

Development of Intercultural Sensitivity: A Comparison of Domestic and Overseas English Language Programs

Yuki Amaki^{1*}, Yuko Nakano Tomoto², Yoko Shirasu³

¹ College of Economics, Aoyama Gakuin University, Tokyo, Japan

² Department of Commerce, Yokohama College of Commerce, Yokohama, Japan

³ Faculty of IT and Business, Cyber University, Fukuoka, Japan

*Corresponding Author: yukiamaki@gmail.com

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Abstract: *This study examined the development of intercultural sensitivity among college students in Japan, focusing on the differences between the impacts of domestic and overseas English language programs. Previous research has focused primarily on students with highly international orientations; however, this study examined students with low international orientation who participated in intercultural programs. The purpose of this study is to explore effective pedagogical approaches to promoting intercultural understanding and enhancing English language learning. The participants were divided into two groups: one that participated in a two-day residential English immersion program at British Hills in Japan, and another that participated in a two-week short-term study abroad program at Holmesglen Institute of TAFE in Australia. The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), based on Bennett's (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), was used to measure changes in intercultural sensitivity before and after program participation. The results indicated that both programs contributed to increases in intercultural sensitivity, however, students in the Holmesglen program demonstrated more significant changes, particularly in the later stages of the DMIS model, such as "Acceptance of Difference" and "Adaptation to Difference." The results of the study suggest that more extensive and immersive intercultural experiences, such as study abroad programs, are more effective in fostering deep intercultural understanding and enhanced adaptability. The study emphasizes that spending more time in intercultural environments is important for developing intercultural competence. While short-term domestic programs provide valuable introductory experiences, they may not be sufficient to achieve advanced intercultural adaptation and integration. The findings underscore the need for practical, immersive experiences to cultivate meaningful growth in intercultural sensitivity among students. Future research should explore the potential of long-term programs to enhance intercultural competence.*

Keywords: English Language Education, Intercultural Sensitivity, Intercultural Communication, Study Abroad Programs

1. Introduction

Research on intercultural communication in Japanese educational contexts has mainly focused on students with a strong international orientation, including those majoring in international studies, those who have studied abroad, or those who intend to study abroad. However, despite enrolling in internationally themed seminars or courses, there has been relatively little research focusing on students with low levels of international orientation. The purpose of this study is

to explore novel pedagogical approaches to fostering intercultural understanding and improving English language proficiency among college students with a low international orientation.

Over the past two years, our research team has implemented several programs at a domestic intercultural English language learning institution, focusing on students with a low international orientation. These initiatives were designed to provide students with opportunities to enhance their intercultural awareness while acknowledging the role of English language proficiency. Specific examples of program components include a one-day program whereby students participated in a short-term learning session, and a more immersive residential two-day program. To expand the scope beyond domestic intercultural experiences, the study also included students who participated in a two-week, short-term study abroad program in Australia. A comparative analysis was conducted to assess the development of intercultural sensitivity between these groups.

For the present study, the research team used a preliminary Japanese translation of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), derived from Bennett's (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The IDI consists of 60 survey items that were used to measure changes in intercultural sensitivity before and after students participated in the programs. The primary goal of the study was to develop a scale of intercultural sensitivity specifically designed for college students in Japan. To this end, the research team examined and contrasted the survey results obtained pre- and post-program, employing the translated version of the IDI. Participants in this study included students who participated in an overnight, two-day language training program at British Hills in Fukushima, Japan, as well as those who participated in a two-week short-term study abroad program in Victoria, Australia. The purpose of this research is to investigate the extent of changes in intercultural sensitivity among students in the domestic short-term program and those in the English-speaking study abroad program, and to assess the impact of each program on students' intercultural awareness and English language acquisition.

2. Research Questions

The present study examined the development of intercultural sensitivity among college students using the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) scale. The DMIS, developed by Bennett (1986), conceptualizes intercultural sensitivity as a progressive process that goes through six distinct stages. Hammer and Bennett (1998) used the DMIS as a grounding to develop the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) to assess intercultural sensitivity within this theoretical framework.

The six stages of the DMIS are as follows: Stage (1) "Denial of Difference"; Stage (2) "Defense against Differences"; Stage (3) "Minimization of Difference"; Stage (4) "Acceptance of Difference"; Stage (5) "Adaptation to Difference"; and Stage (6) "Integration of Difference." The first three stages reflect an ethnocentric stance, while the subsequent three stages indicate the development of an ethno-relative perspective. The survey used in this study was conducted using a Japanese-translated version of the IDI, as summarized by Yamamoto and Tanno (2002).

This study examines changes in intercultural sensitivity among college students at a university before and after participating in two different English language study programs. The programs were: (1) a two-day, one-night program at British Hills; and (2) a two-week study abroad program at Holmesglen. The analysis was conducted using a Japanese translation of the

intercultural sensitivity development scale. The study compares changes in students who participated in a two-day learning experience in Japan, designed to mimic an immersive British environment, with changes in students who studied in a local language school in Australia, accompanied by a homestay experience.

A study conducted by the research team of Barbuto Jr. et al. (2015) examined the attitudes of students with experience in studying abroad and found that those with a strong ethnocentric perspective were less interested in accepting and practicing local cultures and customs. Consequently, they were less likely to have a successful study abroad experience. Conversely, students showing lower ethnocentricity were more likely to have a successful program and to experience personal and professional growth during their study abroad experience. The results of the study provide a basis for testing hypotheses regarding the effects of study-abroad program duration on intercultural sensitivity. Specifically, it was predicted that participants in the two-week study abroad program in Australia would demonstrate significant differences in their levels of intercultural sensitivity compared to those who participated in the two-day program in British Hills. The prediction was based on the hypothesis that the group will show significant progress in Stage (4) of the DMIS model, the Acceptance of Difference stage, and beyond. This assumption is based on the understanding that in contrast to the learning environment in their home country, where English may not be the primary language of instruction, students in the study abroad program are required to utilize English in all facets of daily life. Moreover, the opportunity to live with host families was expected to facilitate a shift from an ethnocentric mindset to a more culturally open perspective, helping them to better accept cultural differences.

In Stage (5) – Adaptation – students were expected to develop a deeper understanding of the cultural differences between Australia and Japan. The process was expected to foster the development of a more adaptable mindset that can help them better understand the viewpoints and behaviors of others. Although the study abroad period is limited to only two weeks, participation in the short-term study abroad program was expected to contribute to the further development of intercultural sensitivity and bring about psychological changes such as increased adaptability and openness to cultural diversity.

3. Research Method

The researchers conducted an online survey using a Japanese translation of the International Sensitivity Development Scale, targeting a college in the Kanto region of Japan. The survey was conducted with two groups of participants: 22 students who participated in the two-day residential intercultural understanding program at British Hills (hereafter referred to as BH) and 13 students who participated in a two-week study abroad program at Holmesglen Institute of TAFE in Victoria, Australia (hereafter referred to as Holmesglen). Because the sample size in this study is small, the generalizability of the results is limited. Therefore, this issue is considered to be a valid topic for ongoing research.

In the BH program, students were required to communicate exclusively in English, usually over both days, in order to improve their English language skills and develop intercultural sensitivity. The program included activities such as baking traditional British sweets and receiving lessons about different international cultures. Students in the BH program stayed in the same residence hall and shared rooms in groups of approximately three to four. Meanwhile, students in the Holmesglen program lived with local families. The Holmesglen program is designed to improve English proficiency and foster proactive communication skills through

interaction with local students and teachers. In addition to English training, students also received hospitality training and underwent other educational experiences.

Students completed a pre-program survey several weeks prior to their respective programs, followed by an online post-program survey of identical questions within one week of program completion. The survey included 56 items designed to assess six orientations toward cultural differences and similarities, using a four-point response scale for all items except for the basic demographic questions. In this study, four survey items relating to religious awareness of “universal values” were excluded because the unfamiliar terms used made them difficult for students to understand.

4. Data Analysis

This study assessed changes in intercultural sensitivity before and after participation in activities conducted during a two-day residential language program at British Hills and a two-week study abroad program at Holmesglen Institute of TAFE. Questionnaires were distributed both before and after program participation. Participants responded using a four-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = somewhat agree, and 4 = strongly agree), with 4 representing the highest level of agreement. Mean scores were then calculated. Table 1 presents 7 items out of 56 items that showed the most significant differences in the college students’ responses. The results showed that there were variations in the results for the various survey items when comparing the mean scores across the different stages.

Table 1: Changes in Mean Scores Before and After the Program

	Survey Items	BH [Two-day residential language program in Japan.]			Holmesglen [Two-week study abroad program in Australia.]		
		Before	After	Change	Before	After	Change
1	There are cultural differences around me.	2.82	3	0.18	2.44	3.08	0.64
2	In general, other cultures are inferior to my culture.	1.64	1.27	-0.37	1.78	1.62	-0.16
3	People from other cultures are less intelligent than people from my culture.	1.59	1.27	-0.32	1.78	1.38	-0.4
4	Despite differences in appearance, all people are basically the same.	2.95	3.45	0.5	3.11	3.62	0.51
5	All people are basically the same.	2.95	3.09	0.14	2.78	3.62	0.84
6	I feel that there are advantages to being a member of more than one culture.	2.95	3.18	0.23	2.67	3.46	0.79
7	I behave differently when I am with people from other cultures than when I am with people from my own culture.	3.09	3	-0.09	2.44	2.85	0.41

4.1 Overcoming Denial of Difference [Stage (1) “Denial of Difference”]

The first stage of the DMIS, “Denial of Difference,” describes a state in which people have little awareness of cultural differences and few opportunities to engage with other cultures. In this study, the score for survey item (#1), “I feel that there are cultural differences around me,” increased by +0.18 for the BH participants and +0.64 for the Holmesglen participants, with the Holmesglen group showing a more significant change.

In the BH program, participants were exposed to English instructions, and they interacted with foreign instructors, but the overall learning environment was Japanese. Consequently, their experience of cultural differences was more abstract and less immersive. In contrast, the

Holmesglen participants experienced cultural differences in many aspects of their daily lives, which helped them develop a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. These findings suggest that overcoming the denial of difference requires engagement in direct and immersive intercultural experiences.

4.2 Reduction in Sense of Cultural Superiority [Stage (2) “Defense Against Difference”]

The second stage of the DMIS, “Defense Against Difference,” is characterized by a tendency to view one’s own culture as superior and to perceive other cultures negatively. In this study, the scores on survey item (#2), “People from other cultures are inferior to people from my culture,” and survey item (#3), “People from other cultures are less intelligent than people from my culture,” decreased in both groups, with BH participants showing changes of -0.37 and -0.32, and Holmesglen participants showing changes of -0.16 and -0.4, respectively.

The larger decrease in a sense of cultural superiority among Holmesglen participants suggests that direct interaction with people from other cultures was decisive in changing their previously held stereotypical prejudices. Despite acquiring theoretical knowledge about other cultures, the BH participants had fewer opportunities to engage in face-to-face intercultural interactions. Consequently, the reduction in a sense of cultural superiority bias exhibited by this group was relatively limited. These findings suggest that short-term domestic programs may not provide the level of exposure to other cultures sufficient for prompting significant changes in attitudes toward other cultures.

4.3 Recognition of Cultural Similarities [Stage (3) “Minimization of Difference”]

The third stage of the DMIS, “Minimization of Difference,” is the stage at which people notice cultural differences but fail to see their significance. Instead, they focus on shared human characteristics and downplay differences. In this study, the score for survey item (#4) – “Despite visible differences, all people are essentially the same” – increased by +0.50 in the BH group and +0.51 in the Holmesglen group. For survey item (#5) – “All people are fundamentally the same” – the score increased by +0.14 in the BH group and +0.84 in the Holmesglen group.

These results show that as Holmesglen participants spent more time in intercultural environments, they not only became more aware of cultural differences, but also recognized that there is a commonality to human values and experiences that transcends cultures. This transition suggests a movement toward empathizing with different cultural perspectives. In addition, ongoing intercultural interaction appears to enable the development of a deeper understanding of both cultural differences and similarities, promoting a more balanced perspective.

4.4 Enhancement of Intercultural Adaptation [Stage (4) “Adaptation to Difference”]

The Adaptation to Difference stage involves developing the ability to adapt to different cultural perspectives and behaviors. In this study, the score for survey item (#7) – “When I am with people from other cultures, I behave differently than when I am with people from my own culture” – showed minimal change in the BH group (-0.09) but a significant increase among the Holmesglen participants (+0.41).

This result suggests that Holmesglen participants became more adaptable in their behaviors, adjusting how they communicate and interact to align with different cultural settings. This ability to adapt is an important part of intercultural competence, which is developed more

effectively by spending extended time in face-to-face intercultural settings rather than being exposed to short, planned interactions in a structured environment.

4.5 Moving Towards Intercultural Integration [Stage (5) “Integration of Difference”]

The final stage of the DMIS, Integration of Difference, is achieved when people fully accept and incorporate different cultural perspectives and develop a flexible cultural identity. In this study, the score for survey item (#6) – “I feel that there are advantages to being a member of more than one culture” – increased by +.023 in the BH group, but showed a much larger increase of +.079 for the Holmesglen participants.

This suggests that spending more time in different cultural environments helps people develop a more adaptable cultural identity. Holmesglen participants may have gained a stronger sense of belonging to multiple cultures, making it easier for them to understand and adapt to cultural differences. This finding supports the argument that long-term immersion in diverse cultural environments is crucial for developing higher levels of intercultural sensitivity.

The results confirmed that both programs contributed to the improvement of intercultural sensitivity. The Holmesglen program, however, appeared to invoke a more advanced progression in the development of intercultural sensitivity. Analysis of the changes in scores at each stage of the DMIS model has revealed that long-term intercultural experiences abroad are crucial factors in promoting intercultural adaptation and integration.

5. Discussion

Based on the data analysis, the study findings were examined from five perspectives.

5.1 The Duration of Intercultural Exposure Affects the Development of Intercultural Sensitivity

The comparison of changes in intercultural sensitivity between the BH and Holmesglen participants revealed that those in the Holmesglen program showed greater progress. This suggests that the more students interact with different cultures and spend time in intercultural environments, the more their intercultural sensitivity grows. The BH program was a short-term domestic English language program that included interactions with foreign teachers. However, because participants remained in a Japanese learning environment, their exposure to intercultural experiences was limited to structured learning experiences. In contrast, the Holmesglen participants experienced intercultural interactions in their daily lives, allowing them to interact with locals and immerse themselves in different cultural environments. The findings suggest that long-term immersion in intercultural environments is more effective in enhancing intercultural sensitivity.

5.2 Awareness of Cultural Differences and Reduction of Cultural Biases

The results suggest that the Holmesglen participants became more aware of cultural differences and demonstrated a reduction in cultural biases. In particular, their direct experience of cultural diversity likely helped to reduce preconceived stereotypes and fixed perceptions of other cultures. Though the BH participants also had opportunities to engage with foreign cultures, their experiences remained within a culturally familiar environment. As a result, while their awareness of cultural differences increased, they may not have fully internalized new cultural values and perspectives. To deepen intercultural understanding, it is essential to live in an intercultural environment and engage in direct interactions with local people.

5.3 Acceptance of Cultural Diversity

The study also found that the Holmesglen participants became more open to accepting cultural differences. They gained a better understanding of different cultural values and behaviors, and they became less likely to believe that their own culture was inherently superior. While the BH participants also developed an increased interest in other cultures, the improvement in acceptance of cultural diversity was relatively limited. This difference may be due to the contrast between learning about cultural differences as abstracted knowledge and actually experiencing them in daily life. The findings indicate that the best way to develop intercultural sensitivity is not only to learn about cultures in theory, but also to actively experience and engage with different cultures firsthand.

5.4 Developing Intercultural Adaptability

Anderson et al. (2006) demonstrated that participants in a four-week, short-term, non-language study abroad program showed significant increases in intercultural sensitivity, as measured by IDI developmental scores. The most notable improvements were observed in the “reversal” and “acceptance/adaptation” domains. Similar results emerged in our study. The Holmesglen participants demonstrated an increased ability to adapt to intercultural environments. Through daily interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds, they became more flexible in dealing with new situations. This was particularly evident in their ability to adapt their behavior to fit different cultural values and practices. On the other hand, the BH participants showed limited improvement in intercultural adaptability. The short duration of the program and the lack of face-to-face intercultural experiences likely reduced their opportunities to develop adaptability. This finding suggests that to develop intercultural adaptability, students need to be engaged in real-life experiences in which they actively encounter and adapt to different cultural norms and behaviors.

5.5 Awareness of Belonging to Multiple Cultures

The findings of this study suggest that Holmesglen participants became more aware of their ability to engage with multiple cultural contexts. Rather than identifying solely with their home culture, they began to see themselves as part of an intercultural community. While the BH participants also showed an increased interest in intercultural experiences, they did not reach the stage of fully integrating these cultural perspectives into their own identities. This finding suggests that advancing to the Integration of Difference stage in the DMIS model requires prolonged intercultural exposure in which students actively internalize diverse cultural perspectives and incorporate them into their identity.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study highlight the importance of direct and prolonged intercultural experiences in the development of intercultural sensitivity. Petersdotter et al. (2017) suggest that extended study abroad experiences can increase overall self-efficacy, and students are encouraged to participate in these to enhance their academic and personal growth. The Holmesglen participants showed notable improvements in intercultural adaptation and integration, indicating that direct intercultural experiences are essential to strengthening intercultural competence.

While the BH participants became more aware of cultural diversity, they did not fully reach the stage of adapting to or integrating multiple cultural perspectives. This highlights an important difference between learning *about* cultures in a structured environment and actively *experiencing* them in everyday life. According to Engle and Engle (2004), U.S. college students

studying abroad in France experience rapid language improvement during the first semester, but their progress slows down during the second semester. After 15 weeks, they become accustomed to daily life, their motivation to engage in further language challenges decreases, and they are less likely to make efforts to improve their advanced language skills. Our study focused on short-term study abroad programs, but in the future, our team would like to research long-term study abroad students to better understand differences in the development of intercultural sensitivity that occur through prolonged exposure to different cultures.

Altshuler et al. (2003) note that intercultural sensitivity is a complicated combination of thoughts, attitudes, and actions, and there is no easy way to explain or predict it. To deepen intercultural sensitivity, it is essential to go beyond theoretical knowledge acquisition in formal learning environments and provide students with long-term opportunities to immerse themselves in different cultures and engage in face-to-face intercultural interactions. In addition, Anderson et al. (2006) state that as cultural diversity increases and business becomes more global, educational institutions need to develop students' ability to interact effectively with other cultures. Future intercultural education programs should not only focus on conveying cultural knowledge but also create practical learning experiences in intercultural settings to foster the development of meaningful intercultural competence.

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Notes

This paper utilizes the BH program data presented at the 19th Annual Conference of the Japan Association for Development Education in 2024 and conducts a comparative analysis with data pertaining to the Holmesglen program.

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