in a variety of international settings. There was typically a wide range of English communicative ability among students participating in SA programmes (159 in 2018/2019), many of whom had limited prior intercultural communication experiences. SA policy aims on the institution's website included: "gain a global perspective"; "experience different ways of living and thinking in different cultures"; "develop a flexible mind"; and, "develop an ability to collaborate from both local and global perspectives." However, SA training was not provided in the setting and post-SA requirements adopted an essentialist framing (described later). A new intercultural training course for SA preparation was developed, supported by university management keen to expand SA support. The course contained eight individual units covering SA and intercultural topic areas and was established as a credit-based elective option for SA students (outlined later). The AR in this paper focuses on how that course was developed, implemented, and experienced by students in the setting.

Action research

Educational AR enables a critical examination of educational practices in an interventionist approach aiming for positive educational change (Burns, 2015). Such research, situated in particular institutional educational practices and researcher observations, commonly takes place through a process of observing, planning, acting, and reflecting (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014). The application of AR here began with an observation stage to build a study focus by examining institutional educational practices, SA support mechanisms, people (i.e., students and international department staff), and documents (university website, SA promotional material) (Richards, 2003). There followed a planning stage to develop an educational intervention. The acting stage involved implementing the intervention before the final cycle stage of evaluation and reflection (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014) which involved observing the intervention in practice to understand the extent that the intervention had led to the intended educational improvement (Burns, 2015).

Through the AR process outlined in this paper, I (researcher and teacher in the setting) attempted to address the following question:

> How can a non-essentialist intervention be developed and be made successful for SA
> training in a university ELT context?

Firstly, I made research observations on SA educational practices in my role as a teacher at the university working with SA students and the university's international centre. This role offered an important insider perspective; however, it also resulted in a tension between my positioning as a teacher and objective researcher perspectives (Hammersley, 2006). My use of first-person emphasises my own narrative as a teacher and researcher constructing research and interpretations on educational practices in my particular context (Heikkinen, Huttunen & Syrjälä, 2007). I therefore acknowledge my interpretations on educational practices as partially subjective, though both researcher and insider perspectives are potentially important for interpretations in AR (Burns, 2015).

In the research planning stage, following observations, I developed a conceptual orientation for a pedagogical framework by operationalising a definition of an educational problem formulated in my

observations. Based on the defined problem, I then attempted to build an innovation to impact on SA instruction. Next, I conducted a qualitative course evaluation around how students had interacted with the pedagogical framework as well as their perceptions towards the course content and design. The objective was to analyse student work and reflect on what had, and had not, been effective in the implementation of the framework, and not to explicitly "track" intercultural learning. Examining the intervention in how effectively it implemented the pedagogical framework was important, as with all new intercultural programmes (Borghetti & Beaven, 2018), and it was also useful to examine how students in the setting worked with e-learning content and design (Berti, 2020). Data comprised a total of 162 reflections from across eight units (students completed a reflection at the end of each course unit) (Appendix A) and 21 end-of-course feedback entries (Appendix B). Following the evaluation, I considered course adaptations and enhancements as part of the AR process of reflection. As such, the research focus is one iteration of the course in one action cycle as I sought implications for future iterations of the course.

Table 1 *Overview of the students*

Student	Age	Gender	SA setting	SA length (weeks)	Past SA experience?
1	20	F	Philippines	3	N
2	19	M	UK	3	N
3	19	F	UK	3	N
4	21	M	Philippines	4	Y
5	20	M	UK	2	N
6	20	F	Philippines	4	N
7	23	M	US	3	Y
8	22	M	Malaysia	3	Y
9	21	M	Philippines	3	N
10	20	F	Malaysia	3	N
11	21	F	UK	3	N
12	21	F	UK	2	N
13	20	M	UK	3	N
14	21	M	US	3	Y
15	20	F	UK	4	N
16	20	M	UK	4	N
17	20	M	UK	2	N
18	21	F	Malaysia	3	Y
19	20	M	UK	2	N
20	21	M	UK	3	N
21	21	M	UK	2	N
22	21	F	Australia	2	N

Analysing the student data

I conducted content analysis of the student data. On student perceptions, the research orientation relied on interpretations of wide-ranging perspectives; as such, the data were approached inductively (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). However, on learning outcomes and the extent that the pedagogical objectives could be seen in the student discourses, predetermined codes were used around intercultural learning and ELF awareness. Course unit reflections were largely written in

English and end of course feedback largely in Japanese. Therefore, some translation work was required. I used machine translation through DeepL online translator (https://www.deepl.com/) to aid in the translations and speed up the process. I then reviewed all translations and Japanese language support was available from a colleague to check my interpretations represented the form and content of the original discourses. The data were imported to the qualitative analysis software NVivo 11 and I worked with the student reflections and feedback there to code items based on my interpretations.

Research participants

In all, 22 students were involved in the course. Providing data for this research evaluation was not compulsory but all students consented with the guarantee their anonymity would be protected. Some diversity among the participants was provided in gender, age, SA setting and length, and past SA experiences (see Table 1).

While relevant for SA outcomes, additional information (e.g., study discipline, programme type) is not included in this table since it was not considered relevant to the AR focus on the SA training course itself.

Findings

The findings are organised according to the AR process of observing, planning and acting, and reflecting. Firstly, I outline my observations in the university context to provide grounding for the subsequent planning and acting. There, I provide a description of the intervention before I evaluate the student data, divided by student perceptions and learning outcomes.

Observation: The educational problem

In my role as a teacher on-site, I observed that pre-departure SA support provided by the non-teaching international department consisted of generic advice about going abroad. The department did not have systematic measures in place to evaluate the quality of SA programmes offered or intercultural learning taking place, reflecting the lack of institutional examination measures elsewhere in Japan into the quality of SA learning (Koyanagi, 2018). Among returnees, I informally observed that some transformative learning experiences appeared to have occurred when they talked to me about their SA experiences in the university's self-access centre. However, in formal post-SA requirements, in which students reported on their experiences in presentations for study credit, the international department expected a focus on SA destination national cultures. I observed from student reports to me, as well as participation in these presentation events, that minimal direction was provided. The following examples (used anonymously with explicit permission) were typical of the majority of comments in those presentations, which tended to be essentialist:

> *"I thought Indian people would eat with their right hands, but Indian people eat with fork and knife at the table."*

> *"Canada people are hasty. They are often late."*

The comments also included cultural comparisons along national lines and singular stereotypical characterisations of Japanese national culture:

> *"We are Japanese people and very shy. American people are more active."*

In addition, there was a tendency to group together non-Japanese national cultures under the label "foreign":

> *"Foreign people are active. I got a lot of energy and courage."*

> *"I learned differences between Japanese and foreigner peoples' thinking."*

It was also common to see ethnocentric comments:

> *"When I was abroad, I was able to feel the goodness of Japan."*

I saw such comments as problematic when viewed as SA learning outcomes since they did not clearly link to the kind of transformative learning aimed for in many SA experiences. Indeed, there was a contradiction between this educational approach and the stated SA policy aims in the university (see "Educational context" section). Furthermore, the lack of post-SA educational support neglected research findings on the importance of post-SA support to help students unpack their experiences (Messelink, van Maele, & Spencer-Oatey, 2015), thus representing a further deficit in the educational provision. Therefore, I interpreted and defined an educational problem around SA practices at the university as not adequately representing or addressing intercultural learning in conceptual or pedagogical ways.

Planning and acting: Implementing an intervention

Based on the educational problem interpreted, I attempted to build an educational solution to impact on SA training in the educational setting. I selected an independent e-learning approach over a more traditional face-to-face course from an organisational perspective to address the challenges of setting up a credit-bearing course for students across academic years from different faculties taking part in SA at different times of the year. As such, students could start working through the course at any point during the academic year. However, creating learning opportunities on such a course presented potential challenges. Firstly, intercultural aspects may not be adequately considered in e-learning task design (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013) and there may be "overly optimistic" assumptions that the use of e-learning leads unproblematically to intercultural learning (Berti, 2020). It was necessary, therefore, to effectively conceptualise intercultural learning (e.g., Byram, 2008; Baker, 2015) and to formulate a conceptualisation of English language use appropriate for the argumentation provided in the framing of the innovation (Jenkins, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2011; Sifakis, 2019). It was then important to carefully select and develop content within the pedagogical framework for online delivery (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

A further issue was that engaging with complex themes and content independently would potentially be challenging for some students. Indeed, there is a need on such courses for teachers to support students to gradually make sense of the intercultural learning areas (McConachy, 2018), as well as offering guidance and training in tech-based learning since not all students may be aware of how to use their devices for educational purposes (Berti, 2020). The role of teachers on such courses, therefore, is both to facilitate learning through the careful design of tasks within a pedagogical framework and to offer ongoing support. This support was provided through the tutorials, email contact, office visits by students, monitoring task completion and following up with individual students about any learning issue identified, either around content or course delivery method.

Course design

In content, I utilised a range of interactive audio, video, image, and text-based resources, hosted on

the online learning platform Moodle. While the majority of resources were newly made for this course, the course may also be seen as an adaptation of Baker's (2012) use of e-learning to develop ICA among Thai university students. I adapted some topics and reflective questions from that course, supported by educational resources in Japan (e.g., Abe, Nebashi, Sasaki & Shaules, 1998; McConachy, Furuya & Sakurai, 2017; Shaules & Abe, 1997). The course outline, therefore, attempted to build on educational developments in the area, acknowledging how they were designed based on related pedagogical perspectives and recognising the ongoing utility in adapting and applying these developments to new contexts.

The course comprised eight learning units: (1) Researching study abroad; (2) What is culture?; (3) Intercultural communication; (4) Cultural stereotypes; (5) Individual and culture; (6) Exploring my own culture; (7) English as a global language; and, (8) Intercultural awareness. The content, which may be useful for other SA practitioners in the process of developing or adapting their own SA intercultural training, is outlined in detail Appendix C and includes some sample tasks. I scaffolded the units through a detailed course orientation, extensive feedback of tasks, linked translated glossaries, activity instructions and lengthier texts in English and Japanese, and subtitles on video content. The units were supported by two pre-SA one-to-one tutorials to check progress, address any learning issue, discuss course content, and provide any other SA support.

Following engagement with learning content, students reflected at the end of each unit on what they learnt, what was perceived as interesting or important to their SA preparation, how content was perceived as individually relevant, and how pre-existing perspectives may have been challenged (Byram, 2008; Holliday, 2011; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). An element of social reflection took place by completing an online forum reflective task and then completing a discussion task using guiding questions with a teacher in the self-access centre. These speaking reflective tasks may have been effective if used with non-teaching individuals, however, it was important within the institution to promote self-access centre usage on campus and it was a useful opportunity for students to use English in meaningful discussions with teachers staffing the facility (I had informed teachers of the course aims). These shared reflections led to an independent self-reflective writing task to be completed in English or Japanese (Appendix A). While the reflections contained items relevant to intercultural learning, students were not awarded grades based on intercultural learning taking place; rather, grading was based on task completion and length of reflective writings.

Finally, to acknowledge that intercultural learning takes place around SA experiences and is not limited to the boundaries of the time spent overseas (Jackson 2020; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012), I included some post-SA content and tasks. The inclusion of post-SA aspects aimed to help students unpack their experiences, link learning on the course to the SA experiences, and help students formulate new learning objectives (Jackson & Oguro, 2018; Messelink, van Maele, & Spencer-Oatey, 2015). The course culminated in a post-SA poster presentation, made with teacher support, in which students reported on their SA experiences. However, the evaluation as part of the AR reflection process is primarily focused on the pre-departure units and content.

In the academic years 2020-2022, SA programmes were postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this e-learning mode of course delivery and course character offer potentially meaningful self-access intercultural training in home contexts given the shift to e-learning brought about by the pandemic, as well as intercultural education for students unable to participate ordinarily in SA programmes. Finally, learning objectives, content, and course design outlined would also be relevant for students on longer programmes if expanded with content on practical matters about being based overseas for longer.

Reflecting: Evaluating the Course

In this section I summarise the evaluation, illustrated by student data, divided into two sections: (1) student perceptions; and (2) learning outcomes. The illustrations were selected as representative examples from the data linked to particular codes. As students were permitted to use Japanese, some illustrations are highlighted as approximate translations.

Student perceptions

Student perceptions of the design and usefulness of the course are included as important feedback on the course itself, not as conceptual data next to the orientation of the innovation.

Table 2 *Coding on student perceptions*

Student perceptions	Number of codes
Positivity towards learning content	32
Perceptions of course as useful	39
Independent e-learning course design as effective	28
Possible learning challenges	19

Experiences working with independent e-learning course format were perceived by some students, including students 8 and 3, as effective for learning:

> Student 8: *This program requested us "self-learning." So we were able to "learn how to learn" by ourselves.* (End of course feedback).

> Student 3: *By using Moodle, it was easy to learn what I needed to do and study.* (End of course feedback).

Some students perceived the course as useful and important for their SA programmes and personal development, represented by student 5:

> Student 5: *We need this [e-learning course] program. If we don't have it, probably, we couldn't live [be successful] in this situation [SA].* (Unit 7 reflection).

In addition, there was positivity towards content on the course and reports of students engaging positively with intercultural content, observing "new ways of thinking", illustrated by student 17:

> Student 17: *It's been great that I was able to take this course and learn new ways of thinking and understanding that I had never thought of before.* (End of course feedback, translation).

However, there was some resistance towards the course design seen in perceived study challenges among students, including student 12 who implied a preference for a discussion-based approach:

> Student 12: *I think there is a lot of homework [independent tasks] … I wanted to speak to the teachers more.* (End of course feedback, translation).

In sum, the course was perceived positively by most students and many worked effectively through the e-learning tasks, providing reflections linked to learning content. However, other students reported a preference for discussion-based learning. I also noticed that a minority of students worked through content quickly without engaging deeply with the interactive content, seen in Moodle student tracking and copied items from learning content to unit reflections, and represented among 19 coding references for *Possible learning challenges*. As such, some students may have required more support with the content delivery and tasks, as well as support with the learning content.

Learning outcomes

Focusing on the pedagogical framework in learning outcomes, the course appeared to lead to some awareness of non-essentialist thinking and ELF awareness, though there were also some essentialist comments in student reflections.

Table 3 *Coding on learning outcomes*

Learning outcomes	Number of codes
Intercultural learning	65
ELF awareness	21
Essentialist comments	16

Intercultural learning

Following learning content on cultural stereotyping, there were reports of new awareness of stereotyping risks and intentions to avoid them, illustrated by student 5:

> Student 5:   *This unit was very interesting for me. Because "stereotype" is my new favorite word. I have a lot of other countries stereotypes right now. But I will throw away them and think about "culture" again with talking foreign people.* (Unit 4 reflection).

The above extract could be linked to raising awareness of diversity in cultural perspectives among people, towards ICA: level two (i.e., multiple voices or perspectives within any cultural grouping) (Baker, 2015). In addition, there was evidence in the student reflections of awareness of the value and meaning in moving beyond perceived differences, and delinking culture and nation, also of relevance to ICA: level two (i.e., the relative nature of cultural norms) (student 7):

> Student 7:   *We need to transcend the differences between different nations and cultures.* (Unit 8 reflection, translation).

Further linking to level two, some students reflected on relationships between cultures and individuals with some going beyond the sole linking of individuals to their national cultures, which also linked to a "refashioning of national views" (Porto, Houghton & Byram, 2018, p. 486) in intercultural citizenship education, represented by student 20:

> Student 20:   *...it is possible for me to have stereotype. I have to be careful and focus on individuals. I mustn't ignore individual case.* (Unit 5 reflection).

Students also indicated awareness of how individuals may be members of multiple cultural groups, also linked to level two (i.e., individuals as members of many social groupings including cultural

ones), and remarked on awareness of differences among people within cultural groups, including their own (student 9):

> Student 9: *I learned that not everyone in a country has the same culture. I could understand which culture groups I belonged to. I would like to think about what kind of culture I have as an individual, rather than applying too much stereotypes.* (End of course feedback).

There were further examples of critical reflection on students' own cultural identities, reflecting intercultural citizenship and a focus on changes in self-perception, demonstrated by student 8 who talked about a need to reconceptualise understandings of nationality in Japan:

> Student 8: *In Japan we tend to underestimate our diversities ... Many Japanese live in foreign country, and many foreigners live in Japan. And of course, this foreigners could be Japanese later. So we should rethink on the definition of "Japanese."* (Unit 6 reflection).

Critical reflection was also interpreted from student 13 who observed some challenges moving from a small town to the university city where they noticed new behaviours among local students, reflecting ICA level two (i.e., the relative nature of cultural norms) and intercultural citizenship in understandings of culture beyond the national. They reported a decision, following unit 4, to be more accepting of perceived cultural differences:

> Student 13: *I know that cultural differences are different. I myself am a human from the countryside, who came out into the city, so it's difficult to accept cultural differences. However, I think it is important to respect each other through this unit, because cultural differences are commonplace. Before studying abroad, I decided to accept different people's lives by making my mind open through these things.* (Unit 4 reflection).

There was also some indication in the student feedback (student 1) that the content had led to some changes in how students planned to interact with new friends on SA, based on recognition of differences in communication styles on SA and within Japan:

> Student 1: *There are differences overseas as well as in Japan. So, by understanding well, I decided not to be confused because I couldn't understand something, but to communicate carefully…* (Unit 6 reflection, translation).

Based on the above extracts, some evidence was provided of transformation, related to ICA and intercultural citizenship. Several students reported new perspectives and plans to adapt behaviours on their SA programmes. However, it was unclear the extent that these claims led to different actions or behavioural changes on SA.

ELF awareness

In terms of transformation of language perspectives around ELF awareness, there were examples of emerging awareness and acceptance of diversity in English use in the reflections, represented by student 11:

Student 11:   *In English, there is great diversity, especially of accent. Japanese should recognize the diversity and learn many "Englishes."* (Unit 7 reflection).

While it was unclear in the above extract how emerging ELF awareness was linked to changes on SA, student 4 reported a change in communication approach on SA in starting to focus less on accuracy in English language use in SA communication experiences:

Student 4:   *When I speak English, I paid close attention to the details such as particles and grammar, but now I also try to make it less meaningful.* (End of course feedback).

The impact of ELF-oriented learning content on the course may also have been effective among some students, including student 19, in reducing anxiety about using English on their sojourns:

Student 19:   *By studying this kind of English before going on to study abroad, I became less anxious about whether I could speak English at the host country.* (End of course feedback).

The feedback from student 19 reflected an important aim of ELF awareness in building confidence about using English in ways which differ from common educational representations of normative English language use. Presenting content on the plurality of Englishes and ELF interactions and communication strategies was interpreted as potentially helping students rethink communication approaches in multilingual SA contexts. Moreover, as the data extract above (student 19) was from the post-SA data set, it indicated that ELF-oriented learning content may have been useful for sojourn communication experiences.

A further aim of utilising ELF-oriented content was to build awareness of the learning potential from interactions with other international students. Pre-SA, a perception appeared to emerge among some students, represented by student 17, of communication with non-native English speakers in multilingual SA contexts as representing learning opportunities:

Student 17:   *When I go to study abroad in the UK, I can get in touch with non-native speakers from a foreign country different from Japan, so I will cherish this opportunity…* (Unit 8 reflection, translation).

Essentialist comments

Despite some positive outcomes, there were also examples of students recycling unit content in the reflections, copying and pasting items from learning content. In addition, there were 16 examples of essentialist comments in the data set, as illustrated by student 16:

Student 16:   *The most important is to understand your country's culture before you go to study abroad. I thought it was important to understand such things because British culture is different from Japanese.* (End of course feedback, translation).

Linked to the above, student 18 also made an essentialist observation about homogeneity in Japan, comparing it with a general observation about people in Malaysia:

> Student 18: *Although it is something that is not experienced in Japan, Malaysian people are genetically mixed with various races. The friends I met also had different facial features. That is why they are very forgiving and interested in different cultures.* (End of course feedback, translation).

Post-SA, there were also examples of unchanged views towards English language, indicating that neither the pre-SA course or the SA experience had led to ELF awareness or rethinking of the students' own English use (student 14):

> Student 14: *I enjoyed visiting London. I was able to be experience authentic English there.* (End of course feedback).

Summary

Looking at student learning next to the pedagogical framework, the course may be seen as somewhat successful in how the framework was evident in student reflections. Linked to ICA: level two, some students provided reports of new awareness of risks associated with stereotyping. There were also examples of expanded views towards culture and identities among individuals, shown in awareness of problematic links between individuals and cultures in national characterisations. Students also reflected on their own cultural identities and reported some understanding of their identities as more complex than captured by national labels, reflecting an aim of intercultural citizenship education (Byram, 2008). Furthermore, there was evidence in the reports of students developing some ELF awareness and acceptance of plurality and variability in English use. However, there remained some examples among some students of essentialist perspectives in the reflections and end of course feedback.

Discussion and Implications

The educational problem observed and described in this research may be familiar to other teachers when looking at SA learning and support provisions in their own educational settings. The problem was characterised by SA initiatives handled by a non-teaching department, a lack of evaluative measures on the quality of SA programmes offered, an absence of appropriate pre- or post-SA learning support, SA learning outcomes linked to essentialist observations, a mismatch between institutional SA aims and educational practices, and therefore a failure to adequately represent or address intercultural learning conceptually or pedagogically. I became disillusioned with the approach taken, and as such, I wanted to destabilise the existing educational practices through the innovation.

Following implementation of the innovation, some transformative intercultural learning (Byram, 2008; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013) was seen towards non-essentialist perspectives. Several students reflected on stereotype-awareness, delinking individuals, nations, and cultures, as well as reflecting on complexities in their own cultural identities. Their reports were interpreted as useful for SA preparation and linked to ICA level two, contributing to findings of the relevance level two as an educational objective (Abdzadeh & Baker, 2020; Yu & van Maele, 2018). These changes also related to transformation in intercultural citizenship education (Byram, 2008) in the framing of the intervention, and supporting the importance of reflection in processes of change (Byram, 2008; Holliday, 2011; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). The course aims to decenter (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 29) students from assumptions and practices relating to culture appeared somewhat effective, as important aspects of intercultural citizenship education; however, the extent that changes occurred in student actions based on any new thinking was not clearly demonstrated. Nonetheless,

there were interpretations from the pre-SA unit reflections of new perspectives and adapted plans for how students intended to interact with others on their sojourns.

The pedagogical approach also aimed to challenge perspectives students may have had around English use through ELF-aware (Sifakis, 2019) learning content around plurality and diversity of English use in effective communication beyond sole links to Anglophone codified norms. In the student reflections, there was some evidence of emerging ELF awareness. There were also reports of increased confidence, pre-SA, about using English on their sojourns. Reports of changing perspectives towards both culture and language indicated that the implementation of the pedagogical framework was at least partially successful as students considered and re-evaluated their pre-existing assumptions around learning content (Byram, 2008; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). It may be theorised, if not made explicit, that by completing the course and shifting from essentialist target learning objectives, some students developed awareness of multicultural and multilingual aspects of SA as representing learning opportunities.

In terms of specific course adaptations, the evaluation indicated the independent e-learning course design was perceived as effective although some students appeared to require more teacher support working with the independent and e-learning design, as well as the learning content. Adaptations identified were not, however, connected to the learning content itself. As such, future iterations of the course are to include a "drop-in" period each week when the teacher is available to students for advice or study support. In addition, an introductory unit which students complete with teacher guidance to make clear the learning processes and course expectations may be useful. It may also be useful to adapt questions in the end of unit reflections, linking them closely to the idea of transformation. It could involve, for example, a question to encourage students to reflect on what they used to think before completing a unit, followed by a question on what they think following engagement with content. Such questions may help students identify and recognise changes in their perspectives, over basic questions such as, "what did you learn?" or "what was interesting?"

Finally, I designed the course for use among short-term SA students, but the challenging cultural topics and processes of critical reflection may be relevant to students on longer-term sojourns. In addition, to reiterate an earlier point, aspects of the course may be useful for intercultural education in home settings with sections specific to SA removed (i.e., unit 1) and reflective questions adapted. In a context of limited student mobility, helping students find ways to engage with intercultural learning in home settings towards developing intercultural perspectives is critically important.

Limitations

Limitations of this research include the use of end of course feedback which was problematic for research outcomes since these data were obtained post-SA. While the SA experiences themselves may contribute to changes in perspectives towards language and culture, it was made clear to the students that the feedback they provided should focus on their experiences on the course outlined. A further research limitation was the risk that the reflections contained repeated ideas from learning content rather than representing deeper reflection; therefore, the research findings are not a clear "sign of victory" (Dervin & Härkönen, 2018, p. 68). Outcomes from the evaluation are also limited by the relatively few students who have to date completed the course as well as omission of steps to link the course more methodically to intercultural learning by comparing the reflections with pre-course data. As such, claims of transformation are lacking, other than in my interpretations from student self-reports. I therefore acknowledge that interpretations and meaning constructed in this research are rooted in my experiences and subjectivity (Burns, 2015), although I have attempted to be analytically objective. However, my insider perspective was supported by my conceptual

awareness around SA and intercultural education, as well as a desire to improve teaching and learning in the university context, which I hope provides evidence of integrity in the research process.

Conclusion

In a systematic AR process, I have presented a rationale based on contextual observations and conceptual awareness around intercultural education for the planning, design, and implementation of an SA training programme, informed by ICA, intercultural citizenship, and ELF awareness. In doing so, I have provided an example of SA training which accounts for diversity among individuals in multilingual and multicultural SA contexts, as a non-essentialist alternative to traditional focus on products in language learning (i.e., knowledge of linguistic forms) and culture learning (i.e., knowledge of cultural facts) (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Following an evaluation of learning on the programme, some transformations in student perspectives towards culture and language were indicated, and there was a perception that learning on the course was useful for SA training. The intervention presented here may be useful as an educational example for other practitioners around connecting research with practice by incorporating conceptual and pedagogical understandings of intercultural and transformative learning.

To build on or modify conclusions developed in the AR cycle outlined here, it would be useful to initiate another AR cycle. It would also be useful to examine how such courses interact with SA experiences and the intercultural communication in which students are involved, given the lack of focus in this research on SA programmes themselves. A descriptive qualitative study to build understanding of how completing courses of this character can have positive implications for intercultural communication experiences on SA would be useful if contrasted with student data collected pre-course and post-SA. It may also be useful to contrast data from experiences on shorter and longer programmes. Such descriptive research may strengthen conclusions around how courses of this character are important to support SA learning.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Self-reflection writing instructions

Write a reflection about this unit. Answer these questions:

· What did you learn?
· What was interesting?
· How has the unit helped you prepare for study abroad?
· Why was the unit important?
· How is the learning content relevant to you as an individual?

Appendix B. End of course reflection instructions

Students evaluate each of the following four [translated] statements in two parts below:

1. I can research information about my study abroad destination country.
2. I can demonstrate independent learning skills through Moodle, self-access centre (SALC) use, and self-reflection.
3. I can talk about experiences and events relating to my study abroad experience.
4. I can talk about experiences and events relating to my own culture.

(A) Degree of achievement (students select one)

I can do this
I can do this to some extent
I have limited ability to do this
I cannot do this

(B) Please write your reasoning in 200-250 characters

Appendix C. Outline of the course and sample tasks

Unit 1 – Researching study abroad

Students complete a webquest task focusing on programme specifics to encourage research about individual programmes and individual examination of the students' own SA expectations and intercultural learning objectives, and plan-making for pre-SA independent learning.

Sample task: I asked several returnee SA students for practical information about their programmes as well as eliciting focused responses on the following: What was your most important experience?; What would you do differently?; What advice would you give a student about to go on the same programme?; Describe an important intercultural experience; Describe a successful experience using English. I noted down student responses and built a reading task around what they said.

Unit 2 – What is culture?

Students reflect on the complexity of understandings of culture through content on simplistic cultural conceptualisations and interpretations. Students look at cultural metaphors and compare ideas about cultural characteristics.

Sample task: Students explore some definitions of culture (from an online search, including essentialist and non-essentialist perspectives) and consider the extent they agree or disagree, providing reasons for their responses.

Unit 3 – Intercultural communication

Students examine how cultural understandings on fixed national lines may affect intercultural communication. The role of English in intercultural communication is also presented and students consider how people of diverse linguistic and cultural background may use English in diverse ways.

Sample task: Students reflect on an intercultural encounter and answer several questions: Who did you communicate with?; What language did you use?; What happened?; What did you learn about the other person?; Describe your feelings during the encounter; How do you imagine the other person felt?; What did you have in common with the person you talked to?; Why did you select this experience?; Describe any communication successes. (Task based on "Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters": https://www.coe.int/en/web/autobiography-intercultural-encounters).

Unit 4 – Cultural stereotypes

Students explore oversimplified statements about individuals and cultures, looking at stereotypes of particular national cultures including Japan, leading to reflection on why essentialism awareness is important.

Sample tasks: Students consider statements containing common stereotypes about different countries and consider the extent that they perceive the stereotypes as positive, and if they agree with the

statements (adapted from Abe, Nebashi, Sasaki & Shaules, 1999, Culture in Action). Then, students are invited to visit somewhere public (e.g., shopping centre, cafeteria, public transport) and quietly observe other individuals, answering some observational questions designed to help students identify stereotypes they may have.

Unit 5 – Individual and culture

The unit explores links between individuals, nations, and cultures to build understanding of differences among people beyond solely national associations. Students explore problems in singular representations of cultures and consider implications of singular representations of their own national cultures.

Sample task: Students watch "The danger of a single story" by Chimamanda Adichie (2009) (https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story) on the TED website (subtitles available in multiple languages). It presents a message on representations of individuals within national cultures. The video is followed by reflection on issues around singular representations of students' own national cultures.

Unit 6 – Exploring my own culture

Expanding on complexities of culture, students reflect on their individual identities and varied cultural groups in which they are members. Students also explore diversity in Japanese language use in different contexts.

Sample task: Students explore diversity in their own settings through a "Find someone who …" task, completed over an extended period (1-2 weeks). Students seek respondents who share characteristics outlined in a series of items and ask follow-up questions for elaboration next to each item. The aim is to collect different perspectives and then reflect. Items included: [find someone who…] has travelled overseas; has lived overseas; has a hometown in another country; is interested in a particular country; has different fashion style to you; has used English in the last week; regularly speaks another Japanese dialect; can speak a language which is not English or Japanese; has a friend in another country; is not shy; has had a successful intercultural communication experience.

Unit 7 – English as a global language

Students explore the global role of English and consider representations of English language in ELT. Reflecting on their understandings of native and non-native English uses, students consider issues of language ownership, standards, and variability in ELF use, and the implications of these areas for English use in communication on SA.

Sample task: Students select an ELT textbook and analyse it around the following questions: Which textbook did you select? Which countries are represented in the textbook? Does the textbook focus on standard English grammar? Can you see examples of different varieties of English? Can you find any examples of stereotypes? Do you think the book is useful for intercultural communication? Why/why not? What is good about the book? What is not so good?

Unit 8 – Intercultural awareness

The unit explores some practical skills for intercultural communication. Then, students reflect on SA contexts as multicultural and multilingual and consider how SA communication experiences may influence their understandings of culture and language.

Sample task: *Students focus on definitions and examples of accommodation, communication repair, code-switching, glossing over unknown language forms, asking for repetition and clarification, and following gist in an online matching task, before anticipating specific moments when such skills may be useful on SA.*