

Intercultural Perspectives: A Case Study of Intercultural Encounters

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This paper focuses on intercultural learning, both about the other and about oneself, through intercultural encounters. An intercultural encounter is defined for the paper as “interactions (verbal and nonverbal) between two or more people in situations (not necessarily countries) where they may perceive each other to have different backgrounds, and where these differences are salient and affect the nature of the interaction” (Holmes, Bavieri, and Ganassin, 2015:17). The Taiwanese exchange students in the study develop their intercultural awareness through encounters abroad with stereotyping and awkward social situations that, through placing their identity at risk, cause them to “shift their focus away from an external evaluation of the other to an inward contemplation of their own intercultural competence” (Holmes and O’Neil 2012: 707). The methodology of the paper investigates how students’ intercultural attitudes changed during their study overseas, and especially how the students dealt, positively or negatively, with others’ stereotypes of themselves, as well as what the students came to perceive as stereotypes they already had about others (it is easier to perceive one’s own stereotypes and prejudices within the mirror of experience of the host culture). As Byram et al (2001) point out, one’s own prejudices and stereotypes are negative attitudes that need to be overcome, and are based on feelings instead of thoughts. The young people in the paper are trying to deal with a sudden influx of both.

The study examines the narratives of a small group of Taiwanese university students who, after undertaking a period of study abroad on exchange programs for periods of one semester up to one year, developed their intercultural learning through concepts such as ‘stereotyping,’ and ‘cultural conflicts.’ The qualitative design consists of three interviews per person in which students were asked to narrate their short-term exchange student experiences. Transcripts were analysed using grounded theory. Following that, the concept of developing students’ intercultural competency will be explored and discussed, and suggestions will be made in the domain of how exchange student programs can better help students develop their intercultural competency.

Key words: Intercultural encounter, identity, study abroad