

Reflection on the Short-term Intercultural Student Exchange Program - Aiming to Build Cultural Competency and English Proficiency

—The Mero Sathi Project in Nepal—

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the 2015 Mero Sathi exchange programs. These two exchanges were managed by the author with the assistance of a small team of Nepalese and Japanese students. All participants worked tirelessly to promote intercultural and international student exchange in Nepal. This paper analyzes the programs' effectiveness in improving cultural understanding and in motivating participants to improve their English communication skills. The paper also identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the current program.

key words; cultural competency, English competency, intercultural student exchange program

1. Introduction

1-1 Culture and Exchange

No single description of “culture” sufficiently describes the many varied social contexts it encompasses. Many scholars have, however, attempted to narrow the scope. Segall et al. (1999) for example, defined culture as the products of past human behavior and as shapers of future human behavior. To Segall (1999) it is these produced social assets that continually serve to bring about continuities or diversities in lifestyles over time. With this definition, culture cannot be learned as a series of facts, physical elements, or characteristics, but rather absorbed through a deeply personal confluence of language, values, beliefs, and behaviors that encompass every aspect of one's life (Ovando, Collier,

Reflection on the Short-term Intercultural Student Exchange Program - Aiming to Build Cultural... and Cummins, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999).

Cultural exchange programs force participants to interact with people of different cultural backgrounds. These interactions result in culture shock and enable participants to neutrally observe the changes in their environment and the behavioral patterns of the people around them. When this happens, according to Berry's multidimensional acculturation model, there are four possible responses or types of acculturation: assimilation, where people replace their native culture and customs with the culture and customs of mainstream society (1); separation: where people choose not to take on the customs and culture of mainstream society and remain segregated (2); marginalization: where people fail to fit into either their native society or mainstream society (3); integration/biculturalism: where people maintain values and customs of their native culture and take on the values and custom of mainstream society that allow them to become full participants in society (4) (Berry et al. 1992).

To promote positive outcomes and improved learning experiences during cross-cultural interactions, it is necessary to create favorable external factors for participants. With globalization rapidly impacting all aspects of our lives, it is necessary for students to gain greater independence, awareness of international issues, sensitivity to difference, and competence in other languages (Davidson, 2009).

1-2 Education and Culture

Education contributes to the growth of an individual through a process of intellectual transformation. This transformation can be observed in one's attitude towards new challenges, and the pursuit of new skills (Genc and Bada, 2005). The literature suggests that learners are most motivated to learn in a secure and respectful setting. Conversely, an environment where the learner is made to feel unsafe, disconnected or disrespected will be detrimental to learning. The learning environment then has a direct influence on a learner's concentration, imagination, effort and willingness to learn (Ginsberg and Wlodowski, 2009). However, the classroom context remains rife with beliefs and values as "no learning situation... is culturally neutral." (ibid.) These inescapable educational values are formed through a community's local history, religion, media, family, mythology, and/or political orientation.

Students thrive in environments where anxiety is kept low, where motivation and self-esteem are kept high, and when they are encouraged to showcase their skills, experiences, and strengths. These are the foundation for future learning (Taylor and Sobel,

2011) and successful cultural exchange programs. In a cultural exchange program, it is necessary to create an environment for learners to feel welcome, safe and supported even in the most culturally heterogeneous of groups. One way to achieve this in the international exchange context is through the implementation of supplemental activities that meet the needs of the individual learner. These activities offer multiple opportunities to support students and encourage them to make sense of what they have heard, seen or felt. (ibid.)

In the multicultural learning context, education needs to be balanced to address the needs of all students (Corson, 1998). The role of the teacher, and of the students for that matter, is to ensure inclusivity and the maintenance of a non-hierarchical environment for learning (ibid). In language classrooms, where less proficient students often become reclusive, specific encouragement strategies are necessary to elicit roles and responsibilities (Dörnyei and Murphey, 2003). In short-term intercultural student exchange programs, it is of particular importance to outline individual or team roles. This ensures that learners are comfortable with each other and with the learning process.

As short-term intercultural student exchange programs force significant alterations to the expected norms and practices of the learner, participants are at the risk of becoming confused and/or reclusive unless given familiar and explicit roles to enact. A culturally responsive pedagogy that (1) respects diversity; (2) engages the motivation of all learners; (3) creates a safe, inclusive, and respectful environment; (4) derives teaching practices from principles that cross disciplines and cultures; and (5) promotes justice and equity in the broader community and beyond (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 2009) is necessary to engage learners in a way that not only familiarizes them with each other but also motivates them to learn.

1-3 English language learning through Cultural Exchange

In culturally heterogeneous learning contexts, it is necessary to focus on the common language for communication. Cultural exchanges are a valuable means by which to force intercultural learning through regular interactions in English and thus enable students to engage in more explicit modes of interpretation (Corbett, 2003). Unlike classroom learning, student interactions during exchange programs are based on cultural understanding, namely the fluidity of social identification. This includes dealing with unpredictability and helps make spoken interactions 'authentic' (ibid.).

Encouraging language learning through short-term intercultural student exchange

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programs carries the risk of external regulation. As explained by Noels (2009), external regulation refers to cases where one performs an activity because of an interpersonal demand or situational contingency. While the student would interact with his peers in English for the duration of the exchange program, at the end of the program that engagement would desist. Noels (2009) proposes integrated regulation as a means of mitigating this risk. If the activities within the exchange fit within defined goals, beliefs, and activities that the participant already endorses, they will feel that the activity is a realization and expression of their own self and will be motivated to learn even when the contingencies are removed (Noels, 2009).

2. Mero Sathi Project

2-1 General Characteristics

The Mero Sathi exchange programs ('mero sathi' means 'my friend' in English) were conducted in August and September 2015, in the aftermath of the devastating Nepalese earthquake. These exchange programs were seen as opportunities for youths from different cultural backgrounds to come together to show solidarity towards Nepal in its hour of need.

2-2 Objectives

There were three objectives for the short-term (ten days) intercultural student exchange programs.

(1) To create an engaging environment for students to communicate in English and facilitate language learning.

The program aimed to include interactive activities where students from varied backgrounds are encouraged to engage with one another. As such, participants were forced to communicate in English and learn from each other in the process.

(2) To enhance mutual understanding of Nepalese and Japanese cultures through the creation of a nurturing environment.

The program aimed to promote cultural diversity by encouraging students to interact with other culture, as well as facilitating interactions about their own cultures in comparison.

(3) To build fundamental hands-on social skills for students.

Having the students in close quarters with one another for the duration of the exchange,

the programs encouraged close interactions and friendship among the students. This, in turn, helped to improve social skills.

2-3 Program Details

The Mero Sathi program was held twice, once in August and again in the September of 2015. Both took place in Nepal as a Cultural Exchange program for Nepalese and Japanese university students. The programs had two primary goals. The first goal was to support the earthquake affected communities of Nepal. The second goal was to facilitate the participants' cultural competency and English proficiency by living and working together using their common language, English, for a predetermined period.

Through the collaborative construction of a goat shelter, the program aimed to support an earthquake-affected family in Gorkha, at the epicenter of the primary quake. This shelter would, in turn, serve as an ongoing source of income for the family. The "Goat Shelter Project" would also allow for ongoing financial support of a local school, which had also been damaged by the earthquake. In addition to the construction of a goat shelter, the program also provisioned the following student focused and/or cultural activities.

- (1) The first and the final days of the project were spent in Nepal's capital, Kathmandu. With the exchange program clashing with the Nepal's draft constitution promulgation, strikes made travel to various locations difficult. The students instead were given the opportunity to better acquaint themselves through team games and local market visits. The rationale for these activities was to allow students to become familiar with their Nepalese hosts and to acclimatize to the local environment. During the final days of the project, the students were interviewed by local media outlets, such as News 24 Nepal, the national TV channel, and Radio Kantipur, one of the leading FM radio stations in Nepal, which gave them valuable opportunities to reflect on their activities throughout the project in English.
- (2) The second destination for students was the earthquake affected village of Katteldanda in Gorkha. Gorkha had been the epicenter of the April 2015 earthquake, and the support program was still in progress when the students arrived. The Mero Sathi project focused solely on exchange program activities and kept earthquake support aside.
- (3) (August Program only) Sikles is a mountainous village near the foothills of Dhaulagiri Mountain Range. Here students were able to visit a local school and perform a dance and other cultural activities. Critically, the Japanese students also experienced the schooling system of a less privileged community in Nepal. The Japanese students relied on their Nepalese peers to support them in comprehending finer aspects of various social situa-

Reflection on the Short-term Intercultural Student Exchange Program - Aiming to Build Cultural... tions in English, and these close interactions helped to build lasting friendships. Japanese students were also able to learn more about the Gurung (an ethnic community in Nepal), especially their traditional attire and cuisine.

(4) (September program only) Located in remote eastern part of Palpa, Jalpa Maidan is a spectacular setting for student exchange. Our prior charitable activities in Jalpa Maidan ensured the genuine hospitality of the local community here. The students were able to visit the local school and experience the hardships of the Nepalese education system. The Nepalese students performed traditional songs for the Japanese students. Similar to the first exchange program, the Japanese students relied on their Nepalese peers in comprehending finer aspects of various social situations in English, which enabled closer interactions among the students.

3. Survey

3-1 Aim of the survey

The aim of the survey was to reflect on the Mero Sathi Projects which were conducted to improve cross-cultural competence and English language learning. The survey also tries to elicit additional benefits of the project and highlight opportunities for improvement. All the Nepalese and Japanese participants of the program were the target of this investigation.

3-2 Participants

There were two unique data sets from Mero Sathi's August and September programs, with a total sample size of 38 participants both from Nepal and Japan. There were 19 Nepalese participants (9 males and 9 females) and 19 participants from Japan (13 males and 6 females). All the participants were undergraduate university students, with ages ranging from 19 to 22. All the Nepalese participants had studied English from elementary school, and they had no difficulty in communicating in basic English words and expressions. None, however, had traveled abroad.

On the other hand, the participants from Japan had noticeably lower English proficiency, mainly because they had started learning English at a later age, mostly 12. In addition, participants noted that their English classes during junior and senior high school were grammar-centric, with little opportunity to practice communication skills. Out of the 18 Japanese participants, 16 participants had traveled abroad before, many having trav-

eled several times. These were primarily short-term sightseeing trips or school excursions, and the participants had not had sufficient opportunities to communicate with English native speakers.

3-3 Data Collection

The participants of the projects were interviewed directly by the author in an informal setting during the program, with most of the interviews being recorded. Participants were also interviewed via Skype before and after the program. In addition, a simple questionnaire was conducted at the end of each program, and all 36 participants responded. The open-ended free-text questions were included in the questionnaire to elicit the subjective views of participants, the program's impact on their overall world-view, and their suggestions to improve the program.

4. Findings and Discussion

The surveys attempted to elicit student perceptions of language and culture as they pertain to cultural competency. With that, all but one participant regarded English as being necessary for global citizenship and that the program had motivated them to communicate more in English. English was clearly seen by the participants as the best means to communicate with others from diverse cultural backgrounds. Having no choice but to communicate in English motivated the less proficient participants to improve their language competency, and simultaneously provided those more competent students with an opportunity to hone their language skills.

It was observed, however, that students from the same language backgrounds would often speak amongst themselves in their native language. When asked how the program should be improved to better facilitate intercultural exchange, the vast majority of students identified that better enforcement of English as the only means of communication would help achieve this goal.

“I am worried about the linguistic barrier between members. Today on the bus, for example, Nepalese members were talking with each other in their mother tongue, and Japanese members were talking in Japanese, too. I strongly feel that we should make it a rule not to use our mother tongue during the program.”

(Japanese male participant)

It is important to note that some Japanese participants continued to struggle with their insufficient English and were overwhelmed with the need to engage in the program entirely in English. While the Nepalese participants had successfully obtained adequate English proficiency through their primary and secondary education, most of the Japanese participants were still grappling with practical English skills. This is despite having learned English at school for at least six years. Other common responses included increased opportunities for inter-student interaction, though it was not elaborated how this could be achieved.

In contrast, students provided an array of responses for how cultural differences impacted their interaction with other participants and/or how that, in turn, affected their learning opportunities. More than 60 percent of the participants (22 out of total 36 participants) responded that cultural differences had a positive effect on their interactions. These students saw the exchange as an opportunity to broaden their perceptions and learn more about each other. Cultural differences became an interesting topic of conversation for these students, as they compared and contrasted the way of life in different nations and used various mediums like miming, videos and/or pictures to express what they wanted to say.

“I found that in Japan it is not compulsory for everyone to have a religion. That was quite shocking for me. Until then, I always thought every single person on the earth had been assigned a religion. After having this conversation with the Japanese, my whole belief system was challenged.”

(Nepalese female participant)

“And the time when my Nepali friend disliked the Japanese food for dinner and said we would never have it again, it made me realize how Japanese friends felt when they had to eat our meals. Thus, I’m glad we got to taste Japanese food as well, and in a nutshell, there was much cultural exchange today.”

(Nepalese female participant)

The remaining participants described how differences in language and cultural cues made it difficult to communicate. One Japanese participant described in depth how the reserved nature of the Japanese made it difficult for them to open up and/or articulate their feelings. It was seemingly difficult for Japanese students to understand a number of cul-

tural cues and these differences made some students hesitant to initiate communications in fear of committing social taboos.

“I know that one of my main goals is to make good friends with Nepalese students. However, it is quite difficult for me to start a conversation with them. Since the beginning of the program, I have realized I am so ignorant of this country and the people here. I have no idea what people here are interested in. I have no idea what topics they are interested or enjoy talking with us about, nor what topic should I avoid... I am so confused.”

(Japanese male participant)

“Well, whatsoever, I cannot understand their English at all. I’ve been trying my best to be active, but without being able to understand their English, it is almost impossible for me to continue conversations. How can I survive here for the remaining eight days?”

(Japanese male participant)

When asked for suggestions to improve the Mero Sathi program, students proposed a variety of solutions. While some students pointed out gaps in the current program, some gave suggestions for specific activities. Some students described how they had stayed only with their peers and communicated only within a particular circle of friends. This resulted in communication gaps among the participants as a whole.

“Especially in a past few days, the activities had been organized in a way that required us to communicate with our buddies. It was a bit difficult to make friends with other members. As I knew that our program is almost coming to an end, today I tried to ask various questions to different Japanese students as I was not able to talk enough during the program.”

(Nepalese male participant)

The coordinators of both programs had thought that having students engage in different activities for ten days was enough for participants to build friendships with all members and not just their immediately assigned buddies. However, the interview survey indicated that this was not the case for some of the participants. Even during free time and in evening activities, Japanese students preferred to talk only with their assigned buddy. As a result, participants missed many opportunities to communicate with other participants. The program should have considered the membership of each activity more

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carefully.

Specific activities suggested by participants aimed at better promoting exchange and/or encouraging culture learning. One such suggestion included the exchange of ‘food culture’ where participants could make authentic cuisines from their respective cultures. It was also suggested that letting the program coincide with one of the major festivals in Nepal would allow participants to experience the different activities and rituals of the local culture. As Nepal is cultural diverse even within short geographical distance, it was suggested that the project areas for the next program be chosen to include as much diversity as possible.

The survey and interview findings showed that the main objective of the program, to motivate the students to communicate in English, was realized. On the other hand, social interaction and culture learning were still largely dependent on the individual, with only a fraction of students able to fully engage with the opportunities available to them. Students perceived the program as successful, but a few changes are necessary to better foster student engagement and interest in the culture learning process. These changes are discussed in the next section.

5. Implications for Future Programs

Based on the reviewed literature and the findings of the two Mero Sathi programs I suggest two possible improvements for future exchange programs. The first proposed improvement is for a separate, mandatory pre-program orientation that covers “how to communicate and work together with people from other countries” for both the participants and the organizers. At least some of the difficulties the participants had faced during the program could be prevented if we had given them more information and training before the program. For example, if we had given the Nepalese and Japanese participants an opportunity to interact with each other on the phone or video chat, the Japanese participants could have noticed the gap in their respective English ability and had started practicing English harder in advance.

Similarly, if participants had realized the importance of gathering information about their own countries and culture, we might have been able to prevent the following negative comments from the participants.

“I felt ashamed when I could not answer even basic questions about Japanese politics, histo-

ry and culture from Nepalese members on the bus. I felt so ashamed, and I keenly felt the importance of knowing more about my own country.”

(Japanese male participant)

“This village is so famous among tourist, but I had never ever heard about this beautiful village. In fact, my family and friends have never heard about this beautiful village either. What a shame! Through the program, I had learned that we Nepalese are so ignorant of our own country.”

(Nepalese female participant)

Based on participant feedback, activities within the program should be diversified to include different facets of the target cultures. Activities that include local cuisine, folk music, lore, and indigenous festivals should be added to the exchange program schedule. As in the first iteration of Mero Sathi project, a specific purpose related to community development could be added to future exchange programs. Here students will receive the satisfaction of learning and/or being productive while learning from each other and sharing cultures. As one of the Japanese participants mentioned at the end of the program;

“When we conduct international student exchange projects, I think it is not enough to just make good friends with other participants, but we should aim a little higher. That is, during the program, we should talk about serious topics too, such as global problems that we will have to tackle as future global citizens. As students, we should be responsible for our future world.”

(Japanese female participant)

6. Conclusion

The Mero Sathi programs were appreciated by the participants and received ample coverage in the Nepalese media. In keeping hosts and participants in close quarters, all had the opportunity to better observe one another's behaviors and subtle cultural idiosyncrasies. These cultural differences motivated participants to better understanding one another, and this aspect has been perceived as the core strength of the program.

As English was the medium of communication between hosts and participants, most students were better motivated to communicate in English. At times, however, this also

Reflection on the Short-term Intercultural Student Exchange Program - Aiming to Build Cultural... led those with poor language skills to feel intimidated, and this is an area that needs to be addressed in future iterations of the program. The current mode of the project was deemed an overall success, as was determined through comprehensive students' survey responses. Most participants agreed that they had learned a lot about each other's cultures and remained motivated to improve their English communication skills. On top of this, the surveys also helped to identify a number of areas that require improvement. These improvements largely aim to make the program more effective in terms of the cultural diversity offered and in enhancing the motivation of students to communicate in English. These suggestions should be incorporated into future cultural exchange programs.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Mr. Sharad Sharma and Kshitiz Bhattarai (AAEE, Asia Association of Education and Exchange, Nepal) for working together with me for the Mero Sathi Project. Without their sincere efforts, I could not accomplish a lot in Nepal. Also, I really appreciate the support of 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 Nepal.

This study was generously supported by a research grant provided for the author by Tokyo Keizai University (Grant Number 15-19) in the academic year of 2015.

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