Experiencing Diversity and English as a Lingua Franca: Japanese University Students in Bangkok

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Abstract
Following a hiatus due to COVID-19 restrictions, study abroad programs continue to be promoted by Japanese universities as beneficial for acquiring English and fostering global human resources. While prospective sojourners primarily consider inner-circle destinations, such as the United States and Australia, outer-circle countries receive significantly less attention. Therefore, this article is based on a longitudinal, transcendental phenomenological study, funded by the Japanese government, involving the shared experiences of six Japanese university students who studied at a university in Bangkok, Thailand. The authors' main purpose is to better understand the experiences of Japanese students in Bangkok, so that educators can improve language and culture curriculum for students intending to study in outer and expanding-circle countries, potentially increasing access and participation. The six participants completed weekly journals over 10 weeks while in Bangkok, followed by a post-return reflective survey and semi-structured interview. To capture the essence of experience, the authors identified 403 significant statements resulting in two clusters of meaning that compose a textural description of experience: utilizing English as a Lingua Franca and exposure to diversity (e.g. openness of sexuality and socio-economic disparities). A more nuanced structural description involves the four clusters of developing intercultural communicative competence; empathy; appreciation of one's home country; and challenging pre-departure beliefs of the destination. After defining the participants' essence of experience and their impression of diversity, the authors provide pedagogical implications that can help institutions improve the curriculum of pre-departure programs, especially for students who eventually enroll in international experiences outside the Inner Circle.

Keywords
Diversity, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), internationalization, phenomenology, study abroad

Introduction

In Japan, study abroad has been a hallmark feature of numerous internationalization initiatives that aim to develop global human resources, global leaders, and English as a foreign language (EFL) skills (MEXT 2009; MEXT, 2016; MEXT, 2017). While the goals outlined in these initiatives have been criticized as ambiguous and unclear for institutions and educators (Fritz & Murao, 2020; Smith & Samuell, 2022), they seem to reflect the vague notions held by Japanese university students of what it is like to live and study outside of Japan (Khanal &

Gaulee, 2019). One certainty amongst prospective Japanese sojourners is that they predominantly choose to study in countries of the Inner Circle, where English is the primary language, such as the United States (US) and Australia. Conversely, countries of the Outer and Expanding Circle, such as those of Southeast (SE) Asia, where the role of English has either colonial ties or secondary language status, receive significantly less attention (Kobayashi, 2018; Nowlan & Wang, 2018). However, the limited research that has been done on study abroad experiences in SE Asia suggests a unique learning context that could provide benefits that are difficult to realize, both domestically and in the Inner Circle (Kobayashi, 2018; Nowlan, 2020). One participant in the current study described an experience in Bangkok the following way:

> *I had imagined that all Asian people were similar, as Japanese people within Japan are similar. However, I was exposed to Thai people's candidness and diverse ideas about personal issues, like gender and sexuality. I had an opportunity to comfortably discuss such topics in English, which are not commonly discussed in Japan (personal communication, 2021).*

This quote represents some of the common themes experienced by Japanese university students in Bangkok, as yielded through this study's adopted transcendental phenomenological approach. This includes the likelihood of English interactions with other non-native speakers, resulting in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) discourse.

Throughout this article, the authors aim to provide a deeper understanding of the common lived experiences of six Japanese university students in Bangkok. By identifying significant statements and providing the essence of experience across all six participants, this study provides important implications for Japanese universities and educators that could lead to improved pre-departure study abroad programs aimed at increasing access and participation.

Literature Review

Since 2011, study abroad has played a prominent and recurring role in the Japanese government's internationalization initiatives (MEXT, 2012). The following literature review will first explore trends in study abroad destinations since the inception of the Inter-University Exchange initiative in 2011. This will be followed by a synthesis of the few studies examining Japanese students who chose to study in expanding and outer-circle countries within SE Asia, revealing a gap in the literature regarding a shared Japanese student experience in urban SE Asian destinations, such as Bangkok. This synopsis will lead to the study's research objectives and questions.

Study abroad trends amongst Japanese university students

The global outbreak of COVID-19 has disrupted the flow of students looking for international learning opportunities, and Japan is no exception. According to the Japan Association of Overseas Studies (JAOS), student mobility amongst Japanese students plummeted from 77,953 in 2019 to 18,374 in 2021, representing a 76% decrease (JAOS, 2021). However, as society and governments around the world build more tolerance and understanding about the virus and its variants, student mobility programs have continued, though overall participation numbers are still lower than pre-COVID times, in large part due to the reluctance of Chinese students to study abroad during the pandemic (Mok et al., 2021).

It was believed, pre-COVID19, that increasing student mobility numbers would bolster the international standing of Japan's universities on the world stage via global university rankings

(MEXT, 2017). If the number of Japanese students overseas returns to pre-pandemic numbers, the authors assume that the distribution of preferred destinations will remain relatively consistent. This assumption is based on a recent bias that prospective sojourners have towards the Inner Circle, that is, countries that use English as a first or dominant language (Kachru, 1985; Kachru, 1992; Kobayashi, 2020). This “Inner Circle or bust” mentality has resulted in many Japanese university students self-disqualifying from study abroad due to the notion that the Inner Circle is too expensive or that it requires a native-like proficiency in English (Nowlan, 2020; Nowlan & Wang, 2018). To further exacerbate the tendency of students to self-disqualify from study abroad is the reporting of second-language anxiety in Japan, particularly involving situations where Japanese students are expected to communicate with native English speakers from the Inner Circle (Nowlan & Wang, 2018). These issues had a compound effect resulting in stagnant study abroad participation numbers, even before the pandemic began.

Japanese university students in Southeast Asia

Compared to studies done on the experience of Japanese students in the Inner Circle (Conroy, 2018; Fryer & Roger, 2018; Hanada, 2019), there is a dearth of publications based on the experiences of Japanese university students in SE Asia. While the authors of this study recognize the diverse societies and learning environments of nations composing SE Asia, this study also assumes that experiences will differ greatly between regions of a particular country.

In attempting to define advantages to studying in the SE Asia region, Nowlan (2020) followed five Japanese university students completing internships across three SE Asian countries: Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Through inductive coding and thematic analysis, advantages were classified under the themes of costs and proximity; ELF development through comfort and common experience; and development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and soft skills. Kimura (2017) conducted a case study of a single Japanese university student who was studying abroad in Bangkok for one year at a public university. Based on interactions with various non-Japanese interlocutors in English, this student initially perceived native English as desirable to assimilate, though later expressed preference for English interactions with non-native speakers in English due to ease of understanding, which corroborates Nowlan’s (2020) findings. In a later narrative study involving a Japanese male student completing a sojourn near Bangkok, Kimura (2019) discussed the impact of the ELF environment on a student who invested heavily in the native-speakerism model of English. This dynamic manifested in decisions to interact (or not) with particular groups, favoring communication with native speakers, which reflects Kobayashi’s (2018) findings on Japanese and Korean students in SE Asia. Furthermore, Ottoson (2018) investigated the experiences of Japanese students conducting fieldwork in Thailand and Malaysia, concluding that interactions with local students spurred developments in attitudes, knowledge, and relatability. While the seven participants of this study all came from the same Japanese university and department, three reported their experiences from Malaysia while four shared experiences from Thailand and it is unclear whether students reported from a rural or urban setting. Finally, in comparing pre-departure expectations of Japanese university students at a university in a small Thai city for three weeks, Deacon and Ottoson (2020) found that concerns of health and safety were mostly unrealized, while some developments in intercultural attitudes and awareness were perceived, such as a deeper understanding of Japan and Japanese identity.

Research objectives and questions

The existing literature, which largely focuses on greater SE Asia, fails to recognize the unique learning environments of the region’s major urban centers. For this reason, the authors chose to examine experiences in Bangkok due to the city’s economic and cultural prominence in SE

Asia, including numerous universities that rank amongst the highest in the region. Furthermore, since there have been calls for a re-imagined enactment of global citizenship that involves plurilingual and multicultural experiences outside of the Inner Circle, the authors recognize that valuable experiences can be had in such non-traditional destinations (Smith & Samuell, 2022, p. 14). This belief has contributed to the following research questions:

1. What were the lived experiences of Japanese university students during study abroad in Bangkok, Thailand?
   1a. How did they experience it?
   1b. What was the overall essence of the experience?
2. Based on lived experiences, how can educators in Japan better prepare students for study abroad at destinations beyond the Inner Circle?

The authors believe that if the essence of study abroad in Bangkok can be represented and simulated at the classroom level, then this could generate interest in non-traditional destinations, thus increasing access to and participation in international opportunities.

Methodology
This study follows the principles of transcendental phenomenology in exploring the lived experiences of six Japanese students while studying abroad in Bangkok, Thailand. In this section, the sample is first introduced, followed by details of the data collection processes, and finally, the theoretical and analytical framework.

The sample
Typical across all phenomenological studies is the identification of a heterogenous group of people who experience a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study involved six Japanese university students who experienced study abroad at the same university in Bangkok (see Table 1). Through purposive sampling, one participant was recruited via a third-party contact at the institution in Bangkok, Thailand, and the remaining five volunteered to join the study via snowball sampling. This approach of identifying participants with no personal, academic, or professional connections to the authors ensured that there were no conflicts of interest that could negatively affect the integrity of that data collection process. The six participants shared numerous features including nationality, race, and approximate age. Features that differed include home university, gender, and prior experience with international travel. Before the data collection process began, all six participants consented to provide data for the study with an understanding that they could withdraw at any point without penalty.

Table 1
Study Participants

Participant	**Year of study**	**Gender**	**Home region**	**Faculty**
P1	3rd	F	Kyushu	Sociology
P2	2nd	F	Kanto	International Studies
P3	2nd	M	Kanto	International Studies
P4	2nd	M	Kanto	Economics
P5	2nd	F	Kanto	Sociology
P6	3rd	F	Kinki	International studies

Data types and collection processes
To ensure a rich mix of findings suitable for the phenomenological data collection framework, this study took a longitudinal approach comprising reflective journals (Bassot, 2016), surveys, and interviews.

The initial data collection phase involved reflective journaling where participants were expected to submit weekly details of their experiences through free-form writing, essentially answering the following questions:

1. What have you experienced during your time studying abroad in Thailand?
2. What specific contexts or situations have influenced your experience of study abroad in Thailand?

This phase, conducted for 10 weeks from January to April 2020, involved initial journaling prompts intended to yield responses on actual experience, as opposed to opinion, perspectives, and perceptions. To ensure accuracy and depth in the journaling, participants were encouraged to complete this phase in their native language of Japanese, to be translated at a later stage by a professional translator who had no prior contact or relationship with the participants.

Following the 10 weeks of journaling and initial analysis, a reflective survey was completed after all participants returned to Japan in April 2020. Questions in this survey sought to yield examples of experience in cases when participants previously volunteered opinion, perspectives, and perceptions. It also addressed the need for further extrapolation and clarification of the experiences. To ensure authenticity and accuracy in the data, the survey was written in both English and Japanese, and participants were given a choice to reply in either language. The responses given in Japanese were later translated into English by the translator.

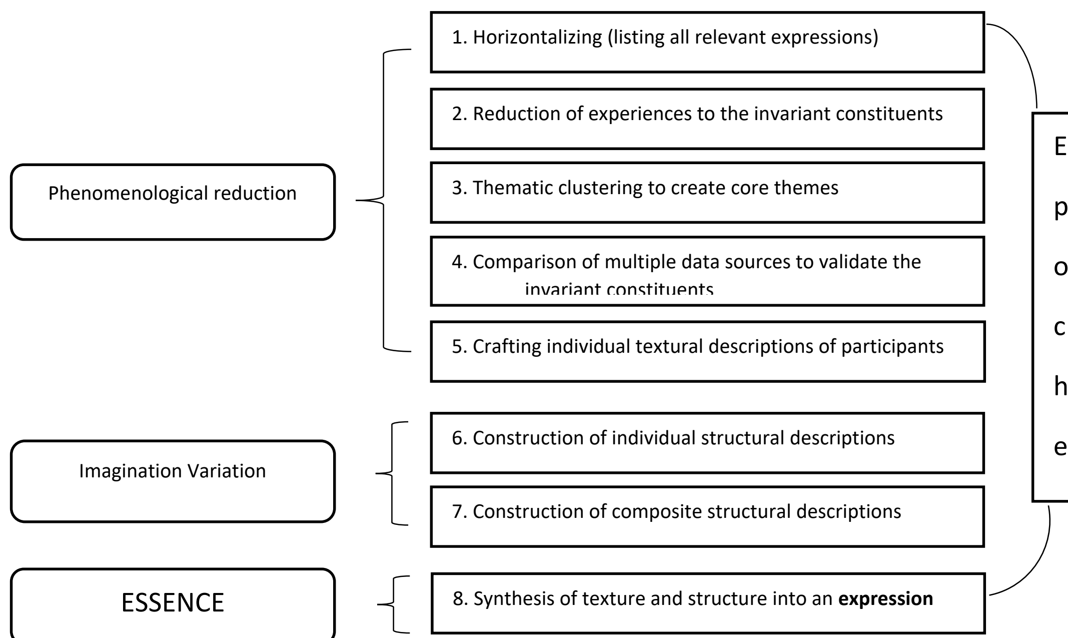
The final phase of the data collection process was a synchronous, semi-structured, face-to-face interview done via Zoom in January 2021 involving tailored questions for each participant. The lag between the survey and interview allowed the authors to analyze the preliminary data (i.e., the journaling and survey) and to ask verification questions about the experiences, to ensure consistency or evolution of opinion over time. Prior to the Zoom interviews, the six participants were given the option to communicate in either English or Japanese. Three of the participants opted into an English interview while three preferred to do the interview in Japanese with an interpreter. Data provided by the latter group was then translated into English.

Theoretical and analytical framework
Based on the foundations of phenomenology established by Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938), Moustakas' (1994) transcendental framework was utilized due to the authors' focus on participant-derived meaning and how this approach highlights how humans attach meaning to external stimuli. Instead of using a hermeneutical approach, which would involve reflective interpretations of the authors, transcendental phenomenology includes the *intentionality* of participants, in other words, their consciousness or awareness of an object or event. Transcendental Phenomenology has been used in the field of education in various capacities, including studies on the lived experiences of black women in distance education programs (Rogers, 2018), of parents with children doing remote learning in the Philippines during COVID-19 (Cahapay, 2021), and of teachers instructing twice-exceptional high school students (Collet, 2019). Specific to study abroad, transcendental phenomenology has been applied to the experience of advising university students on their decision to study overseas

(Henry, 2014), and to determine the impact of study abroad on male preservice teachers (McGaha & Linder, 2012).

In the current study, the authors followed eight steps, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015): (1) The authors first examined the weekly journals and post-return surveys, comprised of verbatim statements from the participants. The data was cleaned to remove repetitive statements and those deemed as irrelevant to the phenomenon being studied. The data that remained were considered as the participants' *horizons*, meaning present experience. During this step, the authors mutually identified 403 significant statements, from a total of 491, resulting in an intercoder agreement rate of 82%. In (2), the authors grouped the remaining significant statements into clusters of meanings, or themes. In step (3), the authors further defined the themes via thematic clustering to establish the core elements related to the phenomenon. Then, (4) data for the individual participants were compared for consistency and accuracy across the journal and survey data, and questions were asked during the interview phase to clarify any inconsistencies or gaps. In the final step of phenomenological reduction, (5) individual textural descriptions (i.e., neoma) were created, thus providing narratives of the phenomenon for each participant.

Figure 1
Modification of Moustakas' Transcendental Framework (Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015)



Step (6) began the process of imaginative variation where the authors attempted to envision how the experiences occurred for the individual participants, based on the data. After this was done for each participant, (7) a composite structural description, based on common themes amongst all participants, was identified. Finally, (8) the composite textural and structural descriptions were merged to establish the essence of meaning, that is "what" was experienced (i.e., neoma) and "how" it occurred (i.e., neosis).

From the researcher's perspective, the role of *reduction* is critical, which includes the process of *bracketing* (i.e., epoche). The bracketing process is what makes transcendental phenomenology presuppositional, meaning that authors are expected to suspend all judgement and identify bias before, during, and after the investigation. Through a metacognitive

journaling approach, both authors identified themselves as native English speakers from the Inner Circle (i.e., Canada and the UK) who have been teaching language and cultural content at Japanese universities for over 12 years each, and both have developed programs to prepare prospective sojourners for international studying experiences. While these common experiences could suggest Western biases towards styles of learning, researching, and acquiring EFL, the authors intended to approach this research with an academic curiosity, suspended biases, and no presuppositions of what linguistic or cultural environment might be best for students. Essentially, they aimed to take an empathic approach where they would experience the phenomenon of study abroad in Bangkok through the experiences of the participants.

Results

The aim of the current phenomenological study is to represent experience as a reflection of the participants' consciousness. This section will summarize the clusters of meaning that compose these textural and structural descriptions, while providing exemplars which were deemed as representative across all participants. The main trends and results that were identified comprise a two-cluster textural description of common objective experience, followed by a more nuanced four-cluster textural description, that explains how the experience was processed.

The textural description

The textural description of common experience, also referred to as the "what", or noema, is the experienced object that is thought about (Moustakas, 1994). With exemplars provided in Table 2, the textural description of the current study involves the following:

1. Cross-cultural ELF interactions
2. Exposure to diversity

Table 2
Textural Description Clusters of Meaning

Clusters of Meaning / Themes	Evidence / Exemplars
Cross-cultural ELF interactions	*I was able to communicate through trial and error. Since we both were non-native, I was **confident**, even when speaking poor English.* **(P5)**
Exposure to diversity	*I met LGBT people, and it was my **first time talking about sexual preferences**, so that made a big impact on me. I now realize this issue is **ignored in Japan** and it can limit self-expression. I am more open minded about this now.* **(P2)**

Cross-cultural ELF interactions

An inherent feature of study abroad in Bangkok, according to the participants, involved the interactions they had with other non-native English speakers, necessitating ELF. Interlocutors included not only local Thai people, but others from the Expanding and Outer Circle. Of the four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, participants only described developments with speaking, and in particular, their increased comfort and confidence with speaking. Examples of this include, "my English skills, especially speaking, gradually improved" (P1). In all cases, students exhibited a transition from focusing on accuracy to focusing on fluency: "even if one's grammar is devastatingly wrong, one can communicate

with other people" (P6); "I could relax when talking to non-native speakers for the first time because there was no pressure to be perfect" (P1), and, "I'm not afraid to speak English to others, even if it's not perfect – my confidence has improved" (P5). Even in cases when the participants struggled with different English skills, they were able to overcome challenges to understand overall meaning, for instance, P2 stated that "we could communicate even if our pronunciation was incorrect." Also, there was more willingness and comfort amongst the participants to seek clarification: "we are free to ask each other 'how do you say this in English?' since we are both non-native speakers" (P2).

Participants were able to gain a greater appreciation for English as a tool for communication, as P3 stated "thanks to English, I could comfortably communicate with other people whose mother tongue is not English." Using English as a tool for communication did not only prove advantageous during casual conversations, but participants were able to recognize potential benefits for future employment and Japan's economic role in the Asia Pacific region: "I think most English interactions in my future work will be with people from non-English-speaking countries, such as those in SE Asia" (P3) and, "Native English is the minority now globally, so this kind of communication is important" (P3).

In recollecting experiences of ELF in Thailand, participants began to recognize diversity through the different varieties of spoken English in Thailand, compared to Japan: "In Japan, we all belong to the same community of English speakers, so we feel protected. However, outside of Japan there is a vast community of English speakers as a second language who use English as a common language" (P4). This element of diversity contributes to the participants' overall sense of diversity in Bangkok, especially when communicating issues of sexuality and wealth disparities. These features of diversity are discussed in the following section.

Exposure to diversity

All participants in this study experienced various manifestations of relative diversity, with common categories including sexual diversity; race and ethnic diversity; socio-economic diversity; and diversity in opinion, which is not usually heralded as a virtue in Japanese society where "the nail that sticks up often gets hammered down" (Hoshino, 1995).

The most prominent form of diversity that was experienced across all participants involved diversity in sexuality and gender. Participants experienced exposure to sexual diversity through various encounters, such as having local friends "come out" as gay (P1), and often seeing transexuals or "ladyboys" openly in public and professional environments (P4). Participants not only made observations of sexual minorities in Bangkok, but also about how such diversity is widely accepted and normalized to the extent that such minorities operate in society "confidently and fearlessly" (P1). Participants often compared manifestations of sexual diversity in Bangkok with Japan, where even a "manly woman is unwanted and regarded as an outsider" (P5). For this reason, participants claimed Japan to be a "backward country" where the more accepting younger population is still outnumbered by the country's considerable aging population (P2).

Discussion of diversity amongst the participants extended beyond sexuality. Participants identified diversity in ethnic background "such as Chinese-Thai, Indian-Thai, Japanese-Thai, etc." (P1). When discussing ethnic diversity, participants were exposed to new ideas about ethnic and national identity. Socio-economic diversity was also apparent as participants recognized "a huge gap between the rich and the poor" (P3) where they "saw street beggars and impoverished people, whom, I realize, we seldom encounter in Japan" (P6).

The structural description

To provide more insight into "how" ELF and diversity were experienced, this structural description, or noesis, highlights the emotional, social, and cultural connections that manifested through the experience. In the current study, the clusters of meaning that compose this include:

1. Intercultural communicative competence
2. Feelings of empathy
3. Appreciation for home country (i.e., Japan)
4. Challenging pre-departure beliefs

Table 3

Structural Description Clusters of Meaning

Clusters of Meaning / Themes	Evidence / Exemplars
ICC	*I saw so much **diversity in society**, like with income, religion, politics, and opinions. I realized that **in Japan**, everyone tries to be the same.* **(P2)** *I realized LGBT issues are **ignored in Japan** and it limits self-expression.* ***(P5)***
Empathy	*Making friends with her (a Thai student) made me realize that Thai people are really **not so different** and that we share the **same problems**. **(P1)***
Appreciation for home country	*I now **fully appreciate** the high standard of living and education in Japan. I feel **lucky**.* **(P3)**
Pre-departure beliefs	*Bangkok was very developed while the rural areas were underdeveloped **beyond my imagination**.* **(P5)**

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) developments

Numerous studies have been done that examine the impact of study abroad on ICC (Goldstein, 2022; Hanada, 2019; Maharaja, 2018). Despite the varied interpretations of "culture" and "intercultural competence" that have been applied to such studies, the authors of the current study adopted elements of Byram's 1997 model. Specifically, the authors identified significant statements that demonstrated intercultural abilities through (a) flexible attitudes, (b) cultural knowledge, (c) skills of interpreting, relating, discovering, and interacting, and ultimately, (d) critical cultural awareness. All six participants exhibited developments in these four elements of ICC, although their individual journeys varied slightly. Via ELF interactions and exposure to diversity, participants began their study abroad experiences in Thailand with "curiosity," "flexibility," and "an open mind," which provides the attitudinal basis for successful assimilation of intercultural competence (Candel-Mora, 2015). In regard to skills of interpreting, relating, discovering and interacting, participants were able to build a bridge of understanding between their own culture (i.e., Japanese) and that of the target culture through the ELF interactions and exposure to diversity. By relating the host culture to one's own, participants were better able to rationalize local customs and etiquette, such as why people may be late for appointments – "time is more flexible here compared to Japan" (P6)–or why Thai students have stronger religious bonds to Buddhism, in comparison with the way Buddhism is practiced by most in Japan. Finally, all participants were given an opportunity to achieve a critical cultural awareness, defined as "an ability to evaluate, critically, and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997, p. 53). In one case, P5 summarized his critical analysis of self-development:

> *I went to Thailand because I wanted to think about and confirm my identity as an Asian. And I found that I was stuck to the socially accepted ideas of Japanese society. I found the way of thinking and the way of living which I had not known, and I was shocked by them. I strongly felt that I am Japanese, and at the same time, I felt that I should not stick to this identity. (P5)*

Through ELF interactions and diversity, participants were able to better understand and appreciate their differences from other Asian societies, and how these differences may help and hinder self-development.

Feelings of empathy

This cluster, involving empathy towards others, contributes to the structural description of how experiences with ELF and diversity manifested. As seen, participants were able to view themselves, and their evaluation of English, through the lens of another foreign interlocutor who may struggle with the same challenges. In such cases, when the participants realized that their speaking partners were struggling to be understood, a sense of empathy resulted in comfort and confidence, as they felt a sense of grouping and a deterioration of the "otherness" that can be associated with English speakers from other countries. Examples of this include, "we were sometimes both stuck for words, which was funny" (P6) and "she too must have felt irritated with herself, which makes me feel better about my own weaknesses" (P5). In another instance, P3 was getting frustrated being unable to explain Japanese culture, but then, she could "feel better since my Thai friend also appeared to have difficulty explaining Thai culture in English."

Feelings of empathy were also expressed when discussing diversity in Bangkok. While speaking with an LGBT person who struggled with identity in her home country of China, P5 claimed that, "I could imagine how so many LGBT people in Japan feel similarly uncomfortable, so I would like to be supportive so they can live comfortably." Despite the numerous cases of showing respect towards the host culture, participants often interpreted negative experience through the lens of their home Japanese culture.

Appreciation of home country

There is a fine line between appreciating one's own culture and ethnocentrism that the participants in Bangkok straddled. With definitions of ethnocentrism usually involving common elements of (a) group self-centeredness, (b) outgroup negativity, and (c) mere ingroup positivity (Bizumic & Duckitt, 2012), the data revealed incidences where participants expressed one or two elements, but not all three. More specifically, there were rarely statements given where students describe the self-centered importance of their ethnic Japanese group, but instead, only expressed isolated comments of outgroup negativity, such as, "people here overcharge and they don't obey traffic rules" (P3) and, "I didn't like doing group work with Thai people because they were disorganized" (P5). However, common statements across all participants reflect mere ingroup positivity, such as the following:

> *Japan is a blessed country: we have public safety, children have pocket money and can use it without anxiety, and they can take the train alone or go out at night safely… it made me realize how wonderful the Japanese education system is (P3)*

Based on the applied definition of ethnocentrism to exist, mere ingroup positivity would need to manifest alongside outgroup negativity and ethnic self-centeredness (Bizumic & Duckitt, 2012). Therefore, since it does not, the authors defined this cluster as "appreciation of home country."

Challenging pre-departure beliefs

In this theme, participants challenged pre-conceived notions about the destination through their experiences with ELF and diversity. In all cases, participants expressed "shock," "surprise," "unexpectedness," and "differences" from their expectations of Bangkok. In some cases, the participants challenged common stereotypes of the destination, for instance, "people in Japan think Thailand is 'the land of smiles' but this is completely wrong. People here can say 'no' compared to Japan" (P5). In other cases, participants expected more commonalities between host and home country since both nations are part of the Asia-Pacific region: "I imagined all Asian people should be the same but was surprised to learn that Japanese people have unique characteristics." There were cases of ELF interactions where pre-conceived notions of communication inhibited successful outcomes, such as, "I expected them to be nicer, but they were quite aggressive" (P5). Additionally, the Thai attitudes towards diversity were quite different than anticipated, as illustrated by, "I was surprised that Thai people don't discriminate against any of the 13 genders" (P4) and, "I was astonished at Thai people's candidness about sexual matters" (P3).

Discussion

Findings from this research aim to provide pedagogical outcomes that go beyond the indistinct slogans of Japan's internationalization initiatives, such as fostering "trustworthy global citizens" and "global leaders" (Fritz & Murao, 2020; Smith & Samuell, 2022). The authors believe that knowledge derived from this study can provide the path forward to better curriculum and preparatory programs which could, in turn, increase study abroad participation numbers and the effectiveness of international programs. Since the existing literature does not specifically look at the common experiences of Japanese students in one emerging SE Asian market (e.g., Bangkok), this article provides valuable insight for educators and administrators who are responsible for better preparing university students for sojourns abroad to Bangkok, and possibly other urban centers in SE Asia and beyond.

The following discussion first presents the essence of experience, according to the six participants of this study. The authors will then propose their interpretation of "diversity," as it relates to Japanese university students in Bangkok, before concluding with pedagogical recommendations to better prepare students for studying in expanding and outer-circle destinations.

The essence of experience

In this study, Japanese university students who studied in Bangkok were embedded in an ELF environment conducive to increased confidence and comfort with speaking abilities, deemed as important for joining the global workforce. The destination not only provided opportunities to experience a range of diverse English interactions, but also diversity in sexual orientations, openness of sexuality, and socio-economic backgrounds, thus establishing an understanding of diversity that is difficult to realize in Japan. Both ELF interactions and diversity were experienced through the participants' intercultural communicative competences, empathy, greater appreciation of home country, and erroneous pre-departure expectations.

The findings from this study, based on the essence of experience, have allowed the authors to address gaps in the literature regarding Japanese university students in the Outer and Expanding Circle. Applied specifically to Bangkok, the authors have established a definition of "diversity" that may be applied to large urban settings in SE Asia, discussed in the next section. Then, the authors suggest pedagogical implications of this study for educators and administrators in higher education.

Diversity

Diversity is a subjective term, which can become even more ambiguous if discussed through the lens of the classroom, the institution, or greater society. For instance, what is perceived as a "diverse" learning environment in Japan may look quite different from other global contexts. In Japanese higher education, institutions have been incentivized to become more diverse through the hiring of non-Japanese faculty members and recruiting more international students from abroad. It is argued that this type of superficial diversity is characteristic of neoliberalism and the neoliberal university, where diversity is promoted as an advantage to tuition-paying students (Ashby-King & Hanasono, 2019; Baez & Sanchez, 2017; Berrey, 2015), but where intercultural interactions are rarely executed (Halualani et al., 2004).

In studies examining university students from the US, diversity was seen as a skill or knowledge base that could be achieved through interactions with others who were different from themselves (Kvam et al., 2018). While some participants of the current study made the connection between diversity and soft skills, participants unanimously associated diversity, not just through interactions, but also through simple observation of minority groups that they do not often see in Japan. Japan is often described as a grouping and collective society where exhibiting appearances or opinions against the norm can elicit disapproving reactions (Effiong, 2016; Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000). For this reason, it is uncommon to see individuals making strong visible or verbal statements about their minority membership, such as being LGBT or in a less advantageous socio-economic bracket. Due to this lack of superficial diversity in Japan, the participants defined a diverse society as one where individuals are confident and demonstrative of their non-majority identities. In this sense, the participants largely corroborate the definition of diversity established by Ashby-King and Hanasono (2019), whose American communication students considered diversity as a mechanism for unifying communities, an affirmation of individual differences, and a harbinger of acceptance and equality. All six participants in the current study expressed positive statements about the pride, comfort, confidence, and freedom of minority groups and how Japanese society could benefit from similarly accepting such groups.

Pedagogical implications

The essence of experience, as stated above, includes both positive and negative aspects. This section provides pedagogical approaches that educators and administrators may adopt with prospective sojourners to maximize the benefits of experience in outer and expanding-circle countries while minimizing the negative aspects, such as breakdowns in ELF communication, shock from diversity, ethnocentric traits, and inaccurate pre-departure beliefs of the destination.

A primary implication of this study involves the prescribed phenomenological approach and how it provides a framework for educators and administrators to carry out research in their respective contexts. This can involve collecting data from returnee students, identifying clusters of meaning, and promoting returnees' essence of experience to future students who wish to study abroad. Outcomes can also be operationalized by educators to design curricula for students intending to study overseas. To achieve this, the authors recommend the creation

of pre-departure programs, based on a framework guided by the findings from this study. This framework includes (1) identifying the pre-departure students' beliefs; (2) identifying and operationalizing the returnees' essence of experience; and (3) developing student-driven approaches to pre-departure programs. The following sections introduce the three elements of this framework.

Identifying pre-departure beliefs

First, the authors recommend that educators and administrators adopt research methodologies that acknowledge phenomenological approaches to foreign language learning, while promoting the language learning experience as "firmly anchored in the perceptual, the emotional and the aesthetic value" (i Solé, 2016, p.19). Highlighting the individual needs of the students is important towards the design of pre-departure programs, as this study's findings reveal that personal perceptions, emotions, and initial judgements of experience are influenced by subjectivity. These aspects are often overlooked in foreign language learning approaches that focus on acquiring language forms or learning for instrumental purposes. By examining the language learning experience from the perspective of the learners–and seeing language learning as a human endeavor that encompasses identity, socio-cultural influences, and emotions–educators have the potential to create pre-departure programs with a holistic understanding of the students' learning needs. In the case of the current study, this could involve pre-departure content to raise awareness of diversity, or content to gain a better understanding of the co-constructive nature of communication and the feelings of empathy. However, in other contexts, educators can benefit by carrying out a needs analysis to identify the current capabilities, existing bias, and knowledge gaps among the pre-departure students.

Identifying and operationalizing returnees' essence of experience

By utilizing the returnee students' essence of experience, educators are given a foundation to develop an informed pre-departure program based on the potential learning needs in individual teaching contexts. The clusters of meaning that compose the structural description of this study–intercultural communicative competence, feelings of empathy, appreciation for home country, challenging pre-departure beliefs–can be used for creating individual course units. For example, this study uncovered certain ethnocentric traits among the six students during their time in Bangkok. Therefore, educators can create lessons involving inquiry-based learning techniques for students to uncover beliefs or values related to ethnocentrism, and to become familiar with their own conscious and unconscious ethnocentric tendencies. In addition, after identifying the specific learning needs in their teaching contexts, educators can invite returnee students to the classroom to improve the pre-departure students' self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) states how learning from the experiences of others contributes to self-efficacy, that is, an individual's confidence in their capacity to complete a task or goal. Study abroad investigations have reported on the effectiveness of Japanese returnee students who act as mentors in the classroom (Lingley, 2015; Neff et al., 2018).

Student-driven approaches to pre-departure programs

With regards to specific tasks, student-driven approaches that have students working with educators as learning partners can "actively engage" students and "determine the path of [students] own learning" (Zmuda et al., 2015, p.148). Tasks based on this approach have been effective in helping Japanese students develop personal foreign language and intercultural development goals before studying abroad (Fritz & Miyafusa, 2016; Fritz & Sandu, 2020). By encouraging pre-departure students to create their own learning goals, sojourners become personally invested in their self-development and become aware of their own skills, attitudes, and knowledge gaps before studying abroad. For example, this study reveals how the returnee

students' confidence and comfort increased by communicating in English with peers who were also Asian speakers of English as a second language (L2). In this case, a pre-departure program could benefit from tandem learning approaches that would pair Japanese students with Asian L2 speakers of English. From these interactions, the pre-departure students would be asked to create their personal English goals (e.g., improving listening skills, developing speaking fluency etc.). During the course, the pre-departure students would continually evaluate and review their goals based on the interactions with their language partner. By taking on the role of facilitator or counsellor, the educator would encourage the pre-departure students to reflect, analyze, and observe, thus enabling a process of review and self-evaluation of goals. By viewing the students as co-constructors of their own learning, Kahn and Anderson (2019) argue this "moves us away from the idea of students as simply passive consumers of educational didacticism" (p. 49). This is an advantageous direction if educators and administrators hope to develop the necessary skillset and mindset required for students to reap the benefits of their study abroad placements. The overall consequence is that student-driven approaches provide the means to engage pre-departure students in a personal process of development to achieve the learning outcomes of studying abroad.

Conclusion

The phenomenological inquiry adopted for this study involved six Japanese university students who studied abroad at a large, public university in Bangkok, Thailand. Explication of the data reveals the articulated essence of meaning for the participants regarding their experience in Bangkok. A textural description of meaning comprises the two experiences of cross-cultural ELF interactions and exposure to diversity while a more subjective structural description includes ICC developments, feelings of empathy, appreciation of home country, and the challenging pre-departure beliefs. The composite description of experience amongst the six participants could be operationalized to improve curriculum at universities, which may, in turn, increase access to international opportunities amongst students who might otherwise self-disqualify themselves. The findings also provide a response to previous publications that question the ambiguous nature of global citizenship and a desire for more insight into the role that ELF can play in the sojourner's perceptions of the target language and one's construction of diversity.

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