Attitudes: A Role in the Reflection of Intercultural Learning Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at Asian students speaking English as a foreign language (EFL) and studying abroad in an English-speaking country and adopts interviews to explore whether and how intercultural learning outcomes are reflected in their attitudes. While finding that intercultural learning outcomes such as culture shock, cultural awareness, cultural identity and intercultural competence are demonstrated by EFL students studying abroad in three kinds of attitudes (i.e. towards native speakers, towards the target culture, and towards communication and interaction with native speakers), the researcher concludes that these three kinds of attitudes play a role in the reflection of intercultural learning outcomes. As attitudes towards communication and interaction with native speakers are found to be more predictable than the other two kinds of attitudes, it is also concluded that such attitudes may be more stable to determine the degree to which EFL students benefit from intercultural learning. However, when these three kinds of attitudes are found to be easily influenced by other factors such as language and cultural barriers as well as psychological resistance, the researcher further concludes that those influential factors can be taken into consideration in order to explore intercultural learning outcomes among EFL students studying abroad effectively and efficiently.

Keywords: EFL, intercultural learning, intercultural learning outcome.

INTRODUCTION

While globalisation is increasingly promoting contact among different regions of the world, cultures in different countries often interact with one another and form connections through trade, immigration and the exchange of ideas and information (Arnett, 2002). Such global effects have not only led to the changes in the fields of communication, education, politics, economics and technology (Graddol, 2006) but also caused increasing numbers of people studying, working, and travelling abroad. Studies have found that globally the population of those who study abroad increased from 68 million in 1991 to 132 million in 2004 and a further massive increase is still in progress (UNESCO, 2007). Indeed, study abroad programs has become one of the global phenomena urged by political concerns, economic needs, cultural interaction or the easiness of travel (Byram & Feng, 2006) and been commonly popular with people in the twenty-first century. According to Leask (2004), study abroad programs in which teachers and students go abroad to experience intercultural contacts with the target culture provide learners with a good opportunity to become intercultural speakers and also promote the internationalization of

education. As students studying abroad have many opportunities to act as intercultural speakers using English as a shared language and communicating with each other, the question that attracts the researcher's attention then arises as to what kind of intercultural learning outcomes students immersed in a host culture may perceive. This study targets students speaking English as a foreign language (EFL) and studying abroad in an English-speaking country and adopts interviews to explore whether and how intercultural learning outcomes are reflected in their attitudes. Length of residence abroad is hypothesized to predict the degree to which EFL students studying abroad may experience intercultural learning, whereas attitudes are assumed to reflect those learning outcomes. Three research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. Do EFL students' attitudes become more positive due to the impact of intercultural learning?

2. Do EFL students benefit from intercultural learning and demonstrate those learning outcomes in their attitudes due to the impact of intercultural learning?

3. What are intercultural learning outcomes which may occur among EFL students studying abroad?

THE COMPONENTS OF ATTITUDES

When attitudes are associated with intercultural learning outcomes, research firstly finds that the components of attitudes seem to make those learning outcomes understandable. Attitudes by nature consist of cognitive, affective and behavioural components (Edwards, 1982). According to Gardner (1985, p.8), "the cognitive component refers to the individual's belief structures, the affective to reactions, and the cognitive to the tendency to behave toward the attitude object". Oppenheim (1992) points out that the component of attitudes involves one's mental life and can directly or indirectly reflect one's stereotypes, beliefs, reactions or verbal statements. Perloff (1993) asserts that attitudes are mainly made up of the affective component and exclude the cognitive component. Herek (2000) emphasises that attitudes contain instrumental and symbolic functions. Instrumental functions are often linked to individual's interests, whereas symbolic functions can be viewed as symbols that reflect values and stereotypes (Huguet, 2006). However, Garrett et al. (2003) insist that attitudes function as the input and output of social action and are particularly related to one's behaviour. On this point, intercultural learning outcomes reflected in attitudes could be concrete and even visible.

ATTITUDES AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

While the components of attitudes are considered to be likely to explain intercultural learning outcomes, research secondly finds that the close relationship between attitudes and cultural contexts is essential to understanding why attitudes are related to intercultural learning outcomes. For example, Byram (1997) points out that positive attitudes are required in order to develop the skills to relate, discover, interpret and negotiate the differences between one culture and another. Bredella (1992) asserts that learners must adjust their own attitudes and view the other culture from different perspectives in the meaning-negotiation process. Indeed, socially constructed attitudes are often related to social and ethnic identities and determine what those who learn the second or target language (L2) experience and how they interact with native speakers (Saville-Troike, 2006). However, studies have found that interactions within the target culture influence learners' attitudes towards native speakers and the target culture (Culhane & Kehoe, 2000). Garrett et al. (2003) also suggest that the cognitive component of attitudes is easily shaped by individual or collective functions which arise from stereotyping in inter-

group relations. In general, it is conceivable that students studying abroad may adjust their attitudes in order to experience intercultural learning but find their attitudes are affected by such learning.

INTERCULTURAL LEARNING OUTCOMES

In order to trace intercultural learning outcomes which may emerge among students studying abroad, research further finds that due to the impact of intercultural learning, intercultural learning outcomes such as culture shock, cultural awareness, cultural identity, intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence which are developed by learners themselves may appear for understanding the target culture or integrating into it. Among intercultural learning outcomes, intercultural competence is considered to be likely shown in the behavioural component of attitudes (Jesen, 1995). Such competence may, on the one hand, involve the "recognition of sameness, across humanity or across specific groups of cultures" (Parmenter. 2010, p.77). On the other hand, it refers to the ability to empathise with others and to hold positive attitudes towards different kinds of people and values (Murphy, 1998). Empathy which enables one to imagine, understand and share what other people think and feel constitutes one of the elements in intercultural competence and can contribute to the formation of positive attitudes towards people with different languages and cultures and to the degree of success in second or foreign language acquisition (Richards et al., 1985). According to Byram (2009), intercultural competence also consists of tolerance and respect for others in which one often relates the characteristics of the target culture to those of his or her own culture.

As whether and how one understands the self and others and learns to be intercultural usually depends on his or her ability to be open to others and to engage in meaningful communicative activities (Müller-Hartmann, 2000), intercultural communicative competence as part of intercultural learning outcomes is not only connected to attitudes, values, knowledge and worldviews but also linked to language proficiency (Sercu, 2002). Such competence calls for psychological adaptation, communication skills, personality strength and cultural awareness (Jandt, 2004). Byram (2009) argues that intercultural communicative competence also includes both the ability to empathise with other cultures and the skills to negotiate differences between one culture and another. According to Samovar and Porter (2003), it is not easy to develop intercultural communicative competence in that such competence involves the elements of one's perception, verbal language and non-verbal language. In addition, culture shock as an inevitable part of intercultural learning outcomes is not only considered to lead to intellectual growth (Ruben, 1983) but also associated with transition shock which refers to a natural situation of being unable to interact with the new environment effectively (Bennett, 1977). Both cultural awareness consisting of insight into the self and others (Byram, 2004) and cultural identity referring to the ability to negotiate conflicts between two cultures and to adapt to the host environment (Kim, 1988) are also part of intercultural learning outcomes. Irrespective of specific manifestations, intercultural learning outcomes usually involve how one views the target culture and native speakers.

METHOD

Based on the claim of Gardner's socio-educational model (1985) that EFL/ESL learners who have the concept of "integrativeness" could hold the favorable attitudes towards the target language group and the target language community, this study targeted EFL students coming from Asian countries and studying abroad in an English-speaking country and adopted focus group interviews to explore whether and how intercultural learning outcomes were reflected in their attitudes. Because length of residence abroad was assumed to predict the degree to which students studying abroad would experience

intercultural learning, participants were divided into three groups according to length of their residence abroad (i.e. more than two years, 1–2 years, and less than one year). Ten participants studying abroad for more than two years were placed in Group A, and ten participants studying abroad for 1–2 years were placed in Group B. The remaining ten participants studying abroad for less than one year were placed in Group C. While attitudes were assumed to reflect intercultural learning outcomes, it was hypothesized that attitudes would become more positive as a function of increased length of residence abroad and that intercultural learning outcomes would be reflected in three kinds of attitudes (i.e. towards the target culture, towards native speakers, and towards communication and interaction with native speakers).

Participants

Thirty students from Asian countries including China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan were recruited for this study. They were recruited as the members of focus groups in that they had had filled out questionnaires and also shown interest in expressing more about what they thought. The length of their residence abroad ranged from three months to eight years. Six participants were engaged in doctoral studies, and nine studied for their master's degrees. The remaining participants included six undergraduate students and nine exchange students. Participants were in their twenties, and several had had the experience of living with American roommates or host families. Although the sample size used for this qualitative research was smaller than that adopted for quantitative research, the qualitative data in this study were gathered from a more diverse group of students to provide a clearer and more detailed description of intercultural learning outcomes reflected in attitudes.

Instrument and Procedures

This study used focus group interviews with semi-structured questions and was conducted at a university in the United States. The interviews with each group were conducted twice in order to correspond to different schedules of participants. Each interview lasted for more than three hours for letting participants express what they thought fully. Since participants in this study came from different countries, they all agreed to speak English during interviews. The raw data were tape-recorded with the permission of participants and later subjected to thematic analysis in which the researcher coded, categorized, and connected the data via a process of comparison (Boyatzis, 1998). According to the themes which referred to three kinds of attitudes (i.e. towards native speakers, towards the target culture, and towards communication and interaction with native speakers), the researcher highlighted the key words of the raw data and analyzed what they meant in symbolizing intercultural learning outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study, on the one hand, showed that due to the impact of intercultural learning, participants benefited from intercultural learning and demonstrated those learning outcomes in different kinds of attitudes. On the other hand, the results of this study also found that how positive students' attitudes were might not depend on length of residence abroad but rather contexts. Of three kinds of attitudes (i.e. towards native speakers, towards the target culture, and towards communication and interaction with native speakers), attitudes towards communication and interaction with native

speakers were found to be the only kind that became more positive as a function of increased length of residence abroad. To render participants' responses more easily understandable, the raw data which might help to understand intercultural learning outcomes are highlighted and analysed as follows.

Theme 1: Attitudes towards the Target Culture

The results of this study showed that intercultural learning affected participants' attitudes towards the target culture. For example, when participants in Group A were asked about how they felt about American culture, most of them considered it to be "positive" and "learnable" and showed their attitudes by noting various beliefs such as "freedom", "open-mindedness", "tolerance" and "diversity". These responses shown in the following excerpts indicated that participants in Group A, who had been studying abroad longer and had more knowledge of American culture, tended to hold more positive attitudes towards the target culture:

A10: *I have been **deeply affected** by the culture and **became helpful to others** and **optimisti**c about life during studying abroad.*

A5: *I consider American culture **positive** because I **learn a lot** from it.*

A9: *American culture is characterized by **freedom, open-mindedness** and **diversity**. I appreciate its strengths.*

A6: *American culture is full of **freedom, tolerance,** and **open-mindedness.** It is a country that accepts different kinds of people as its citizens and integrates different kinds of culture into its own culture.*

While expressing the opinions about American culture, several participants in Group A noted that "open-mindedness" and "common grounds" were important to their understandings of the target culture. The responses displayed by those in Group A in the following excerpts implied that they seemed to demonstrate intercultural competence, which included open-mindedness and empathy, in their attitudes towards the target culture. When participants also responded that they "understood" and "appreciated" the strengths of the other culture as well as recognised the "strengths of their own cultures", such responses indicated that cultural awareness or cultural identity also appeared in their attitudes towards the target culture:

A1: *The more I become **open-minded** to native speakers, the more I **understand their strengths**.*

A7: *I find there is a lot of **common grounds** between the two different cultures.*

A6: *I often **see the strengths of my own culture** from the perspective of the other culture.*

In response to the same question concerning American culture, however, participants in Groups B and C responded that they did not have much knowledge of American culture by noting some phenomena such as "McDonald's fast food", "privacy", "selfishness" and "individualism" as the characteristics of the target culture which might arise from their stereotypes. However, these responses shown in the following excerpts indicated that encounters with the target culture might make them develop cultural awareness in which they understood the differences between their own cultures and the target culture:

B7: *It is **hard for me to understand** American culture. But I think **McDonald's fast food** represents a kind of American culture.*

B5: *I **don't** really **get involved** in American culture. I guess **privacy** is part of American culture*

C7: *I find American people a little **selfish**. American parents give their children free choices, so children seem spoiled and get whatever they want.*

C4: *I think **individualism** is a part of American culture. For example, young people don't like to obey their parents.*

Theme 2: Attitudes towards Native Speakers

The results of this study found that participants' attitudes towards native speakers did not become more positive as a function of increased length of residence abroad either. Speaking of the experience of making friends with native speakers, most participants in Groups A and B did not hold positive attitudes towards native speakers by noting different cultural backgrounds such as "lack of shared topics" and "American life styles of being selfish and changeable" or ethnic differences such as "American social groups". However, because they seemed to perceive different values and customs in the target culture, these responses shown in the following excerpts revealed that they might develop cultural awareness as a result of making friends with native speakers:

A5: *It is **not easy** to make friends with native speakers. I think that the **lack of shared topics is** usually the problem. Besides, American people have **different social groups** according to their **ethnic backgrounds.***

A7: *I can get along with American friends, but I **am unable to consider Americans** as my close friends because of different **cultural backgrounds.***

B6: *I think Americans are **sort of selfish.** They protect themselves very much.*

B9: *American people try everything they can do but **change their minds at any time** for **practical** reasons.*

When asked about the experience of making friends with native speakers, those who were in Group C were also not found to hold positive attitudes towards native speakers due to their superficial impressions of the target language group. For example, most of them responded that they "felt shocked" while seeing native speakers socialize with one another in daily life. These responses shown in the following excerpts indicated that they seemed to experience culture shock which was part of learning outcomes at the first stage of intercultural learning:

C5: *I feel **shocked** when American people like to give me hugs.*

C2: *I feel **shocked** when I see men respect women in the U.S.*

C6: *I **was shocked** to find that American people **liked to have frequent but short contact**s with their friends.*

Theme 3: Attitudes towards Communication and Interaction with Native Speakers

The results of this study found that participants' attitudes towards communication and interaction with native speakers were predicted most strongly on the basis of their length of residence abroad. For instance, when asked about communicating and interacting with native speakers, most participants in Group A responded that the experience of communication and interaction with native speakers was

"comfortable", "enjoyable" and "learnable" and often helped them to "improve English". These responses displayed by the participants in Group A in the following excerpts implied that intercultural communication was important to them and might lead to both the development of intercultural competence or intercultural communicative competence and the progress in the acquisition of the target language:

A8: *My English has been **improved** a lot. Now I feel **comfortabl**e with communicating with native s*peakers.

A10: *I **enjoy** communicating with native speakers because I **learn a lot from them.***

A7: *I feel it is **easy** for me to communicate and interact with native speakers. I **learn English** from communication with native speakers.*

While sharing the experience of communication and interaction with native speakers, however, participants in Group B did not hold similarly positive attitudes towards communication and interaction with native speakers. These responses shown in the following excerpts shed light on the situation that participants in Group B tended not to enjoy communicating and interacting with native speakers because of "language and cultural barriers":

B3: *In terms of communicating with people, I find **cultural barriers**.*

B4: *I think **culture** and **lifestyles** are the **main problems**.*

B10: *The problem of communication may come from **the words we do not know** and **the use of the words** when we speak to native speakers.*

Speaking of communicating and interacting with native speakers, participants in Group C held much more negative attitudes than those in Group B in that they simply related their problems in communication and interaction with native speakers to the psychological resistance they often experienced. For example, they tended to express attitudes towards communication and interaction with native speakers by citing their negative perception such as "fear," and "having a hard time" or their behaviour such as "trying to avoid it". The responses displayed by the participants in Group C in the following excerpts seemed symptomatic of culture shock that stemmed from an inability to adapt to a new life:

C7: *But I still feel **scared** to talk to American people. I don't like to communicate with native speakers.*

C5: *When American people are around me, I am **always quiet and try to avoid** meeting them.*

C10: *I have a **hard time** when I speak English to them. They speak so fast that I **cannot understand** what they say.*

While sharing the experience of culture shock caused by communication and interaction with native speakers, however, several participants in Groups B and C actively expressed their opinions about the ways to communicate and interact with native speakers. For example, they noted that "communication skills", "personality" traits (i.e. confidence, open-mindedness and honesty) and "knowledge of the target culture" could be the factors of enabling them to communicate and interact with native speakers well. These responses shown in the following excerpts implied that it was possible for them to develop

intercultural communicative competence in the future, given that they would like to communicate and interact with native speakers actively:

B5: ***If you are not shy*** *and **not afraid** of losing face as well as become **open-minded** with American people, American people are friendly and willing to make friends with you.*

B6*: Whether or not you can communicate with native speakers depends on **cultural knowledge** and **personality**.*

C3*: I think that lack of **communication skills** is my problem. We need to know more about them.*

C6: *I think communication with people should be **honest and from the bottom of one's heart**.*

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Although the results of this study find that EFL students' attitudes could be affected by intercultural learning, they do not show that all their attitudes become more positive as a function of increased length of residence abroad. More importantly, it is found that how positive students' attitudes are may depend on contexts rather than length of residence abroad. In other words, students may hold positive attitudes towards one context but negative attitudes towards another. For example, students studying abroad longer than two years tend to hold more positive attitudes towards the target culture but less positive attitudes towards native speakers. In addition, the results of this study show that most students in the three groups do not hold positive attitudes towards native speakers due to language and cultural barriers. In response to the finding that students' attitudes towards the target culture and native speakers cannot be easily predicted by length of residence abroad, the researcher argues that these two kinds of attitudes involve more about one's values and perceptions which may arise from their stereotypes and are thus less likely to become positive as a function of increased length of residence abroad. However, the results of this study also show that these two attitudes still reflect intercultural learning outcomes such as culture shock, cultural awareness, cultural identity and intercultural competence. On this point, it can be argued that either positive or negative attitudes towards the target culture and native speakers are essential to reflecting intercultural learning outcomes. However, the researcher suggests that the identification of intercultural learning outcomes on the basis of these two attitudes should require more time and more attention to their influential factors such as language and cultural barriers.

Of three kinds of attitudes (i. e. towards native speakers, towards the target culture, and towards communication and interaction with native speakers), attitudes towards communication and interaction with native speakers emerge as the only kind that could become more positive as a function of increased length of residence abroad. While finding that attitudes towards communication and interaction with native speakers are more predictable than the other two kinds of attitudes, the researcher argues that attitudes toward communication and interaction with native speakers are more likely to become positive as a function of increased length of residence abroad because of direct involvement in communicative activities in the host environment which lead to more understandings of native speakers and the target culture. As the results of this study also show that such attitudes may reflect intercultural learning outcomes such as the success in target language acquisition and intercultural communication, it can be argued that more positive attitudes toward communication and interaction with native speakers are beneficial for the development of intercultural competence or intercultural communicative competence. The researcher also suggests that EFL students should learn to

hold more positive attitudes towards communication and interaction with native speakers and also make good use of communicative skills, the personality traits and the knowledge of the target culture in order to develop intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence.

CONCLUSION

Since an increasing number of people in the twenty-first century study abroad, they may more or less experience intercultural learning as a consequence of communication and interaction with native speakers using English as a shared language in daily life. While finding that students studying abroad indeed benefit from intercultural learning, the results of this study show.that those learning outcomes such as culture shock, cultural awareness, cultural identity and intercultural competence are concretely demonstrated by EFL students in their attitudes towards the target culture and native speakers as well as communication and interaction with native speakers. It is thus concluded that these three kinds of attitudes indeed play a role in the reflection of intercultural learning outcomes. More importantly, the researcher emphasizes that EFL students studying abroad should learn to become alert to those learning outcomes manifested in their own attitudes. When attitudes towards communication and interaction with native speakers are found to be more predictable than the other two kinds of attitudes, it is also concluded that such attitudes may be more stable to determine the degree to which EFL students studying abroad benefit from intercultural learning. As the results of this study find that these three kinds of attitudes can be easily influenced by other factors such as language and cultural barriers as well as psychological resistance, however, it is further concluded that those influential factors can be taken into consideration in order to explore intercultural learning outcomes among EFL students studying abroad effectively and efficiently. Since intercultural learning outcomes emerges naturally among EFL students studying abroad outside the classroom, the researcher emphasizes the importance of intercultural learning to younger generations in the twenty-first century and suggests that English teachers and educators across the world integrate intercultural learning into foreign language education though different approaches such as study abroad programs to help EFL students develop intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence and also to enhance mutual understandings among people in the global society.

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