

Thai Students Developing Intercultural Sensitivity as Study-Abroad Program Buddies

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The IAFOR International Conference on Education in Hawaii 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Several empirical studies have examined the intercultural sensitivity of visiting overseas students in various study-abroad contexts. However, research on the intercultural sensitivity of native hosting students, including in buddy programs, where visiting students and local students are paired for purposes of intercultural exchange is lacking. Although such programs can have positive effects on participants, others warn that social relationships (between visitors and host nationals) can be unbalanced and superficial. Thus, understanding the factors that both facilitate and impede domestic students' intercultural sensitivity development in contexts involving buddy programs requires further investigation. The current project aims to examine the differential effects of intergroup contact on the willingness to interact between Japanese and Thai students, while investigating any change effects on hosts' intercultural sensitivity that occur. This paper provides an outline of the intended study.

Keywords: Intercultural Sensitivity, Intercultural Development, Buddy Programs

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Introduction

Given the limited domestic opportunities for Japanese university students to engage in intergroup contact, one promising treatment area for examining intercultural sensitivity is through STSA programs (defined as 1~8 weeks in length by Gaia, 2015). In spite of the fact that STSA programs are becoming increasingly popular in Japan (JASSO, 2019), relatively few STSA studies have measured Japanese sojourners' intercultural learning experiences (Koyanagi, 2018) and even fewer still have examined hosts' development. With the increase in STSA popularity and its recognition as a high-impact practice, finding ways to appropriately measure hosting students' intercultural sensitivity, in particular, is necessary.

Buddy programs involve placing students into intergroup pairings for various purposes including language practice, intercultural development, friendship, and for increased cross-culture support. While research on buddy programs have demonstrated that several positive effects on participants can occur in study-abroad programs (Nilsson, 2003), others warn that social relationships (between visitors and host nationals) can be unbalanced and rather superficial (Compiegne, 2021). Consequently, when left unchecked, these superficial relationships may end up hindering intercultural growth rather than promoting it. Thus, better understanding the factors that both facilitate and impede domestic students' intercultural sensitivity development in contexts involving buddy programs requires further investigation.

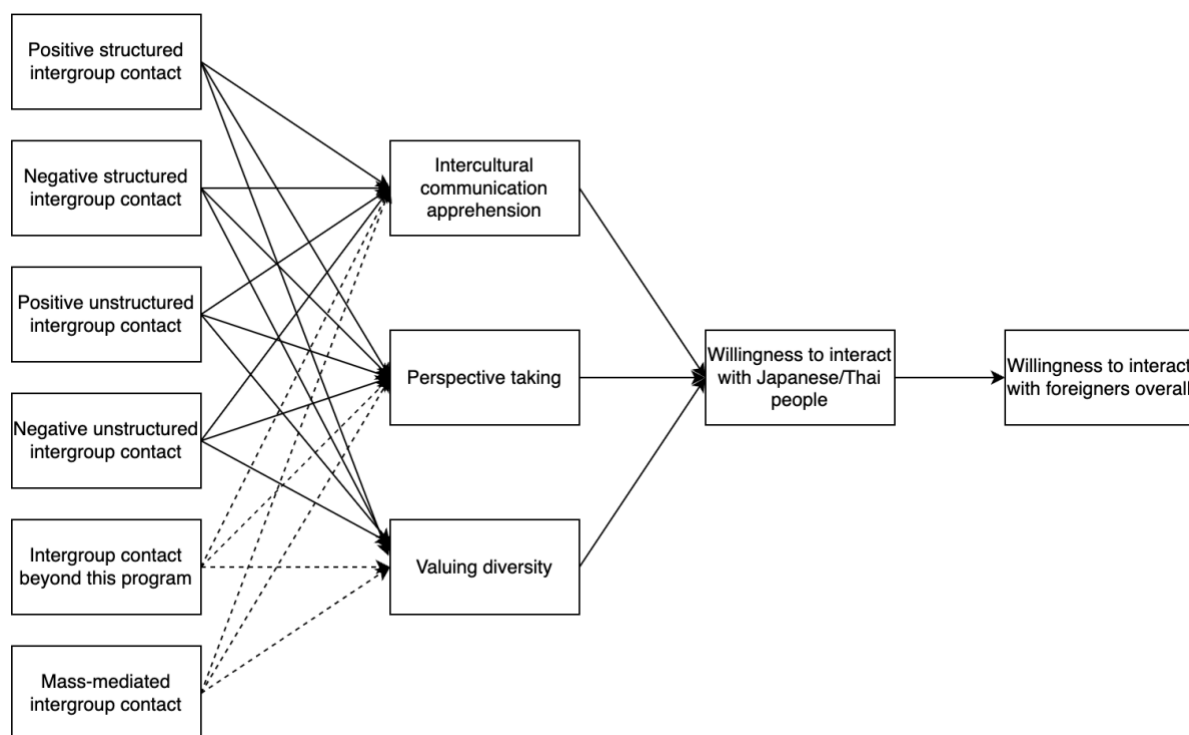
The purpose of this study is to examine the intercultural development of participating Thai student hosts in a STSA program. The following are the key research questions in this study:

- 1) What differences, if any, in intercultural sensitivity development occur for hosting students in a STSA buddy program?
- 2) How can study-abroad educators provide more effective development for international students to engage in intergroup contact?

Study Context

This study is being conducted between a Thai university in northern Thailand and a Japanese university in central Japan. This mixed-methods study will use several quantitative instruments in a causal model design (see the 'proposed model' below). Written surveys and semi-structured pre/post interviews will inform the qualitative perspective. Participants will be recruited through convenience sampling. Appropriate ethical clearance has already been received (No. 19-091) and all interested participants will be required to give informed consent.

The following is the proposed project model:



There are three distinct stages to this research project, which are outlined as follows:

Stage	Objectives
1	Data collection: literature review, needs analysis questionnaires, interviews
2	Data analysis of initial model: refinement of variables, structural equation modeling
3	Data analysis of refined model: multi-group structural equation modeling

Stage 1: Data collection.

The researcher will begin with an extensive literature review of current intergroup contact theories and practices, and establish how this relates to the Japanese and Thai study-abroad context. Data will also be collected through a detailed needs analysis questionnaire. Analysis of the data will aim to reveal: 1) students’ self-perceived intercultural attitudes, and 2) their self-perceived agency towards developing competence in intergroup contact situations. The purpose of this first phase is to then help to refine the selection of appropriate variables and items, as outline in the proposed model above, for the next stage of the study.

Stage 2: Data analysis of initial model.

Initially a pilot study will be conducted using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to confirm the structures of each scale and their fit. Items that don’t fit will be removed from the model.

Stage 3: Data analysis of refined model.

Quantitative data will also be collected after refining the piloted instrument in Stage 1 and Stage 2. Structural Equation Modeling will also be used to test the model fit.

Conclusions

This study proposes an original model of how a STSA program affects the international outlook of Thai university hosting students in a buddy program. This model should be one of the first attempts to quantitatively assess these beneficial effects, through a systematic evaluation of the variables that lead to them. It is anticipated that results from this study will contribute to better understanding hosts' intercultural sensitivity development through STSA programs.

Universities need to intentionally provide intercultural education opportunities beyond second language (L2) development through value-added "learning outcomes above and beyond that which may be achieved in domestic or traditional campus-based courses" (Tarrant, Rubin & Stoner, 2014, p. 141). Therefore, understanding how even STSA programs can lead to increased attitudes, knowledge and skills for effective intercultural communication is necessary given the increase recently of these programs. From a practical standpoint, this research is expected to provide clues for language teachers, coordinators, and other stakeholders to better support students' intercultural sensitivity development domestically and abroad.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge Nanzan University for generously supporting this project with a Pache Research Subsidy I-A-2 in 2023.

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