

Exploring the Impact of Study Abroad on Students' Intercultural Competence: The Case of Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

Today's increasingly heterogeneous world imposes demands on higher education institutions to develop university students' intercultural competence (IC) so that they respond constructively to the cultural challenges of the 21st century. This study aims to explore the impact of short-term study abroad programs on the development of students' intercultural competence. 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Myanmar undergraduates who participated in study-abroad programs to get an in-depth understanding of their study abroad experiences. Thematic analysis was employed to examine how these programs influence their attitudes toward the native culture, the host culture and cultural differences, and their intercultural interaction. The main findings reveal that study abroad enhances students' IC, confirming the five elements of IC by Deardorff (2008): attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, skills, desired internal outcomes, and desired external outcomes, with an emerging aspect 'recommendation' based on 'cultural reflection'. Specific implications are offered to university administrators and decision-makers of Myanmar higher education on the basis of the findings.

Keywords: higher education, intercultural competence, Myanmar, studying abroad, undergraduate students

INTRODUCTION

As a result of increasing globalization and its impact on the world economy, higher education institutions need to prepare students who are well equipped with a set of skills, ensuring that they are qualified for the highly competitive global job market. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) placed emphasize on that 'citizens need not only the skills to be competitive and ready for a new world of work, but more importantly they also need to develop the capacity to analyze and understand global and intercultural issues' (OECD, 2018, p. 2). Educational leaders have realized

that it is important to foster the competence development of graduates to adapt to the rapidly changing demands of world economy.

Imperatives of growing multicultural societies and technological advancements have raised the urgency for intercultural competence. The world has been in transformation into multicultural societies as a result of increasing cross-border movements. Such population shifts have escalated political and social tensions. Furthermore, modern communication technologies make people across the world possible to be connected with people in other places thousands of miles away so considerable attention has been paid to intercultural competence in the global village. Higher education institutions are patently not exempt from these imperatives for intercultural competence (Lustig & Koester, 2013).

A growing acknowledgement of the vital role of developing intercultural competence (IC) can be seen in international education (Lustig & Koester, 2013; UNESCO, 2013). Specific goals of a higher education institution may not be the same as another, but academic and intercultural competencies are common targets to most institutions (Maharaja, 2018; Stier, 2003). A similar view was expressed by Lambert (1994), and Mahoney and Schamber (2004), stating that IC development is one of the goals of Higher Education and students' IC can be increased through participating in study abroad programs which offer one of the trendiest global education experiences (Brandner, 2016). However, Stier (2003) recommended that educational considerations should be given not only to internationalization but to the ethnic diversity of domestic students for enhancing IC of students. This author claimed that study/training abroad programs are beneficial, but not enough, so taking full advantage of the competencies and experiences of students with cultural diversity (e.g., immigrant students) would be valuable in intercultural learning.

Educators and administrators in higher education institutions are called to support their students to enhance IC to an increasing extent (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Griffith, Wolfeld, Armon, Rios, & Liu, 2016). The ministry of education in Japan has started initiatives to fund short-term study abroad scholarships for Japanese students, aiming to alleviate the alarming shortage of a local workforce adequately equipped with the necessary skills to respond to the demand of increasing multicultural workplaces. Consequently, over the last few years, short-term study abroad programs are more popular than joining degree programs in foreign countries among Japanese undergraduate students, in light of new governmental education policies (Koyanagi, 2018).

In Myanmar, both undergraduate and postgraduate students have been increasingly interested in study abroad programs and many of them have applied for scholarships for these programs in recent years. Despite a number of studies and a lot of development in the area of IC, both pre-departure expectations and post-study abroad experiences of Myanmar students have been underexplored domains so this research takes the first step to fill this research gap by focusing on post-intercultural experiences. Moreover, the literature suggested that the process model of intercultural competence by Deardorff (2008) might be relevant but this model needed confirmation by application of this model to the sample in different contexts. These two identified gaps were the basis for the study and a rationale for empirically exploring the intercultural experiences of Myanmar participants.

This research aims to explore how study abroad programs influence the intercultural competence of Myanmar undergraduates, contributing to the theoretical understanding of IC through confirming the five elements of IC: attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, skills, desired internal outcomes, and desired external outcomes, and further developing the understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of IC. The research questions are as follows:

- 1) How has study abroad experience influenced Myanmar students' attitudes toward the native culture, the host culture and cultural differences?
- 2) How has study abroad experience affected their intercultural interaction?

Literature Review

With the increasing number of study-abroad and sojourn programs across the world, the growing body of literature can be found in the field of IC. The previous studies reveal that favorable outcomes of study abroad are academic, career,

intercultural, social, and personal development (Allen, 2010; Dwyer, 2004; Kehl & Morris, 2007; Lenkaitis, 2019; Maharaja, 2018; Orahod et al., 2004). Moreover, other studies have provided evidences that study abroad helps university students to enhance their intercultural competence (Kitsantas, 2004; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001; Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Williams, 2005). Development of IC has been found to be associated with students' goals (Kitsantas 2004) and to the program duration (Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Olson & Kroeger, 2001). Medina-Lopez-Portillo (2004) found that the previous travel abroad experience was related to the intercultural sensitivity development among the US students.

Regarding studies with Myanmar participants, Moe (2021) undertook a qualitative study to explore the challenges faced by international Myanmar female students at a Chinese university and the factors influencing their resilience to continue their graduate studies. Results revealed that language and academic problems, and psychological distress are the major challenges. Furthermore, internal factors such as self-confidence and external factors such as social support were contributing factors to their resilience development while studying abroad. In addition, Sam et al. (2013) explored academic adjustment issues of Cambodian, Laotian, Myanmar, and Vietnamese graduate students at a Malaysian Research University. The results of the qualitative study showed that English language difficulty was the main challenge in term of academic adjustment in their new academic environment.

As regards employment skills development, Sisavath (2021) conducted a mixed-methods study to investigate the advantages of studying abroad for graduate students' employability in the context of Lao. The findings revealed increase in job prospects, in terms of enhanced interpersonal and communication skills, teamwork, and problem-solving and analytical skills. In addition, a qualitative study was conducted by Yarosh et al. (2018) who explored IC of graduate students, enrolling in Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree programs. This study investigated the learning needs of the students in light of how they respond to intercultural challenges. Interview data were thematically analyzed and they reveal that knowledge, awareness, skills and attitudes are IC elements that enable the students to overcome intercultural challenges.

Using a quasi-experimental procedure, Yashima (2010) pointed out that Japanese young people's IC was developed through international volunteer work experiences. The results demonstrate that the international project participants achieve significantly higher IC than non-participants. From an aspect of cognitive modification, Koyanagi (2018) investigates how intercultural communication influences Japanese students who participated in short-term study abroad programs. Questionnaire data show that study-abroad experience extends their horizons and the interview data categorized five outcomes of these programs: "utilization of English language, interpersonal communication skills, involvement in global society, opening doors to greater possibilities and positive attitudes towards living" (p. 105). This study proved that intercultural communication can help students realize and modify their cognitive appraisals which have roots in their native culture.

Regarding the IC and personal development of college students, Maharaja (2018) conducted a qualitative study to explore the outcomes of the study abroad programs for American students. Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) by Bennett (1993) and Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) (Kelley & Meyers, 1995) were used to analyze the students' personal essays on their study abroad experience. Results reported that the study abroad experiences increased IC and personal development, gaining insights into their own and foreign cultures and cultural differences.

Schartner (2016) conducted a longitudinal study to investigate the effect of study abroad on intercultural competence of international graduate students enrolling in a British university. Quantitative data showed that IC enhancement in terms of emotional stability was found and interview data provided evidences of some intercultural gains such as improved intercultural awareness, ability of stereotype deconstruction and increased confidence in intercultural communication.

On the contrary, Forsey et al. (2012) casts doubt on the reported favorable outcomes of study- abroad or sojourn abroad experiences. They argue that although 14 Australian students reported that they enjoyed living and studying abroad, it was difficult for them to articulate what they had learned from these programs. Additionally, Koyanagi (2018) declares that simply sending students abroad is not sufficient and then examining the real impact of these programs is important for

higher education institutions. Therefore, the impact of studying abroad on the intercultural competence of Myanmar students is worthy of exploration to offer some implications to educators and administrators in higher education institutions in Myanmar.

There are a few prior studies (e.g., Moe, 2021; Sam et al., 2013) that explore the challenges, academic adjustment and resilience development of Myanmar graduate students at foreign universities but to the best of the authors' knowledge, no study was undertaken to examine the impact of studying abroad on Myanmar undergraduate students' intercultural competence. In addition, this study is an attempt to lend the voice of students from Asian countries, that has been little found in the literature on study abroad programs (Roy et al., 2019; Sisavath, 2021). Therefore, the present study aims to fill this gap, exploring how study abroad programs influence Myanmar undergraduate students' attitudes toward the native culture, the host culture, and cultural differences, and their intercultural interaction.

Theoretical Construct

Although 'Intercultural Competence' has been operated and defined by different scholars over the last three decades, there has been no consensus on single definition (Deardorff, 2006). It was defined as "effective and appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural situations" (Deardorff, 2011, p. 66). Regarding the IC models in the literature, Byram (1997) developed a framework with five elements: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical awareness. Bennett's model (Bennett, 1998) of intercultural development has been a widely used model as a useful tool, 'Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)', to measure IC through intercultural experience (Hammer et al., 2003). With six stages (denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration), this model received attention in the field of intercultural communication. Fantini and Tirmizi (2006) formed the KASA acronym in the sequence of Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills and Awareness to explore the IC development. However, Yarosh et al. (2018) believed that there was a strong interconnection between knowledge and awareness so their model encompasses four elements: Knowledge, Awareness, Skills, and Attitudes (KASA) by reviewing the IC models and synthesized them to explore the intercultural development of students who joined international joint master programs.

Despite various options available in the literature, we found Deardorff's (2006, 2008) theory to be more useful in observing IC in this study. Deardorff (2006) undertook a nationwide study that was the first attempt to determine an agreed upon definition and elements of intercultural competence among eminent intercultural scholars in the U.S. Although Deardorff's theoretical construct on IC was developed in the middle of the 2000s, its applicability can be found in recent studies (Dalib, et al., 2017, 2019; Hofmeyr, 2021; Louis & Grantham, 2019; Vuksanovic, 2018). Dalib and colleagues (2017) sought to discover how international students reflected their intercultural competence acts in daily situations in the Malaysian cultural setting by 'bracketing' Deardorff's model. In comparison to Deardorff's model, common elements of intercultural competence were found in their study results. In addition, Vuksanovic (2018) employed Deardorff's intercultural model to examine the relationship among ESL learners' intercultural competence, L2 attitudes and use of technology in the U.S. setting. Louis and Grantham (2019) suggested Deardorff's model as a suitable framework in intercultural training for community police officers by bridging the gap between theory and practice. Hofmeyr (2021) compared and contrasted the Global Human Resources (GHR) concept in the context of Japanese higher education and western perspectives on intercultural competence utilizing Deardorff's IC model.

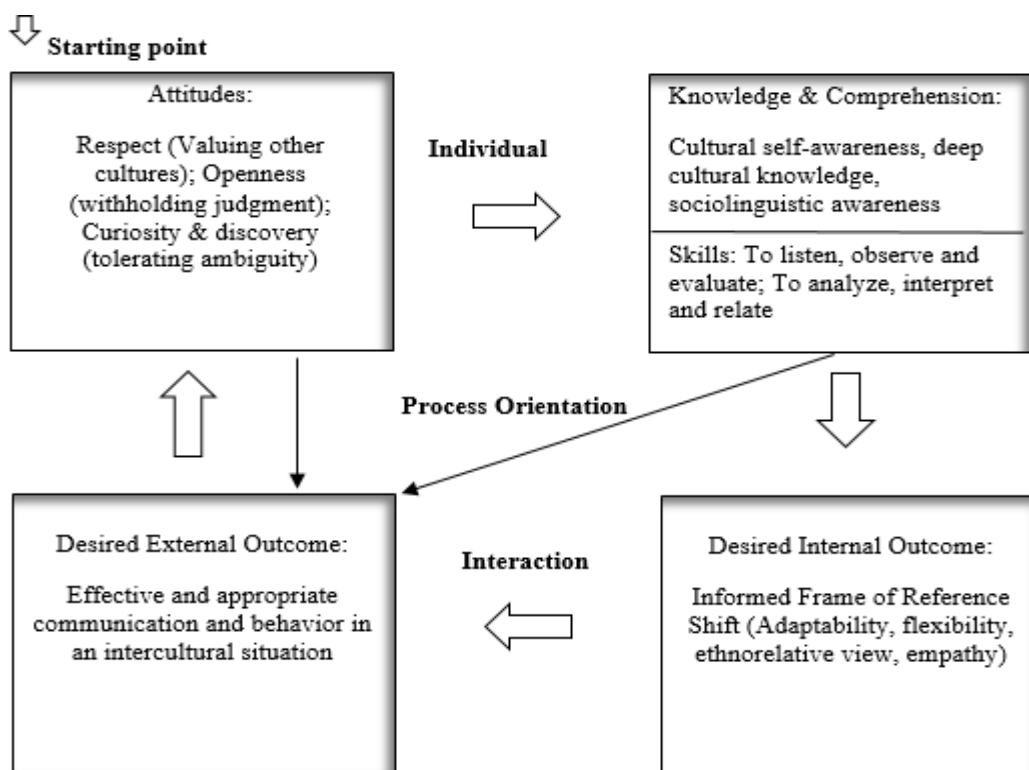
It is acknowledged that the Western expertise provided a solid foundation for comprehending intercultural competence (Yep, 2014). In addition, we admit that Deardorff's 2008 construct represents the Western (mainly US-centric) perspective of intercultural competence. Although some scholars questioned applicability of a theoretical aspect to the context outside a specific culture, Chen (2009) claimed that how foreign elements are handled appropriately in a particular setting is important in cultural studies. Chen further posited that researchers can explain their study results with new elements emerging from the specific cultural contexts, employing the foreign theoretical knowledge. Similarly, some scholars (Dalib, et al., 2017) maintained that other cultures (including south east Asian culture) can take the advantages of

exploring their research site while comparing locally specific findings with the western theoretical knowledge on intercultural competence. Furthermore, in the present study, the participants enrolled in English medium programs and they mostly used English in classes and for social interactions with their peers.

The process model of intercultural competence by Deardorff (2008) (Figure 1.) explains the development of intercultural competence with the components of attitudes, knowledge and skills. Two additional components ‘internal and external outcomes’ are unique items, leading to further IC development. Some previous studies employed this model to explore IC of academic advisors, undergraduate students’ IC development during a semester abroad and how intercultural training were implemented (Covert, 2014; Zenner & Squire, 2020; Zur, 2019).

Figure 1

Process model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2008)



This model was chosen for the current study as it provides the development of specific IC components in a context or situation as well as explaining general development of intercultural competence. Another significant feature of this model is the movement from the starting point ‘attitudes’ (the individual level) to ‘external outcomes’ (the interactive cultural level) that can be fundamentally delineated as "behaving and communicating appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations" (Deardorff, 2004, p. 196). Furthermore, Deardorff’s model shows how individuals’ intercultural competence develops in the continual process of the improvement and it does not a linear, but circular IC improvement and so is the first non-linear one of IC model types (Zur, 2019). The current study, thus, used this model by Deardorff (2008) to explore IC development of Myanmar students, participating in international study-abroad programs.

Research Method

According to Creswell (2012), methods of data collection within a phenomenological study can consist of interviews, focus groups, and written or oral self-reports of participants' experience so semi-structured interviews were used in this study. Qualitative research methods through interviews allow researchers to receive rich and in-depth data. Semi-structured interviews were employed in this study because it helps researchers to encourage the participants to share their perceptions experiences with freedom and to elicit in- depth responses from them. Furthermore, semi-structured interview is a data collection tool that offers the interviewer the opportunities to probe into deeper issues with the flexibility of asking clarifying questions when necessary (Creswell, 2009).

Data on Myanmar students' IC were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews conducted face to face before the confirmed COVID cases was found in Myanmar and via telephone during the pandemic. Interview questions

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

Code	Gender	Age	Discipline	Host Countries	Duration
S1	F	22	English	Sweden & Thailand	2 semesters (1 semester in each country)
S2	F	21	Psychology	Thailand	1 semester
S3	F	22	English	Cambodia	1 semester
S4	F	22	English	Thailand	1 semester
S5	F	22	English	Malaysia & Sweden	2 semesters (1 semester in each country)
S6	F	22	Mathematics	Vietnam	1 semester
S7	F	22	Mathematics	Philippines	1 semester
S8	F	22	English	Vietnam	1 semester
S9	M	21	Law	Cambodia	1 semester
S10	M	20	Physics	Sweden	1 semester
S11	M	20	History	Indonesia	1 semester
S12	M	20	Zoology	Sweden	1 semester
S13	M	20	Zoology	Malaysia	1 semester
S14	M	19	Anthropology	Netherlands	1 semester
S15	M	20	English	Japan & Thailand	2 semesters (1 semester in each country)
S16	M	20	Geology	Japan & Malaysia	2 semesters (1 semester in each country)
S17	M	22	Chemistry	Sweden	1 semester

were prepared based on the previous studies and emphasized four research areas of interest: their attitudes towards the native culture, the host culture, cultural differences and intercultural interaction (e.g., How has your study abroad experience influenced your attitudes towards the native culture? Can you give me some examples of how this experience has changed your attitudes to your native culture?).

Each respondent was interviewed in the Myanmar language and each interview lasted for about 30 minutes. The participants were guaranteed that the data would be only used for academic purposes and the data would remain confidential. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. To code the collected data, the interview transcripts were read rigorously to get a comprehensive view of the data. Manual coding was conducted and color-coding technique was used as proposed by Creswell (2009) to gain the profound insights from colored coded themes. Themes were generated from the most recurring codes. The coding and analysis will be related to the five elements of IC: attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, skills, desired internal outcomes, and desired external outcomes.

Participants This research is a phenomenological study as it seeks to understand intercultural experiences of Myanmar students. Creswell and Creswell (2017) roughly estimated that 3 to 10 participants may be sufficient for this kind of study based on a review of several qualitative research studies. The participants for this study were 17 undergraduate students studying at Mandalay University who went abroad for a semester-long study. The interviews were done between six months and one year after the participants returned home. Of 17, there are 8 participants identifying as female (47%) and nine identifying as male (53%). These participants were with relative homogeneity in terms of their age, ranging between 19 and 22 years ($M = 21$, $SD = 1.06$). Among them, 13 (76%) studied in a foreign country for a semester and four (24%) participated study abroad programs for two semesters.

Results

This section focuses on how study abroad experience influences the students' attitudes toward the cultural differences and intercultural behaviors, covering four main themes: native culture, host culture, cultural differences and intercultural interaction.

Native Culture

The basic component described by the process model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2008) is 'attitudes' and in this study, the findings point out that the majority of the students developed new attitudes toward the native culture after participating in one-semester study abroad programs. As regards the sub-components of 'Attitudes', the data reveal that these attitudes include valuing, critical views and curiosity about their own culture.

Many students became aware to value the traditional wears and a student reported:

“Regarding the dress code, even in ASEAN countries like Thailand, they wear traditional dresses only in ceremonies but in Myanmar, many people wear traditional outfits on a daily basis. I have been aware to value these Myanmar traditional wears.” (S5)

On contrary, another student assumed that wearing traditional outfits all the time is not appropriate especially in the hot season and noted:

“...the weather is hot so I think that the dress code should be less conservative in our culture.” (S2)

Many participants have become critical of their own culture by having negative attitudes towards it. In relation to different closing times of hostels based on gender, a student commented:

“In Myanmar, the female hostel is closed at 7 pm but in Vietnam it is closed at 11 pm. I feel that students are accepted as mature in the host culture” (S6)

Table 2*Qualitative Results 1 (Native Culture)*

Superordinate theme	Theme	Themes' Description
Native culture	Attitudes	Valuing the native culture
		Critical view on the native culture
		Curiosity about the native culture
	Knowledge and Comprehension	Awareness and knowledge of the native culture
		Searching for the information about the native culture
	Skills	Deep understanding of the native culture
		Reflecting the native culture
	Cultural Reflection	Evaluating the native culture
		Recommendation for the native culture after observing other cultures
	External Outcomes	Explaining the native culture to people from other cultures

In addition, Student (8) and (13) criticized the different closing times for male and female hostels, underscoring the gender discrimination in the educational context in Myanmar:

“In Myanmar, female hostels for university students are closed at 7:00 pm but for male students, the hostels are closed at 11.00 pm. I feel it is a kind of gender discrimination” (S-13)

The data revealed that many participants gained awareness, knowledge, and deep understanding of the native culture after exploring the information about their own culture as they wanted to share the native culture knowledge with peer international students. A student reflected: “When I was abroad, I wanted to explain the native culture to friends so I learned about it” (S15)

Another student mentioned how she reflected and evaluated the native culture after study abroad experience:

“After returning home, I have valued my culture and become a devout Buddhist more than before by reading religious books and evaluating my religion again.” (S6)

Some participants mentioned that they wanted to explain their own culture that foreign people may misunderstand. One of the participants reported how he explained the cultural and political context of his own country to others in the host country.

“...my classmates and teachers asked me about religious conflicts in my country. I explained them that most religious conflicts are part of political scandals and most Myanmar people respect each other regardless of religion. You can see pagodas, churches and mosques in central parts of Yangon, the largest city in Myanmar” (S11)

The findings indicate the participants' critical views of their own culture and some of the students who went to European countries proposed recommendations for the native culture after observing other cultures: more openness should be developed between males and females, dominance of seniors should be reduced in the working culture, and learner-centered approach should be encouraged in the classroom culture in Myanmar. For instance, a student who went to Sweden suggested:

“I needed to undertake a study visit in Sweden, and based on this experience I needed to write a report by combining theories and practice. There should be projects like this in the courses of Myanmar universities.” (S17)

In general, participants’ attitudes changed while and after study abroad experience, revealing more respect or more critical attitudes toward their own culture. It appears that participants who returned from western countries like Sweden and Netherlands have become more critical of the native culture, and given some recommendations based on reflection of intercultural awareness and observation. This may be because they experienced more cultural differences in the western context than in the eastern environment.

Host Culture

The participants of this study reported how they have changed their attitudes and gained insights into the host culture and its people. Most of them also reflected their development of observation and evaluation skills, and adaptive behaviors in the host culture. The majority of the students expressed positive attitudes towards the host culture by mentioning that they prefer flexibility, friendliness, gender-equality, work-life balance, self-reliance of the people in the host culture. However, few students reported that although they expected friendliness from the host people, they did not receive it whereas many of them expressed that they changed their attitudes from negative to positive during this experience, observing and evaluating the host culture. A participant noted:

“I was anxious to go to Europe as I thought they were not helpful but my expectation was wrong. They are very friendly.” (S17)

In a similar view, another student who went to Indonesia reported that how he observed the host culture and how he shared his cultural practices with foreign friends:

“I also visited and observed a mosque, and their religious practices while they were worshipping. I realized that they were devout Muslims and I respected them. I also made up my mind to become a devout Buddhist. After that program, Indonesian friends visited my country and I took them to places including Bagan which is famous for its ancient pagodas in Myanmar and they observed religious practices in Buddhism.” (S11)

A student noted how he learned the language of the host country and he developed linguistic awareness, comparing the native and host languages, as well as sociolinguistic awareness by noticing how people of different cultures used English expressions differently. He reflected:

“I learned the Cambodian language as much as I can in my free time. The word order of the Cambodian language is not the same as the Myanmar language but it’s like English... Although we use the linguistic term ‘monastery’ for a building in which monks live together but they use a different expression ‘pagoda’ for it.” (S9)

A student reported his awareness of gender equality by mentioning in Sweden, women are recruited as bus drivers but in Myanmar, women bus drivers are hardly found.

“The first thing I want to talk about is gender equality in Sweden. When I was in Sweden, what I noticed was that some bus drivers are women.” (S10)

Many students stated that they managed to behave flexibly and adaptively in the host culture. A student reflected how she could adapt to the classroom culture of a new academic context by ‘behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations’ (Deardorff, 2006, p.249):

“When we do peer review in the class in Myanmar, we usually give each other positive comments, avoiding negative ones. When I did the peer review in the classroom of the Vietnam University, my partner was from Thailand. Although I noticed some weak points in her work, I did not mention them. I was surprised when she pointed out many weak points of my work. Later, I could accept it and I discussed openly both positive and negative points with them.” (S8)

Overall, attitude change from stereotype views to non-stereotype perspectives seemed to be a highly discussed component, and flexible and adaptive behaviors in intercultural situations were also frequently expressed by the participants.

Table 3*Qualitative Results 2 (Perceptions of Host Culture)*

Superordinate theme	Theme	Themes' Description
Host culture	Attitudes	Attitude change
		Withholding judgment of the host culture
		Curiosity about the host culture
	Knowledge and Comprehension	Awareness and knowledge of the host culture
		Linguistic awareness and knowledge of the host culture
	Skills	Observing the host culture
		Evaluating the host culture
	External Outcomes	Flexible and adaptive behaviors in the host culture

Cultural Differences

Most participants revealed their awareness and insights into cultural differences, comparing the native and host classroom cultures and a student noted:

“In Thailand, teachers raise many questions in classrooms and they listen interestingly to students’ ideas. Discussion is encouraged in the classroom there. In contrast, Myanmar teachers usually give lectures and explain the concepts in detail in the classroom” (S2)

Some students had skills to analyze, interpret and relate to the reasons of different cultural behaviors and one student noted:

“I understand people behave differently depending on the culture they were raised.” (S1)

Table 4*Qualitative Results 3 (Perceptions of Cultural Differences)*

Superordinate theme	Theme	Themes' Description
Cultural Differences	Attitudes	Attitude change (Respect for cultural differences)
		Curiosity about different cultures
	Knowledge and Comprehension	Awareness and knowledge of the cultural differences
		Skills
	Internal outcome	Flexibility
		Ethno-relative view
	Cultural reflection	Generalized view of cultural differences
		Recommendation for building intercultural friendship

Many students showed respect and acceptance of the cultural differences and a student reported:

“I think I should not show disrespect for culture differences and we need to accept them as they are. Their culture is different from us and we don’t need to follow it but we must accept it.”(S3)

Some students expressed their ethno-relative views of cultural differences and how they changed their perceptions and behaviors, developing intercultural friendships after their study abroad experience. One student reflected:

“I have realized that in every culture there are some good and bad points. I thought I could not have a close friendship with people from different cultures but now I have a lot of friends from different cultures.” (S13)

Some students provided some suggestions for developing intercultural friendship, stating that common interests, ideas and goals, interaction time, and humanity played key roles in building intercultural friendship. “Regardless of religion and culture, we should show humanity and can become close friends.” (S8)

Generally, the data show that most students expressed awareness and knowledge of cultural differences by comparing similarities and differences between two cultures. In addition, many of them offered suggestions for how to build intercultural friendship.

Intercultural Interaction

The majority of the participants expressed that they gained confidence in using English in intercultural interaction during and after study abroad experience. In addition, they were aware that other international students often made language mistakes like them. As a result, they have become no longer worried too much about making mistakes in communication in English. Moreover, they developed convenience and confidence in intercultural conversations. One participant reported:

“While I was in Sweden, I noticed that other international students like Italians and French make some mistakes while speaking English as well. Then I realized that the purpose of communication is to understand each other among the interlocutors. After participating in this program, I feel more confident of my interaction skills.” (S10)

Similarly, another student expressed how she has developed her intercultural communication skills after study abroad experience.

Table 5

Qualitative Results 4 (Intercultural Interaction)

Superordinate theme	Theme	Themes’ Description	
Intercultural interaction	Attitudes	Open mindedness in intercultural interaction	
	Knowledge and Comprehension	Awareness and knowledge of how others use English	
	Skills	Interpreting and relating to the reasons different cultural behaviors	
	Internal outcome		Convenience and confidence in using English
			Convenience and confidence in intercultural interaction
			Adaptability Ethno-relative view Empathy for foreigners in the native culture
External outcome	Adaptive and effective behaviors in intercultural interaction Offering help to foreigners in the native context		

“I prepared some greeting phrases and topics to talk about, referring to English-speaking course books. But now, I do not prepare anything, and I converse with people from different cultures with natural responses and without tension. I think my intercultural interaction is more effective now.” (S1)

Many of the participants reflected that they developed the ethno-relative views and empathy in intercultural interaction, leading to effective intercultural behaviors.

“Now I can accept different cultures, but in the past, I had anxiety to interact with people from Islamic culture. Now I understand that every society has good and bad people...I am ready to make friends from different cultures. I had a close friendship with Filipino friends as we spent a lot of time interacting together.” (S4)

In a similar view, another student noted how she has developed cultural empathy and confidence in intercultural encounters.

“I feel empathy now when I meet foreign students in my country as I faced many difficulties in Vietnam...So now when I meet foreigners who seem to lose their ways, I start to greet and ask them how I can help them. I have more confidence in my intercultural interaction” (S6)

Furthermore, many students revealed that they achieved significant progress in intercultural interaction such as avoiding cultural conflicts, and sending wishes to friends from other cultures on their holy days. Furthermore, they mentioned that they adaptively interacted with international friends as they wanted to show appreciation and openness to others’ cultures, and to be part of the globalization. One student reported:

“I am now much more confident in conversing with people from different cultures. And then now I often send wishes to my Christian and Muslim friends on their holy days as I want to appreciate their cultures although we are culturally different.” (S3)

Increased confidence and convenience in using English was highly expressed as internal outcomes of study abroad experience in the interview data. Furthermore, many of the interviewees reported their external outcomes that they can behave adaptively and effectively in intercultural interaction with cultural awareness, ethno-relative views and improved English language skills.

To sum up, the findings comparing participants studying in eastern and western contexts, both groups of students mentioned that they cherished some Myanmar traditions such as traditional dress, and traditional skincare and cosmetic (Thanakha) more during and after the programs. Moreover, both groups of students reported on their boosted confidence and English skills in intercultural interaction. Students who went to Asian countries appreciated their Asian peers who valued and preserved their traditions (S7, S9) whereas they showed their negative attitudes toward the host people adopting and impressing the western culture (S4, S7).

On the other hand, those who went to European countries seem to have become more critical of the native culture and to have more holistic understanding of culture and society than their counterparts studying in eastern nations. Students who went to Europe noted the difference between the individualistic culture of the western society and collectivistic culture of the eastern society (S1, S12) and different caring cultures for aging parents in eastern and western cultures (S12). In addition, those who studied in European countries reported on little leisure time (S10, S12) and dominance of senior employees (S14) in the native working culture, rote learning of formulae in science education in the native context (S17), and knowledge of LGBT issues and sexual orientations (S5, S10) but no one who went to only Asian countries mentioned these matters.

Discussion

The qualitative analysis of the study discovered development in the intercultural competence of the Myanmar students after completing a study abroad program, focusing on their attitudes towards the native culture, the host culture, cultural differences and intercultural interaction. Applying the process model of intercultural competence by Deardorff (2008) with the five elements of IC: attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, skills, desired internal outcomes, and desired external outcomes, this study attempted to further enhance the understanding of the complicated nature of IC.

Most participants expressed increased intercultural awareness, open-mindedness, ethno- relative views, attitude change, skill development, and appropriate and effective intercultural behaviors after study abroad experience. Many participants reflected that they gained knowledge and awareness of the host culture and its people. Moreover, many expressed that they have developed positive attitudes expressing preferences concerning flexibility, friendliness, gender-equality, work-life balance, and self-reliance of the people in the host culture. However, a few recounted that they received less friendliness from the host people compared to their expectation. This finding provides corroboration for some of the prevailing student abroad studies, which suggests that international students find difficulties in making friends with local people in the host environment (e.g. UKCOSA, 2004; Wright & Schartner 2013; Schartner, 2016).

Interestingly, both male and female participants pointed out the gender issue: different closing time of university hostels for male and female students. This showed that they gained awareness of gender discrimination in the native culture based on intercultural experience. Some students reported that they encountered some difficulties like being lost in a new place in the host country and as a result, they had increased readiness to help foreigners in the native country, indicating the development of cultural empathy. These findings related to increased awareness, cultural empathy and open-mindedness are consistent with some of the international student literature (Maharaja, 2018; Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Schartner, 2016; Yarosh et al., 2018).

Most participants recounted that they boosted convenience, confidence and skills in using English in intercultural interaction during and after this experience. Some of the participants recounted that their international peer students made mistakes in English like them so they became no longer worried too much about their imperfect English, especially while speaking. In addition, they reflected that they felt less insecurity and anxiety while using English in intercultural communication. These findings are compatible with the previous research by Koyanagi (2018) who found that Japanese students who studied abroad increased their English and communication skills, leading to intercultural friendships. Furthermore, Lao students claimed that English language proficiency improvement as a result of participating in study abroad programs maximized their employment opportunities (Sisavath, 2021).

In addition to the medium of instruction (English), the participants reported that they gained the language proficiency of the host community, especially oral skills. This finding coincides with previous research on host language skills development during study abroad (Magnan & Back, 2007; Martinsen, 2010; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). Magnan and Back (2007) pointed out that U.S students gained improvement in the host language skills after participating in a semester-long study abroad program in France. Correspondingly, Martinsen (2010) quantitatively investigated changes in U.S. students' oral Spanish skills after six weeks in Argentina, employing native speaker evaluation of student oral proficiency. These results determined that most of these students achieved considerable improvements in their oral skills of the host language throughout their short-term stay abroad.

With regard to intercultural behaviors, many participants seem to have developed skills to recognize behaviors ruled by the host culture, and flexibly and appropriately behave in new cultures even when the host cultural behaviors are unfamiliar given their native context. For example, a participant who was unfamiliar with receiving and giving direct and constructive peer feedback managed to adapt to the new classroom culture. The behavioral changes in intercultural settings are regarded as key indicators of IC (Deardorff, 2006). In addition, some participants seem to appreciate the new cultures and interact actively in intercultural encounters while maintaining their native culture. For instance, some participants mentioned that they took part in the events of the host culture while wearing traditional Myanmar outfits, and sent wishes their Christian and Muslim friends on their holy days while expressing their increased appreciation of Buddhism. In this regard, the integration strategy is defined by Berry (2005), when individuals seek intercultural interaction to be part of the social network of the host culture while maintaining their identity of native culture.

The findings revealed that participants who went to western countries articulated more holistic perspectives on diverse cultures and societies compared to their counterparts studying in eastern nations. It seems that the more diverse cultures they encounter, the more they can compare, reflect and evaluate both the native and host cultures, developing skills to analyze, interpret, and relate which is one of the IC components (Deardorff, 2008).

In regard to the duration of study abroad programs, Hartlen (2011) expressed that many students are aware of the advantages of long-term study abroad programs. This scholar also highlighted that it is important for academic advisers to inform students about the benefits and availability of short-term study abroad opportunities. Dwyer (2004) found that the longer duration of a study abroad experience may lead to better outcomes. However, this study also suggested that a program duration of at least six weeks could result in enormous success in attaining academic, intercultural, personal, and career development. Moreover, study abroad programs with short duration and low costs can be attractive and practical alternatives for those who have some hesitations in commitment to a lengthy program (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005).

Many responses supported Deardorff's model (2008) by reporting their development of intercultural competence in line with the key components of this model. Similar findings were found in the qualitative study by Yarosh et al. (2018) who explored IC of graduate students taking part in Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree programs. In their study, the interview data indicated that knowledge, awareness, skills and attitudes are IC elements that enable the students to overcome the challenges in an intercultural context.

The process model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2008) as an organizational principle has demonstrated useful to offer an IC model based on the qualitative data collected in this research project. Therefore, the results obviously confirmed the relevancy and applicability of this framework to the sample in the Myanmar context. The responses proved that the participants expressed their development of IC, agreeing with all the key components of the model.

According to Deardorff's (2008) model, the starting point of intercultural development is the fundamental category 'attitudes' and from this point, intercultural outlooks are developed and moved to the second category 'knowledge and comprehension'. However, the results show that 'attitudes' can lead to 'knowledge and comprehension' whereas 'knowledge and comprehension' of cultural differences can in turn enable participants to develop their 'attitudes' toward their native culture such as respect. Therefore, both 'attitude' and 'knowledge and comprehension' components can be starting points and fundamentally important for internal and external outcomes of this model. Moreover, a new key component 'Cultural Reflection (Recommendation for the native culture after observing other cultures; Recommendation for building intercultural friendship)' and some new definitions for other components were emerged from the study results. For example, the emerging elements relevant for the intercultural development are 'critical views on the native culture', 'explaining the native culture to people from other cultures', and 'offering help to foreigners in the native context'.

Some important educational implications may arise from this study's findings for policy makers, educators and study abroad program directors in higher education institutions in Myanmar. According to the interview data, some students reflected that they were not familiar with providing constructive peer feedback, participating in classroom discussion, and project-based learning before studying abroad but they revealed that they needed to listen to teacher's lectures in the classes instead. Based on these results, it is suggested that educational leaders in Myanmar arrange some training courses for Myanmar university teachers to adopt the student-centered approach in classrooms. As intercultural competence is one of the main goals of international Higher Education (Lambert, 1994; Mahoney & Schamber, 2004), it may be suggested that decision-makers of Higher Education and study abroad program directors in Myanmar universities take into consideration the prominent role that study abroad experience plays on students' IC development, support overseas study programs to continue and create more opportunities for students to participate in these programs.

Limitations And Suggestions for Further Studies

Concerning the limitations of this research, firstly, the participants of this study are undergraduate students at a university in the middle region of Myanmar and all are Burmese apart from one student so the findings may not provide generalization for Myanmar students from the universities in other regions, as intercultural experiences might vary based on students' cultural backgrounds. Hence, further studies with students from different cultural contexts are called for to confirm the validity of the theory.

Secondly, although this study attempted to qualitatively compare the experiences of students who went to Asian and European countries to some extent, the sample size who went to Europe was quite small. Therefore, a quantitatively

comparative study between students who studied in eastern countries and those in the western context may produce results contributing to the better understanding of intercultural experience.

Thirdly, this study focused on IC development of undergraduate students and most of them spent only one-semester in a foreign country. Thus, future studies should involve graduate students with one or two-year length of overseas study as IC development may vary depending on educational level and length of stay in a foreign country.

Finally, in this study, the cross-sectional data were collected from students after their study abroad experiences so pre- and post-collected data would supply valuable information regarding the enhancement of students' intercultural competence.

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