

The Positive Effects of the Buddy Model in International Student Exchange

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the 'Buddy Model' of cultural learning and measures its effectiveness in promoting cross-cultural relationships. This model was developed by the author and implemented in 2013 and 2014 to enhance intercultural student exchange programs in Vietnam.

This paper describes the effectiveness of the Buddy Model for enhancing cultural understanding and minimizing culture shock within study abroad programs. The Buddy Model specifically aims to address Japanese and Vietnamese cultural differences by tailoring activities to meet theoretically best practices and the unique needs of Japanese students. This study found the Buddy Model to be of particular relevance for the Framework of the Vietnam-Japan Youth Exchange (JVYE) due to its effectiveness in exposing Japanese youth to Vietnamese culture.

Key words: culture learning, culture shock, Buddy Model

1. Introduction

1-1 Globalization and Education

Globalization was defined by Giddens as 'the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa' (Giddens 1990). Globalization is a complex and heavily researched process that involves a rapid, multidimensional social change. These include, but are not limited to, the world economy, politics, communications, the physical environment and culture (Tomlinson, 2006). Simply put, globalization continues to make the world more interconnected (Friedman, 2006) and allows relationships to extend beyond borders, time zones and languages. This has already seen radical transforma-

tions in human interaction, connecting people and expanding businesses across the world. As educators, it is our duty to prepare students for these new challenges and to give them the tools to adapt in the face of constant change, and to work within new cultures outside of their comfort zone.

Education is not exempt from globalization. Students now engage in short courses from institutions all over the world and are increasingly accepted to attend all levels of education in foreign countries. This in turn has seen the number of students studying abroad increase considerably from 0.8 million worldwide in 1975 to 4.5 million in 2012. The literature also suggests that 97% of the students who study abroad gain employment within 12 months of graduation, in comparison with 49% of their peers (Kendra, 2012). The diversified knowledge and cultural experiences gained while studying abroad thus greatly strengthen a students' employability in an ever-globalized labor market.

Studying in a foreign country, with unfamiliar structures and customs, is not trivial (Ossman & Schmoelz, 2010). This is especially true for students who do not sufficiently understand the language, or who are yet unfamiliar with the expected behavioral norms. The ability then, for students to consciously adapt to their target culture is vital, and results in most succumbing to some level of culture shock.

1-2 Culture Shocks

There is no singularly valid definition for 'culture,' as it encompasses an entire social context and the mutual experiences of a whole community. Regardless, various scholars have attempted to define 'culture' in their own way. Segall et al. (1999) defined culture as the products of past human behavior and as shapers of future human behavior. These 'shapers' continually serve to bring about lifestyle uniformities and diversities that become more pronounced over time. These are exemplified as different languages, demeanor, or unique social cues. For example, in both Japanese and Vietnamese societies people bow to greet one another, while in Nepal they join hands in Namaste. All of us are subconsciously aware of the cues that comprise our own respective cultures (Oberg, 1954).

As globalization continues to make the world more interconnected, contact with diverse cultures has increasingly become part of everyday life. Culture shock is considered the first and inevitable stage in culture learning and was coined by Kalervo Oberg in the 1950's. When a person enters a new society, the aforementioned cultural cues are removed (ibid.). This leaves the individual helpless, or in a state of 'shock' where they are unsure of how to behave. This phenomenon has been well researched by Smalley (1963)

and Ball-Rokeach (1973) building much of the initial foundational understanding. In this period, however, 'culture shock' carried negative connotations and focused primarily on language barriers and emotion. The research of the era described participants' feelings of frustration and anxiety when entering a new culture with the following five reactions commonly documented: (1) mental fatigue during the adaptation stage; (2) feelings of uneasiness when failing to continue the behaviors of the original culture; (3) refusing or being refused by a new culture; (4) uncertain status in a new circumstance; (5) discomfort when things fall short of expectation; and (6) feeling of powerlessness when failing to deal with the new culture.

Eventually, the meaning of 'culture shock' expanded to different sectors, especially education and business. Consequently, it was associated with notably neutral properties as compared to the predominantly negative context it was previously viewed in. In 1975, Peter Adler introduced five stages of the culture shock process, which were referred to as contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy and independence. In the 'first contact' or 'Honeymoon' stage, one experiences feelings of excitement and curiosity. As the first stage gradually passes, individuals begin to face difficulties in comprehending the dissimilarities between their old and new cultures. This disorients the individual, which in turn makes them disintegrate from the new culture. Following this stage, there is a period of depression or 'homesickness'. Gradually though, the individual realizes the differences between their old and new environments and attempts to reintegrate with the new culture. During the next stage, individuals learn to self-reflect prior to making decisions, and develop strategies to cope with their problems. Finally in the fifth stage, individuals accept the new culture and can define the pros and cons of their new environment. This objective mindset allows the individual to either achieve biculturalism or to reject their new environment. Due to the very personal nature of this process it is however, difficult to measure.

Lysgaard (1955) also suggested a linear process of cultural acceptance, known as the U-Curve. This model was created to make up for the lack of evidence supporting the model of Adler and Lysgaard. Church (1982) illustrated a more scientific method to explain the concept of culture shock. Here, culture shock denotes the adjustment of feelings, which can be referred to within a mood range. This mood range moves from 'high' when first in touch with the new culture to below 'regular' when trying to adapt. It then gradually recovers as one approaches the end of the cultural adaptation process.

More recent models of culture shock emphasize 'adaptation' and incorporate both ed-

educational and psychological theories. Specifically the literature describes the importance of one's own ability to adapt to a new culture. Juffer (1987) considers culture shock to be more closely related to psychological growth and created a new model based on five stages of learning and development, each with its own opportunities. These include one's past experiences, misunderstandings or perceptions of the intergroup, the detection of possible danger, or a lack of knowledge toward a new situation. Culture shock then requires people to regulate their behavior and to be compatible with the new circumstances. This 'modifiability' towards a new culture in turn offers numerous unexpected opportunities. Gudykunst and Hammer (1988) believe that the reduction of anxiety and uncertainty implies an increase in the understanding of the new environment. Creation of favorable contexts, cultural similarity, and network interactions thus enhance the process of cultural adaption.

Culture learning is both dependent upon the individual and the external factors surrounding the individual. Furnham (1986) presents six main outcome determinants for culture shock, namely (1) the linkage between the initial context and the new, (2) the internal factors (age, gender, characteristic, level of knowledge, experience, and so on), (3) current mental and physical conditions, (4) current interpersonal circumstance, (5) the features of new environment, and (6) geopolitical condition. Berry, et al. (1992) also acknowledged the contribution of communication styles, nonverbal behavior and methods of dealing with culture shock as being a strong indicator of success. These specifically enable individuals to maintain a strong cultural identity, yet build links with members of other cultural groups leading to an integration strategy in which important elements of both cultures are blended (Davidson, 2009).

Culture shock can be considered the first step of cultural learning, which in turn leads to the achievement of greater self-awareness and individual growth. It also represents the initial psychological transition of an individual when moving beyond their comfort zone. In this research, the matters characteristic of the past culture, the duration of adjustment, the pattern of adaptation and the expression of culture shock will be analyzed. Particular emphasis is placed on how the Buddy Model improves each of these metrics.

1-3 Acculturation and Cross-cultural Exchange among Students

Most of the students who study abroad experience culture shock, especially when they meet new people with radically different cultural backgrounds. This process enables

Table 1 Berry's Acculturation Attitudes (Berry et al., 1992)

Acculturation attitudes		Is it considered to be of value to maintain cultural identity and characteristics?	
		Yes	No
Is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with other groups?	Yes	Integrated	Assimilated
	No	Separated	Marginalised

them to neutrally observe the changes in their environment and the behavioural patterns of those around them. When that happens, according to Berry's multidimensional acculturation model, there are four possible responses or types of acculturation: (1) assimilation, where the individual replaces their own culture and customs within the culture and customs of mainstream society; (2) separation: where the individual chooses not to take on the customs and culture of mainstream society and remains segregated; (3) marginalization: where the individual fails to fit into either their native society or mainstream society; and (4) integration/biculturalism: where the individual maintains the values and customs of their native culture and takes on the values and customs of mainstream society.

This model defines two dimensions of acculturation. The first dimension is based on maintaining one's own cultural identity and the second around maintaining links with members of a different cultural group. The students' final response to culture shock is dependent upon their ties to these cultural dimensions.

To promote positive outcomes for the cross-cultural interactions between individuals and groups, it is necessary to create favourable external factors around the students. With the process of globalization rapidly spreading to all aspects of our lives, it is necessary for students to gain greater independence; an awareness of international issues; sensitivity to difference, and diversity and competence in other languages (Davidson, 2009).

2. The 'Buddy Model' and Learning a New Culture

In a multicultural setting, culture shock is inevitable and a pre-requisite for an

individual's acculturation within a new society. The experience, however, is far from comfortable and is often accompanied by a variety of psychological frustrations. Sadly these frustrations are often observed when conducting short-term cultural exchange programs between students of different countries. It is certainly not uncommon to see students end up in a foul mood, or to express themselves negatively toward the new culture and/or their new friends. According to Seki & Nguyen (2015), a student's failure to deal with culture shock is one of the main reasons they become preoccupied with negative feelings towards the target culture. In the process of conducting different types of international cultural exchange programs, Seki and Nguyen found out that a 'buddy system', in which one or two local participants take care of one 'new-comer' during the program, alleviated his / her culture shock, and created a better overall atmosphere during the program. Furthermore, most of their participants wrote positive comments about their experiences within the Buddy Model.

The Buddy Model uses intensive training to foster cultural learning while minimizing culture shock. The activities create an environment that forces students to communicate openly during their intensive short-term exchange programs. Through such exchange programs, the Buddy Model helps students to overcome key cultural barriers including language and customs.

2-1 General Characteristics of Vietnamese and Japanese Societies

In this research, the Buddy Model has been tailored to meet the practices of Vietnamese society and Japanese participants. It is important then to describe, in broad terms, some of the critical characteristics of Vietnamese and Japanese societies. Table 3 and Figure 1 help to highlight the key differences between the two countries.

2-2 Buddy Model customization for the Vietnam-Japan Youth Exchange Program

One of the defining features of the exchange program is the amount of time dedicated to target culture collaboration. In the program, participants spend the majority of their time working with members of the target culture, with each activity carefully crafted to correspond with mainstream cultural learning models, to solve problems and achieve defined outcomes.

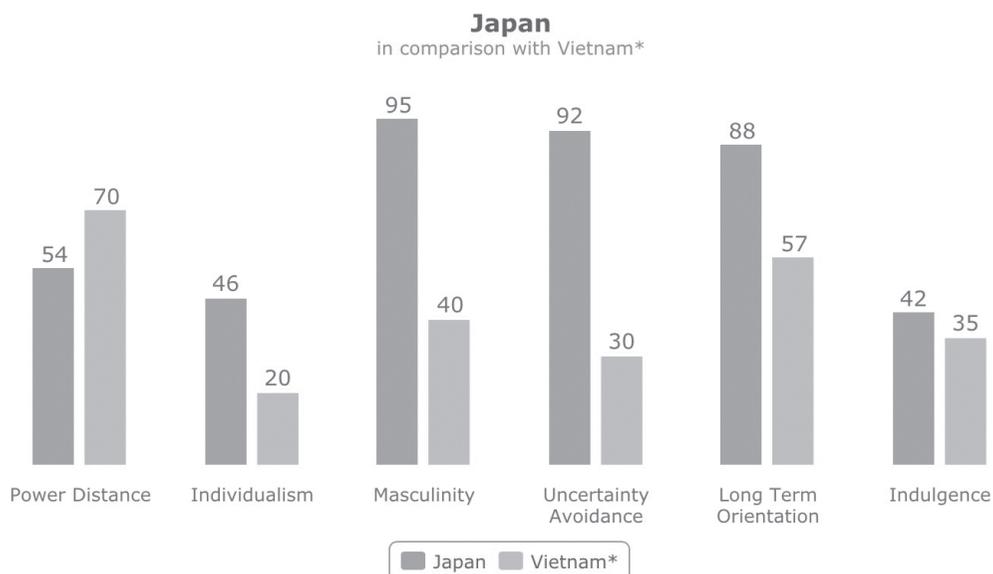
For this study, the Buddy Model was applied during a 12-day Vietnam-Japan Youth Exchange programs (VJYE) held in Ho Chi Minh City. The Asia Association of Education and Exchange (AAEE), a Japanese based general incorporated association, organized

Table 2 General characteristics of Vietnamese and Japanese Societies

Characteristic	Japan	Vietnam
Power Distance	A borderline hierarchical society Decision made by each hierarchical layer A meritocratic society, but equality, ideology in education	Accepting a hierarchical order Reflecting inherent inequalities, man as breadwinner in family Leader as a benevolent autocrat in socialism
Individualism	A moderate collectivistic society: a strong sense of shame, harmony of group, a paternalistic society, community loyalty Collectivistic by Western standards and individualist by Asian standards Respecting the private and reserved characteristics	A high collectivistic society: long term commitment group Everyone takes care of their crew Avoiding to offence due to shame and loss of face. Management is the management of groups
Masculinity	One of the most Masculine societies in the world: mild collectivism, competition between groups not individual. Appreciating success, status and honor as living mission Excellence and perfection in their material production, and in material services and presentation Workaholism is expression of their Masculinity (hard for women pursuing)	Considered a Feminine society: caring for others and quality of life as a sign of success Conflict solved by compromise and negotiation Encouraging leisure time and flexibility An effective manager as a supportive one for group Focusing on well-being than status
Uncertainty Avoidance	One of the most uncertainty avoiding countries over the world: Due to the threaten by natural disasters from earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons and volcano eruptions leading them well-prepared in any circumstances Prescribing strictly for maximum predictability; risk factors	A low preference for avoiding uncertainty: relaxed attitude, flexible schedule Treating future rather as innovation than threatening Precision and punctuality are not naturally practiced
Long term Orientation	One of the most long-term orientation societies Care for a long history of mankind Plan for many generations in future	A pragmatic culture, truths depend on situation Adapt traditions and changed conditions easily
Indulgence	A culture of restraint: controlling their desires and impulses, based on education's ideology Tendency to cynicism, pessimism Restrained by social norms	A culture of restraint: the norm of society controlling peoples' behavior, especially the criticism of the old generation

Source: Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, Michael Minkov (2010) <http://geert-hofstede.com/japan.html>

Figure 1 The characteristics of Japan ese and Vietnam ese (Hofstede, G. et al 2010)



both of the exchange programs. The programs offered a combination of academic, social, cultural, and sightseeing activities. Through the program, participants were involved in a series of action plan workshops, community service, and social activities. These collectively enhanced mutual understanding, cooperation and helped to foster a deeper relationship between Vietnamese and Japanese students.

2-3 Framework of VJYE

All activities within the 12-day program were created to promote acculturation to new culture in a warm and friendly environment, as well as encouraging them to communicate in their common language, English.

2-4 Description of the Model

This research considers culture shock to be the inevitable first stage in a lifelong process of cultural learning, and that culture shock is indeed necessary for students to successfully integrate with a new culture. There are many external factors that similarly affect this process, most of which are dependent on the participant's own cultural background. To better highlight a typical Japanese student's experience when first engaging with Vietnamese culture, we have modified Lysgaard's U-curve model below.

Based upon these characteristics, we hypothesize that Japanese students will experi-

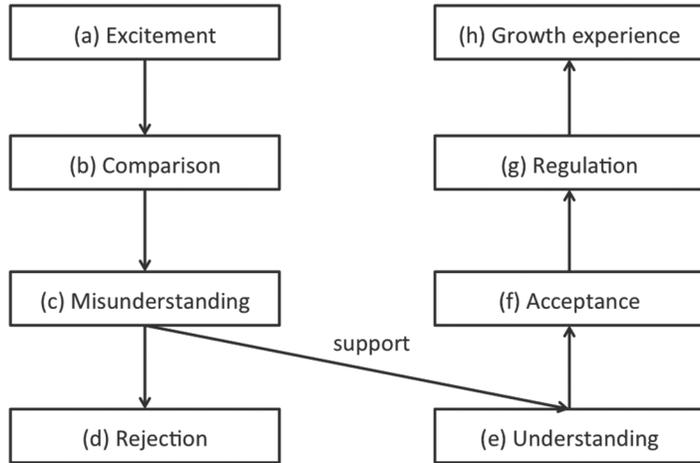
Table 3 Activities of the VJYE Programs

Activities	Details	Period	Place
(1) Warm-up activities	These included 'ice-breaker activities' to help both Vietnamese and Japanese students make friends. Through a city-tour and other sightseeing activities, the student got to know each other. Many teamwork games pushed students to collaborate and required continuous communication.	2 days	Ho Chi Minh
(2) Academic/ group learning	In this phase, students focus on an academic environment. The skill sets required are more rigorous than the previous activities. Through these activities, students learn how to work professionally in an international group and learn basic Vietnamese business concepts.	3 days	Ho Chi Minh (in class with lecturer)
(3) Local trip/ field trip	Local trip complements the theoretical knowledge gained by students in the academic phase. In completing this phase, the student will witness first-hand the local economy and living environment. In addition to this, students are given the opportunity to interact with members of the local community.	4-5 days	Remote area/ countryside
(4) Culture Exchange	This section helps students understand both Vietnamese and Japanese cultures through various mediums. Participants are given an opportunity to showcase their culture, in their own preferred mode.	2 days	On stage activities, outdoor activities
(5) Reflection	In the final phase, students are required to reflect on the program and self-evaluate their progress.	1 days	

ence all seven stages of culture shock during the VJYE program. During this process, Vietnamese students will support Japanese students in gaining new understandings and in breaking down expected cultural barriers. All activities within the Buddy Model are also arranged to support students throughout each of the steps described by the Modified U-curve culture shock model.

The first stage of the Buddy Model comprises of warm-up activities (1). This corresponds to stage (a) excitement, (b) comparison, (c) misunderstanding (Figure 2). At the

Figure 2 Modified U-curve culture shock



beginning of the program, students arrive in their target country with a sense of excitement and desire to discover and learn. After this honeymoon period, students will tend to compare their new environment with their own expectations. Discrepancies may then lead to fundamental misunderstandings and miscommunication between the participants and the host community. To minimize this, the warm-up stage includes only recreational or tourist outings. These are designed to provide students with a safe yet immersive environment, with group activities facilitating an atmosphere conducive to self-expression and a means for the participants to get to know their hosts quickly.

The activities listed above for academic/group learning (2) are related to stages (d) rejection, (e) understanding, and (f) acceptance. After the first phase, deeper friendships between many of the participants will have been formed. The second phase then gives participants and their hosts an opportunity to work intensively in the same environment. Under the time and academic pressure, the expression of different personalities will naturally cause conflicts and miscommunication. However, the friendships founded in the previous phase and the ongoing support of the Vietnamese hosts should help Japanese participants come to terms with the differences they encounter. Strategically, these activities (2) also help to negate the 'rejection' stage (d) of the culture shock process.

The third set of activities (3) corresponds with stage (g) regulation in the culture shock process. In this phase, and after accepting the new culture, Japanese students should be capable of behavior regulation and practically apply the concepts studied in the previous activities (2). In this phase, most students will overcome any feelings of culture

shock and begin engaging in a more enlightened way.

The final activities (4), (5) correlate to the concluding stage (h) growth experience. Following all previous experiences and activities, students will have gathered a range of experiences relating to Vietnamese culture. In this phase, students reflect on their achievements. These reflections are shared as presentations and as a formalized self-evaluation. The exchange concludes with a cultural night, which is organized to re-iterate the ritual, customary and traditional activities of both cultures.

I hypothesized that the program based on the Buddy Model has an overall positive effect on student cultural learning.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a traditional field experiment methodology. Ten students from Japan and ten students from Vietnam were enrolled in the program. To ensure adequate communication, all students were required to meet English language pre-requisites, and their level of interest in the Japanese or Vietnamese culture was gauged prior to acceptance.

A survey was conducted post-program to check the overall effects of the Buddy Model. To most accurately assess the effectiveness of the Buddy Model, this survey questions the perceptions and experiences of both Vietnamese and Japanese participants. For triangulation and additional qualitative data collection, focus groups and expert opinions are sought and reviewed. The VJYE was conducted twice in Vietnam with ten Japanese students participating in the program each year. For this study, the total sample size was 38 students (including Vietnamese participants and the participants from Japan in 2013 and 2014).

4. Results and Discussion

At the beginning of the program, participants were strategically enrolled in mixed groups. Wherever feasible, groups were constructed with even numbers of Japanese and Vietnamese students, with differing personality, experiential and/or other related characteristics. Rationally, in a single program with equal numbers of Japanese and Vietnamese students, personalities vary. This allows planners to construct groups in a way that gives each student a specific role in the project, be that as a leader, connector or a supporter.

Figure 3 The factors affecting the stages of culture shock

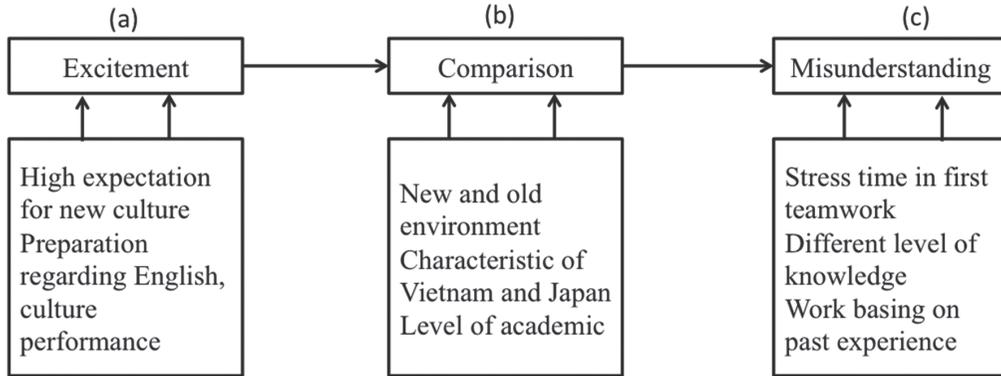


Table 4 The English level of all students before and after the program

Level (N=38)	Before (%)	After (%)
Very Good	1 (2.6)	1 (2.6)
Good	16 (42.1)	19 (50.0)
Fair	15 (39.5)	15 (39.5)
Average	4 (10.5)	2 (5.2)
Weak	2 (5.2)	1 (2.6)

The typical characteristics of Japanese students are described in Table 3, and this was used as a basis for mapping participants to their hosts. The literature shows that Japanese students tend to be more reserved, introvert and risk adverse than their Vietnamese counterparts. These factors negatively affect their behavior in stages (a) excitement, (b) comparison, (c) misunderstanding and thus make it more difficult for Japanese students to integrate with Vietnamese culture. In contrast, Vietnamese students are more outgoing, active and positive in difficult situations, thus balancing the group as a whole.

As expected, post-exchange survey responses suggest that more than five students from both countries were well acquainted already by the end of the first day.

Prior to the in-country exchange, students were required to interact with each other online. The purpose of this online interaction was to prepare for the English language challenges that lay ahead (Table 4). The Vietnamese organizers of the program had checked the participants' English proficiency level through Skype and Facebook interactions, and realized the necessity of giving them opportunities to use English before the program.

This online pre-program thus provided an additional opportunity to build friendships.

Table 5 Characteristics of the participants in the program

Character (N=38)	Vietnamese	Japanese
Strong power & open-minded (Leader type)	6	3
Active & joyful (Connected member)	8	7
Reserved, introvert & careful (Supportive member)	6	8

The strong correlation between an individual student's English proficiency, and their subsequent willingness to actively engage with members of the target culture was also noted.

Activity (1) was conducted in correlation with the stages (a) excitement, (b) comparison, (c) misunderstanding, of the exchange program. This specifically included a city tour and targeted team-building games. As a result of these activities, friendship among participants deepened rapidly. Students received more opportunities to communicate with each other and were better prepared for the comparison stage of culture shock. In short, potential cultural misconceptions were resolved in a proactive way as a direct result of the intervention.

Predictably, those Japanese students with lower English communication skills experienced misunderstandings in the next stage of culture shock. This group, due to their personality and lower level of engagement, were always at risk of reacting negatively to the culture shift, and this would provide an explanation for the slower pace in the increase of friendships during this stage.

One similarity between Vietnamese and Japanese students, as described in Table 3, is the collectivistic societies they come from. Vietnam is, however, considered to be more feminine and nurturing. In this stage then, it was not unusual to see Vietnamese students proactively tending to the needs of their struggling Japanese peers. Subsequently, by the end of the acceptance stage of culture shock, all of the students had established a close circle of friends, which continued to strengthen until the end of the project.

Culture shock also created predictable conflicts within the group. Of particular note were the differences between the intransigent and risk adverse nature of the Japanese participants and the more flexible and *laissez-faire* approach of the Vietnamese. Some Jap-

Table 6 Marking the score for each activity in program

Section	Average score (max=5)	How it affects participants (5 of the most common answers)
Warm-up activities	4.7	Good first impression about Vietnam Experiencing lifestyle Learning Vietnamese history Easy to make friends
Academic/group learning	3.9	Learning business generally Learning teamwork with Vietnamese students Expanding their viewpoints
Local trip/field trip	4.65	Experience with local lifestyle, food Non-verbal communication with locals (no English) Understand the Vietnamese perceptions by conversations Building strong friendships
Culture exchange	4.8	Communication skills with children Public speaking Confidence to perform on stage
Reflection	4.05	Presentation skills Body language More confidence English practice Reflecting all programs
<p>*The score ranges from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating a maximum level of satisfaction with the program and 1 meaning no satisfaction with the program. *This table is scored based on the views of the participants from Japan. In this table, Vietnamese students are treated as partners, serving to guide their Japanese counterparts throughout the process. As such their ratings are not scored.</p>		

anese students expressed their frustration and fear of building new relationships, inability to immediately integrate with a new culture, and their displeasure towards changes in the initial program plan. It required measurably greater effort to encourage Japanese students to exit their comfort zone (Table 3). However, according to the survey and focus group responses, the deliberate arrangement of students and group formation effectively dissolved all initial cultural barriers, thus helping Japanese participants overcome their culture shock. All Japanese participants noted that the support of their “buddies” was critical to their successful negation of culture shock. They also indicated that they had built strong friendships with their Vietnamese peers, which erased almost all the difficulties

Table 7 Degree of success of the program under participants' perception

Standard	N	Percentage
Very successful	10	26.32%
Successful	26	68.42%
Moderate	2	5.26%
Fail	0	0%

during the programs.

Table 6 shows other outcomes directly related to the experiences offered in program identified in survey and focus group responses. Students have also indicated that the demanding nature of the program helped them to engage and dramatically improve their interpersonal skills. In other words, in accepting a new culture, many of the Japanese students felt that they had become more open-minded, with nearly 90% of students (Table 6) indicating the obvious success of the program.

5. CONCLUSION

Globalization impacts every aspect of contemporary life, and education is certainly no exception. The increasing frequency at which students travel abroad for study, work and pleasure, forces us to reconsider how to best prepare them to adapt to changes in their environment and to accept new cultures. Culture shock is considered to be the initial stage required to adapt oneself to a new culture and has been the focus of this study.

In this research, the differences between Vietnamese and Japanese cultures were examined, and appropriate theories were applied in tailoring the stages of culture shock. The Buddy Model was in turn constructed to scaffold and better support Japanese students' cultural and language acquisition. This paper described how the Buddy Model was applied in Vietnam over two VJYE programs in 2013 and 2014. At the end of these two programs, all 38 participants were surveyed and asked to describe the program's outcome and their personal reflections.

The survey indicated the success of the program and showed that the basic cultural barriers had been minimized as a direct result of this project. In particular, students noted their ability to put personalities aside and become more involved in the new environment. Other positive outcomes included the increased confidence in using English as a

primary means of communication and the construction of long-lasting relationships with their Vietnamese or Japanese peers.

Acknowledgment

First of all, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Ms. Xuan Nguyen (AAEE, Asia Association of Education and Exchange, Vietnam) for working together with me for the last three years. Without her sincere effort, we could not accomplish a lot in Vietnam. Also, I really appreciate the support of Mr. Sharad Sharma (AAEE, Nepal) and Mr. Jason la Greca (AAEE, Australia) for giving me valuable comments on this research. Last but not least, I am hugely grateful to all the students and teachers who have supported our projects in Vietnam.

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