

Travelling Abroad on a Multicultural Experience Program

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Abstract

To improve the intercultural competence of future teachers, Aichi University of Education has offered a course called ‘Multicultural experience activity’ for the first time in March 2019. This article gives an overview of this course, and describes in detail a trip to Thailand where students had the chance to experience Thai culture and visit schools, thus learning about one foreign country firsthand.

Keywords: 共通科目, 多文化体験活動, intercultural understanding, education, Thailand

1. Introduction

We are living in a globalized world, and it is becoming more important to understand people from other cultures. This is especially true for Japan, which until recently has been a society with a relatively low number of foreign citizens. However, the number of immigrants has been increasing recently. In 2008, there were a total of 2.2 million foreigners living in Japan, 490,000 of which had permanent residency. 10 years later, the total number had increased to 2.6 million foreigners, while the number of those with permanent residency has increased at a much higher rate and now stands at 760,000 (figures according to ‘Statistics of Japan’ at <https://www.e-stat.go.jp>).

This development has had profound impacts on Japanese society, and teacher education is no exception. As the number of foreign children in Japanese schools increases, it is necessary for teachers to have intercultural “knowledge” and “experience” to deal with issues resulting from this diversified student body, as described by Kano regarding multicultural education (Kano 2019:152) and by Okazaki, who refers to Japanese-language education for children (Okazaki 2019).

At Aichi University of Education, a new curriculum addressing this aspect was implemented in 2017. Regarding “knowledge” about how to deal with foreign children, a new compulsory course called ‘Education to support foreign students’ (外国人児童生徒支援教育 *gaikokujin-jido-seito-shien-kyoiku*) has been created. While gaining theoretical knowledge is good and necessary, it is even better to experience foreign cultures firsthand. Students at Aichi University of Education have for many years been able to go abroad to spend a semester or a year at one of our partner universities, or to take part in a week-long trip abroad accompanied by a teacher. However, neither of these have ever been part of the curriculum, which means that students cannot gain any credits for these activities, nor is there any assurance that such opportunities will be available for students every year.

Therefore, the 2017 curriculum reform addressed this problem by creating a new course called ‘Multicultural experience activity’ (多文化体験活動 *tabunka-taiken-katsudo*), thus offering students the chance to gain “experience” by going abroad. This course, however, is not compulsory, for financial and organisational reasons: students have to pay for themselves

to travel abroad, and not everybody may be able to do this; and sending all 900 undergraduate students of an annual intake abroad within a short timespan would be a major challenge. Hence this class is elective and is part of a group of four courses, all of which have “activity” (活動 katsudo) in their names, and students have to choose one of them:

- ‘School support activity II’ (学校サポート活動II gakko-support-katsudo II)
- ‘Nature experience activity’ (自然体験活動 shizen-taiken-katsudo)
- ‘Multicultural experience activity’ (多文化体験活動 tabunka-taiken-katsudo)
- ‘Company experience activity’ (企業体験活動 kigyo-taiken-katsudo)

The common thread of these four courses is that they are not conducted inside a classroom, but outside of the university. Three of these courses are held in Japan, where students can assist teachers in a school, or take part in a nature project, or join a company. And one course, the ‘Multicultural experience activity’, enables students to go abroad.

2. Conceptual framework of ‘Multicultural experience activity’

The four ‘activity’ courses mentioned above are for students in the third and fourth year of study, and the curriculum does not set a specific term in which they should be taken. However, as students are busy with teaching practice, job hunting and graduation theses in the second term of the third year and all of the fourth year (sixth to eighth semesters), the ‘activity’ classes are offered mainly in the first term of the third year (fifth semester). The ‘Multicultural experience activity’ has so far been held only once, in the first term of the 2019 academic year, as those students who enrolled in 2017 and for whom the new curriculum is valid, are in the third year in 2019.

Although the first term of the students’ third year began in April 2019, the ‘Multicultural experience activity’ was actually

held a month earlier, in March 2019. The reason for this is that March has very few fixed obligations for students as well as for teachers.

Students gain one credit for the ‘activity’ course they choose, which means that these ‘activity’ courses must be no shorter than one week. This is equivalent to other similar experiences that are held outside of the university, e.g. teaching practice, field work or study trips, for which students also receive one credit if they last one week. While it is certainly desirable to stay abroad for a longer period of time, financial aspects (longer stays cost more) and the one-credit rule determine the ‘Multicultural experience activity’ to be one week long.

Many study abroad trips that are organized by Japanese universities seem to emphasize foreign language training, especially English. Students going abroad should have an opportunity to improve their foreign language abilities in a non-Japanese environment. While this is a legitimate goal for a study trip abroad, the ‘Multicultural experience activity’ at Aichi University of Education sets its emphasis not on language training, but on two other aspects – education and culture.

Most students at Aichi University of Education aspire to become teachers, therefore a study abroad trip for those students should include educational content. As mentioned above, theoretical knowledge is good but practical experience is better, so all ‘Multicultural experience activity’ courses were designed to include visits to schools in foreign countries. For the cultural aspect famous sights are visited as time allows.

While no other study abroad trips with an emphasis on education and culture could be identified during a literature research, there is a reference describing trips by engineering students to Singapore and Taiwan, which are very similar in nature to the ‘Multicultural experience activity’ offered by Aichi University of Education, as technical universities and factories were visited, but also famous sights (Tanaka et al.

2014).

3. 'Multicultural experience activity' in Thailand

In spring 2019, Aichi University of Education offered 14 'Multicultural experience activity' courses, enabling 193 students to take part. The author of this article was in charge of taking a group of 16 students to Thailand in early March for a trip lasting 5 days and 4 nights. The group was accompanied by an office employee of the university, plus a local Thai guide fluent in Japanese.

The group spent two nights in Bangkok and two nights in Ayutthaya. We visited the following educational institutions:

- Sri Ayudhya School (high school, Bangkok)
- Panyapiwat Institute of Management (university, Bangkok)
- Wat Srakaeo School (orphanage with attached school, near Ayutthaya)

As there are school holidays in Thailand during most of March and April, it was not possible for us to observe normal classes in these schools. However, we were able to meet a group of high school students at Sri Ayudhya School, who were all learning Japanese. We first observed a Japanese class held especially for us, and after that the students from Japan introduced a karuta game to the Thai students to learn Japanese words, followed by a kanji quiz and an origami demonstration. There was also some free time for the Thai and Japanese students to communicate with each other.

At Panyapiwat Institute of Management, we met more students who were studying Japanese. We were given a tour of the campus, and after that, we cooked Thai food and made Thai tea together with the students and had lunch together. There was ample time to get to know each other, and as the Japanese and Thai students were of the same age, there were many topics to talk about.

At Wat Srakaeo School, the Japanese students split into four groups and then rotated to visit kindergarten and primary school classes. The kindergarten was unaffected by the school holidays and operated as usual, so the Japanese students joined the classes, played and danced with the children, and made origami. Doubling as an orphanage and a local school with classes from kindergarten to high school, Wat Srakaeo School offered a variety of activities during the school holidays. Some of the Japanese students were able to join a sports event for primary school students, while others took part in special classes where they taught traditional Japanese games such as origami and kendama. They also taught some basic Japanese and English. Thai and Japanese students ate lunch together in a large dining hall. Some high school students were also present, and our students had a chance to interact with them and become acquainted.

How to communicate with the Thai students had been a chief concern when preparing this trip. However, it turned out to be a minor issue. The Thai students of Panyapiwat Institute of Management spoke Japanese very well, and so most of the conversation between the Japanese and Thai students was conducted in Japanese: 10 Japanese students mentioned that they spoke only Japanese, 3 spoke English, 1 spoke a mixture of English and Japanese, and 1 spoke a mixture of English and Thai (data from a questionnaire conducted after the trip, which was answered by 15 students).

At Sri Ayudhya School, the knowledge of Japanese was much lower. Only 3 students said that they exclusively communicated in Japanese, while communication with a mixture of Japanese and English was most often mentioned (5 students). 2 students spoke English only, 1 a mixture of English, Japanese and Thai, 1 a mixture of English and Thai, 1 Thai only, and 2 used gestures or the translation app in a smartphone. Of those who used Thai, it has to be mentioned that no Japanese student spoke more than some basic words to introduce themselves.

At Wat Srakaeo School, communication was more difficult than

at the two schools mentioned above. The Japanese level of the Thai students was so low that nobody was able to hold a conversation in Japanese only, and thus the most frequent answer was that communication was conducted with a mixture of gestures, smartphone apps and the help of a translator (5 students). 4 spoke only English, 3 a mixture of English and Thai, 2 a mixture of Japanese and English and Thai, and 1 a mixture of Japanese and English. Due to the fact that we met a wide range of students, from kindergarten to high school at Wat Srakao School, the method of communication had to be adjusted according to the age of the students. As a matter of course, foreign language competence (English, Japanese) was best with the high school students who we met during the lunch break.

During the trip we also saw the following cultural heritage sites:

- Grand Palace (Bangkok)
- Wat Pho and Wat Arun Temples (Bangkok)
- Wat Phra Si Sanphet, Wat Maha That and Wat Yai Chai Mongkon Temples (Ayutthaya)

While this list is dominated by temples, it does reflect the main sightseeing attractions which nearly all tourists to Thailand visit. As it was the first trip to Thailand for all students, it was expected that these sites would be visited on our trip. There was also ample time to see local daily lifestyles by visiting markets and shopping centres.

4. Reports by Students

Since, as indicated, the 'Multicultural experience activity' is a course for which students get a credit, writing two reports was a requirement for passing the class. The first report had to be submitted before the trip, the second one after the trip. The topics for both reports could be freely chosen by the students, with the only guideline being that the first report should include education, history or culture of Thailand, while the second report had to refer to the experiences students had during the

trip. Both reports had to be two pages long.

Taken as a whole, the reports written before the trip were nothing to speak of, probably because the students did not have any in-depth knowledge of Thailand at this point. Most reports were a mixture of trivia, basic statistics and Wikipedia excerpts, covering subjects as diverse as the education system and food culture in one report, to give an example.

However, the reports written after the trip were totally different. They were written on a much higher academic level. Without exception, the students included the experiences which they had in Thailand. This gave every report the feeling that something had really been achieved on this trip. The 16 reports are introduced here by the main subjects that were covered:

- How to communicate with Thai students, and how I learned to exchange opinions even without using much Japanese.
- Smiling faces in an orphanage, and how to play with such children whom I have never met before (I was actually very worried about meeting them).
- Seeing an orphanage left a very strong impression on me. I had expected to see sad and lonely children, but was surprised that I could play well with them.
- An orphanage operated by a temple seems to be a typical feature of the Thai society, where religion is a lot more important than in Japan.
- Thai children in the Wat Srakao kindergarten were not afraid when we foreign visitors came into their classroom. It seems they are more open to visitors than Japanese children (Japanese kids would more likely hide if a strange person enters their room).
- The Thai education system was impressive. I was very surprised about the diligence of the students to study foreign languages.
- In Thai schools, students seem to have a clear goal when studying, while in Japan the students are only learning for the next test.
- Thailand does not score very high at international school

assessment tests like PISA or TIMSS, but it is noteworthy that the actual ability of Thais to speak foreign languages (at hotels, taxis, shops) is very good.

- The atmosphere at Sri Ayudhya School during class was noteworthy, as it reminded me of a Japanese primary school, where the students compete with each other to see who can give the fastest answer.
- Students at Sri Ayudhya School were very diligent in studying Japanese, and it was interesting to see how they learn kanji.
- Food in Thailand, the food stalls were everywhere. Thais can buy food everywhere all day long, and many of the food stall operators even speak Japanese.
- Street life in Thailand is different from Japan due to the many food stalls, and a lot of people are smoking on the street.
- Thailand seems to be a paradise for animals, as there were so many dogs running freely around in the city. It seems that Buddhism plays a role in the respect towards animals.
- The economic development of Thailand was much more advanced than I expected. Especially Bangkok, it was a highly developed metropolis.
- The economic development of Thailand could be seen by the many construction sites. However, air pollution in Bangkok was severe due to the high number of vehicles.
- Food in Thailand was cheap. A full meal at a food stall was available for around 100 yen. However, it must be noted that the average income in Thailand is only about the equivalent of 60,000 yen a month, which is much lower than Japan.

5. Conclusion

The 'Multicultural experience activity' in Thailand was a successful trip, enabling the students to experience a foreign country firsthand. At the time of the trips, the students had already finished two years of their teacher training course at Aichi University of Education, so they were well-prepared to observe how the Thai students behaved in classes. The reports

written after the trip show that they were able to understand the connection between skills learned at school and career opportunities, and to realize the major differences in the way that Thai and Japanese children learn at school.

From the cultural viewpoint, the omnipresent references to religious practices and the many temples visited contrasted to the non-religious lifestyle that most Japanese have. Food was also of great interest to the students, as Thai food is only relatively seldom available in Japan, so the trip was a good chance to sample new and unknown tastes.

The 'Multicultural experience activity' courses will also be offered in spring 2020, where students can choose from 14 different trips (one each to Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan and Vietnam, two each to Cambodia and South Korea, and three to Thailand). Therefore, the trip to Thailand that has been described in this article will also be offered again. It will be one day longer, thus enabling a more in-depth view of Thai society. For a further understanding of Thai culture, a visit to a museum or a traditional building such as the Jim Thompson House in Bangkok may be included. Regarding visits to educational institutions, no major changes are planned as this trip gave an excellent overview from kindergarten to university.

The benefits of study abroad programs in general have been shown in numerous surveys, as Nguyen 2017 has done for short-term programs similar to the course described in this article. There has so far not been any empirical research about the 'Multicultural experience activity' described in this article or the other 13 trips organized by Aichi University of Education in March 2019, so we have no scientifically proven data about the effects on the students. However, as the number of participants in the 'Multicultural experience activity' in March 2020 is expected to increase by about 10%, the course has so far proved to be successful in offering a multicultural experience to a large number of students.

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