




## Learning while Traveling: Influences of Short-term Cross-cultural Immersion Experiences to High School Students

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### ABSTRACT

This present study explored the experiences of Filipino learner-participants in a 6-day cross-cultural immersion held in Indonesia, aiming to understand how they interpreted their cultural learning over a year later. Employing phenomenology as the research design, data was collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussion, participant observation and document analysis. The findings indicate that interactions with the host community helped participants develop intercultural competence manifested in the recognition of cultural diversity, respect of cultural differences and reassessment of their cultural prejudices, leading to lasting changes in their perceptions and behaviors after returning home. However, the limitations brought by the restrictions on movements due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the lack of pre-immersion and post-immersion activities have presented challenges to the breadth and depth of these changes. These findings underscore not only the importance of cultural education but also the significance of continuous guidance from educators during the different stages of the experience. Furthermore, it was shown that despite the short time spent in the immersion and the age of the participants, significant transformative learning was still experienced by the participants, contrary to what some studies suggest.

### RESUMO

O presente estudo explorou as experiências de alunos-participantes filipinos numa imersão transcultural de 6 dias realizada na Indonésia, com o objetivo de compreender como interpretaram a sua aprendizagem cultural um ano depois. Utilizando a fenomenologia como desenho de investigação, os dados foram recolhidos através de entrevistas em profundidade, discussão em grupos focais, observação participante e análise de documentos. Os resultados indicam que as interações com a comunidade anfitriã ajudaram os participantes a desenvolverem competências interculturais manifestadas no reconhecimento da diversidade cultural, no respeito pelas diferenças culturais e na reavaliação dos seus preconceitos culturais, levando a mudanças duradouras nas suas percepções e comportamentos após o regresso a casa. No entanto, as limitações trazidas pelas restrições aos movimentos devido à pandemia da COVID-19 e a falta de atividades de pré-imersão e pós-imersão apresentaram desafios à amplitude e profundidade destas mudanças. Estas conclusões sublinham não só a importância da educação cultural, mas também a importância da orientação contínua dos educadores durante as diferentes fases da experiência. Além disso, foi demonstrado que apesar do pouco tempo de imersão e da idade dos participantes, ainda foram vivenciadas aprendizagens transformadoras significativas pelos participantes, ao contrário do que alguns estudos sugerem.

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## Introduction

In recent years, cross-cultural immersions have emerged as a method to develop cultural competence. The recognition that international experiences are integral to 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning has partly driven the creation of this program. Students who participated in these immersions have reported significant changes in their intercultural and even personal development. Lately, the preference for short-term cross-cultural immersion trips has been attributed to lower costs, less requirement on time, and access to a wider range of destinations (Potts, 2016).

Short-term immersion, as a new teaching pedagogy, has raised questions among researchers regarding its effectiveness compared to long-term immersion in achieving desired learning outcomes. Some studies have identified formation of intercultural competence (Nelson & Luetz, 2021; Onosu, 2021), emotional intelligence (Nelson & Luetz, 2021), cultural intelligence (Wood & St. Peters, 2014) and self-awareness (Sobkowiak, 2019) as gains from participating in short-term immersions.

Although the experience lasts for a few days to a few weeks, several authors argue that the resulting benefits do not primarily depend on the length of stay in the host country. Other factors are also significant determinants of learning outcomes from these activities. These factors include the depth and willingness of participants' interactions with the host community (Onosu, 2020), and host country attitudes and the presence of participants from the same country of origin (Plews et al., 2014). In addition, location, group size, and pre-immersion preparation can also influence the impact of cultural immersion on participants (Barden & Cashwell, 2013). Interestingly, the study by Garcia (2018) recommended facilitating reflections before, during, and after the trip regardless of the immersion duration. Therefore, to ensure that participants fully take advantage of the learning experience, these other factors have to be seriously considered and appropriately targeted.

In reviewing available related literature, it was also noted that most studies focus on immediate effects during and after the experience. Few publications discuss the long-term influence of cultural immersions on participants. Dutton (2019), for example, studied short-term immersion outcomes over three to eighteen months after return, finding continued critical reflection leading to meaningful changes. Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus (2011) also observed that participants in a short-term study abroad program integrated new knowledge into their lives even a year after the experience, highlighting the lasting impact of such immersive learning experiences.

In summary, there is a paucity of research on the significance of short-term cross-cultural immersions in cultural learning. Secondly, since long-term effects have been scarcely investigated especially in the case of short-term cross-cultural immersion, it is then still unclear how long these effects last, and how these are integrated into the participants' lives.

Delving into these domains will offer a comprehensive understanding of how cultural immersion can be employed as an effective teaching and learning tool without requiring extensive resources, unlike long-term engagements.

This study, therefore, sought to clarify the changes in perspectives and behaviors occurring after a short-term cross-cultural immersion experience. Specifically, it intended to answer the following questions: 1. What meanings do students make of their cultural learning experiences immediately after the short-term immersion participation? 2. What perspectives and behaviors of the participants changed because of their short-term cross-cultural experience after a year? 3. What factors influenced the integration of the participants' cultural experiences from the short-term immersion?

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

To address the research questions, the phenomenological research design was used employed, emphasizing personal knowledge and interpretation. Phenomenology is used as a research methodology when the purpose of the study is to understand the subjective lived experiences of participants (Qutoshi, 2018). Since the objective of this study was to have an in-depth understanding of how the participants integrated the meanings they attached to their cultural learning experiences into their lives, phenomenology was deemed an appropriate approach. The participants engaged in a six-day cultural immersion in Indonesia, during which they participated in various activities with students from an Indonesian Islamic school. After the trip, participants interpreted their experiences to create meanings. The manner in which they were integrating these meanings into their lives was also explored based on the perspectives of the participants, aligning with the epistemological stance of phenomenology which emphasizes personal knowledge and interpretation.

### **Data Collection**

During the six-day International Cultural Camp in Kendari, Indonesia, the researcher, who was also a teacher-participant, recorded field notes. Reflection papers from the five student participants and journals from the 2 teacher participants were collected and analyzed immediately after the event. One year after the cultural camp, semi-structured one-on-one interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted with the student participants to explore the integration of learning into their daily decisions and activities.

A semi-structured interview guide was prepared to ensure the fluidity of conversations between the researcher and the participants. The guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit deep thoughts and perceptions from the participants.

**Table 1.**  
*Pseudonyms and Descriptions of the Participating Students*

Student Pseudonym	Description	
	During the Immersion	At Present
Analyn	Female; Grade 12 student; travelled before to Thailand	First year university student; Psychology
Berlyn	Female; Grade 12 student	First year university student; Civil Engineering
Caryn	Female; Grade 12 student	First year university student; Nursing
Darlyn	Female; Grade 12 student	First year university student; Public Administration
Earlyn	Female; Grade 12 student	First year university student; Psychology

second round of personal interviews, additional interview guides were created to address specific points requiring clarification. According to Qutoshi (2018), since phenomenology heavily relies on perceptions, data is primarily gathered through personal interviews. An interview guide for the focus group discussion was developed based on data from the series of one-on-one interviews. It was divided into two parts. The first part aimed to have participants review and either approve, revise, or add to the initial codes. The second part contained questions to refine the action plan for future cultural immersions.

### **Data Analysis**

All recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim into a Microsoft Word document. To organize these transcriptions alongside other documents, the researcher employed interpretive phenomenological analysis, allowing for exploration beyond the informants' own understanding to identify additional meanings and insights.

Each transcript and written note was read multiple times, with descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments noted. Initial coding for these comments was performed using Microsoft Excel. Major and minor themes for each case were identified using insights from both the participants and the researcher. Participant phrases were selected to summarize and name most themes, while those capturing the same essence were clustered together. A summary table of themes with detailed descriptions was created to clearly identify which themes to use or discard, with poorly represented themes excluded.

The summary of themes was then compared to existing findings and concepts in the literature. A cohesive narrative was constructed based on the summary table, incorporating participant quotes to enrich the findings.

### **Limitations**

Since the study was limited to one group of students from one school participating in one trip, the findings are highly specific to this particular context and population while

identifying factors characteristic of the phenomenon being studied. However, the results may be useful in assisting other educational institutions in planning and organizing immersion programs in their own context.

The researcher was also one of the two teacher-participants in the trip, and some of the activities were only reserved for student-participants. Because of this, some of the participants' concrete experiences may not have been experienced by the researcher. The researcher coordinated the activity with the proper offices and individuals prior to the travel, and served as a coach and a guide to the Filipino delegates during the trip. Though the researcher served as one of the teachers of the participants in at least one subject before and after the immersion, the interaction was abruptly limited by the lockdowns imposed due to the pandemic. As such, effort was made to guarantee that this connection with participants and the immersion will not adversely affect the results; rather it should be used to optimize data collection while upholding the integrity of the study.

Data was also affected by the guidelines imposed by the Inter-agency Task Force (IATF) since the interviews were all conducted virtually. This limited the observance of their facial expressions and gestures which were as important as their verbal answers especially in a qualitative research. To minimize the adverse effects of these limitations, all virtual interviews were recorded.

### **Ethical Considerations**

To guarantee procedural ethics, the researcher was transparent with the participants and ensured the privacy and confidentiality of information. Before a participant's permission to join the research was asked, the researcher thoroughly explained the nature and goals of the research verbally and through an information letter attached with a consent form. All participants were also informed of the option to withdraw or terminate their participation at any time, without penalty. In order to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were utilized instead of the real names of the participants and even the members of the host community who were included in the experiences of the participants were not identified. To further protect the anonymity of the participants, only the researcher had access and knowledge of these real names. In the case of situational ethics, the researcher continuously reflected on and even questioned her ethical decisions. To do this, the participants were constantly reminded that the purpose of the research was to unveil their experiences during and after the immersion trip, and not the lives or experiences of people in the host community.

Relational ethics, on the other hand, was satisfied by engaging in reciprocity with participants. The researcher respected the participants by being mindful of the consequences of her character and actions. The opinions and suggestions of the participants were considered in the various steps in the research process including the designing of the interview guide questions.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Immediate Effects of the Immersion Experience**

The results reveal the meanings participants ascribed to their experiences during and immediately after the immersion.

#### ***Recognizing Cultural Diversity***

Participants attributed various meanings to their cross-cultural immersion experiences. One key realization was the awareness of cross-cultural similarities and differences. They initially experienced shock upon encountering significant differences between groups, particularly noting practices among Muslims and Hindus, such as the conservative dress code for women, the prevalence of Hindu god statues and sculptures, and the practice of praying multiple times a day.

Alongside feelings of fascination, participants experienced confusion as they compared their existing knowledge with new information. They questioned why people in the host country engaged in practices absent in their own social group. They even questioned certain acts and behavior that are “allowed in our country but are prohibited in their place” (Darlyn). Using their own culture as a reference point, participants formed initial evaluations of the foreign cultural practices and beliefs.

Critical reflection, a key component of Mezirow’s Transformational Learning Theory, is evident in the participants’ shared experiences. They began to question why certain practices and beliefs were forbidden in the host community but accepted in their own, and vice versa. This process involved examining new information that challenged their existing views, practices, and ideas. Through a self-reflective lens, they came to realize the diversity of people from different backgrounds.

Initially, participants felt apprehensive due to an ethnocentric mindset, evaluating other cultures using their own as the standard. They unknowingly characterized the foreign culture with terms like “prohibited,” “allowed,” “conservative,” and “different” based on Philippine standards. This hindered their understanding of the foreign culture and revealed a preference for their own cultural group. This analysis aligns with the initial stages of Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, where other cultures are perceived as “less real” than one’s own.

Ethnocentrism stems from beliefs and behaviors ingrained during primary socialization, often unquestioned and accepted as the norm. Given the participants’ limited interactions with individuals from outside the Philippines or with Filipinos from different cultural backgrounds, they tended to perceive their own perceptions and behaviors as closer to reality.

### ***Respecting Foreign Culture***

The participants' journey into unfamiliar territory led to encounters with novel situations. While some had read about the host country beforehand, they found this insufficient in preparing them for the full immersion experience. Despite belonging to different religions, they chose to wear the hijab during one of the conferences to avoid offending their host school. Additionally, two students were advised against drinking water while standing, as it is customary in the Muslim host community to sit while eating or drinking. Another unfamiliar situation arose when a participant accidentally touched a male teacher, later learning that such physical contact is forbidden unless it is with a husband, father, or brother. Consequently, all participants became cautious when interacting with male students and teachers from the host community.

The respectful attitude towards the foreign culture was primarily influenced by their understanding that they were "the visitors" and that the differences "does not mean they are lesser or lower human beings" (Caryn and Darlyn). They expressed that they behaved politely and respectfully, akin to grateful guests, and recognized that to disregard or disrespect the host's way of life would be impolite. Furthermore, the participants were aware, as one of them mentioned that the host community would not alter their practices or identity for visitors. This understanding motivated them to research about Indonesia before departing from the Philippines.

Respecting individuals from different cultural backgrounds is a fundamental aspect of intercultural competence, fostering an ethno-relative perspective reflected in one's behaviors (Bennett, 2017). Initially captivated by their new experiences, the participants consciously chose to interact with their hosts courteously. This shift in attitude gradually led them to recognize that, despite cultural differences, everyone deserves acceptance and respect.

According to Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), showing respect for the host community's culture aligns with the Acceptance stage. At this stage, individuals perceive the host community's culture as one among various equally complex worldviews. The hosts view their culture as integral to their communal identity, much like how the participants view their own culture as a defining group identity. Acceptance, in this context, does not necessarily imply agreement with another culture. Although some participants did not fully grasp certain practices and beliefs they encountered, they remained curious about the new culture.

However, this acceptance may not have been fully internalized during the short immersion, which lasted less than a week. This is evidenced by the participants' use of terms like "embarrassed," "cautious," and "wary." Despite their respectful behavior towards the hosts, the participants did not entirely attribute these actions to embracing cultural diversity, contrary to Bennett's assumptions. Instead, their respect stemmed from the awareness that they were visitors in a foreign setting.

### ***Reassessing Personal Prejudices***

Before the immersion, participants acknowledged holding biases, especially against Muslims, based on the belief that Muslims may be hostile towards other religious groups. In the initial days of the immersion, participants felt uneasy around students and teachers from the host school, leading them to stick together as a precaution against potential negative interactions. However, over time, they encountered situations that confronted these preconceptions.

As days progressed, several participants reconsidered their initial perceptions of the group and began to value their hosts' hospitality, kindness, and generosity. This shift in perception illustrates a process of cognitive restructuring in response to direct cultural experiences. The evolving attitudes among participants highlight the transformative potential of immersive cultural encounters in challenging stereotypes and fostering mutual understanding.

Prejudice, defined by Baldwin (2017) as negative feelings or biased thoughts toward a particular group, was evident among the participants before their trip. The cultural immersion experience in the host country helped them realize that their perceptions of Indonesian people were indeed biased. Without this firsthand experience, these preconceptions might have been wrongly accepted as truths. This finding resonates with research conducted on Singaporean university undergraduates by Yan Lo-Philip et al. (2015), who also had preconceived notions about the Lao people before participating in an intensive six-week summer field school in Laos. During their immersion, the students discovered through their field notes that practices they assumed were universal in Laos actually exhibited variations and sometimes contradictions, prompting them to critically examine their own biases. King (2020) further emphasized that cultural immersion activities can effectively challenge students' biases.

### **Long-term Effects of the Immersion**

Approximately two months after the immersion experience, the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, leading to government-imposed movement restrictions. Despite these limitations, the participants successfully integrated their learning into their perspectives and activities. Initially, they demonstrated respect for foreign cultures as visitors, adhering to polite behavior. Surprisingly, even upon returning to their home country, they continued to value cultural complexity and exhibited courtesy towards diverse cultural groups.

Reflection papers from the participants revealed their initial apprehension before the immersion trip, as it was the first time the four of them had traveled abroad without their parents. Remarkably, several months later, some actively sought opportunities to engage in similar activities, transforming their apprehension into excitement and curiosity.

Before the immersion, many participants were hesitant to initiate conversations with strangers during travel. However, at the time of the interviews, all were first-year university



students actively engaging with classmates from diverse cultural backgrounds in school projects and virtual meetings. Some participants sustained interactions with individuals from different cultures through webinars, seminars, and international online exchanges. Additionally, they maintained communication with teachers and students from the host school via social media, exchanging information about their respective countries' educational landscapes.

Before, I had difficulty interacting with my classmates who had different opinions. Today, however, it is easier for me to talk with them because I learned that we may have differences but it does not mean that we do not equally deserve to be respected. (Caryn)

Given the evident disparities in lifestyle and preferences between Filipinos and Indonesians, the participants noted several practices and beliefs that they found to be unusual. Upon returning home, however, one of them underwent a significant transformation in clothing style and dietary choices. The participant made a deliberate decision to dress conservatively and to decrease personal pork consumption.

The participants' observations and experiences during the six-day cross-cultural immersion undoubtedly contributed to the development of their intercultural sensitivity and competence, evident in reported perceptual and behavioral changes. As defined by De Angelis (2015), intercultural competence involves the ability to respect and communicate with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, reflected in observable behaviors. The participants described behaviors indicating increased acceptance not only toward Indonesians but also toward individuals from other cultural groups. They consciously avoided judging other cultures and refrained from comparing them with their own. Some actively participated in cultural events, while others engaged with people from different backgrounds to deepen their understanding of cultural differences. This process unintentionally led to several impacts, including increased self-confidence in traveling and communication, adjustments in personal habits and preferences, and even changes in career aspirations.

Before experiencing changes in perspectives and actions, the participants encountered internal conflict. Field notes and interviews revealed their confusion between "respecting what hosts do" and "doing what hosts do." Some felt they needed to completely change their beliefs to accommodate new cultural experiences, while others pondered where to draw the line between acceptance and merely appreciating the richness of the hosts' culture.

I had so many questions when we returned here. When we were there, I respected their culture because we were just guests. But when we came back, I asked myself, "Should I compromise my beliefs just to accept the culture of others?" (Darlyn)

Various observations and experiences prompted the participants to reflect on their habitual actions, questioning the validity of presuppositions formed through prior learning, as

emphasized by Transformative Learning Theory. The absence of such reflections may have hindered their awareness of how they perceived, felt, and acted during the immersion. However, by asking "why" questions and engaging in reflective practices, the cross-cultural immersion helped them understand their current viewpoints and actions, enabling them to choose which aspects to retain and which to transform.

### **Constraints in Integration**

The effectiveness of the activity for the participants may have been restricted by both internal and external constraints. One significant external constraint was the onset of the pandemic shortly after the cross-cultural immersion. This prevented the participants from visiting places and applying their new cultural learning. Despite expressing interest in traveling within the Philippines and abroad, their plans were unfortunately postponed due to government restrictions on air travel. Engaging with people and experiencing diverse cultural encounters could have enriched the participants' understanding and appreciation of cultural differences.

The participants themselves highlighted the lack of post-immersion activities as a major reason for not fully capitalizing on their learning from the trip. They noted that no specific outputs were required following their return, which could have aided in reinforcing, clarifying, and processing their new experiences. While some students demonstrated a capacity for personal reflection on their experiences, there remains a necessity for educator guidance to optimize this reflective process.

Additionally, another factor that hindered the development of intercultural competence was the participants' inadequate understanding of their own culture. While it was assumed that they possessed a comprehensive understanding of their culture and religion before the cross-cultural immersion, there was an absence of any cultural orientation—both about their own culture and that of the host country— or lack of any criteria for identifying the participants' level of cultural knowledge before the trip.

Regrettably, the lack of post-immersion activities may have limited the participants' development of intercultural competence. This aligns with the findings of Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus (2011), who emphasized the importance of additional educational experiences post-immersion in enabling students to act upon their transformative experiences. Santoro and Major (2012) also stressed the significance of post-placement reflection.

Furthermore, the participants acknowledged their lack of in-depth knowledge and understanding of their own culture. Familiarity with one's culture not only leads to an accurate representation but also facilitates effective cross-cultural relations (Hoff, 2014). Without awareness of the values underpinning one's cultural beliefs and practices, individuals may assume others share similar values, resulting in insensitivity towards values important to members of other cultural groups.

## Conclusion

Overall, the findings underscore that despite the short length of time spent engaging with other foreign cultures, short-term cross-cultural immersions have the potential to foster intercultural sensitivity and competence among high school students. Transformative learning, thought to be applicable only to adult learners, can also be manifested by adolescent learners through critical self-reflection. In this process, the important role of educators cannot be discounted as they serve not only as facilitators during and after immersion activities but also as guide in orienting and guiding the students towards the acquisition of proper knowledge and skills before getting immersed in a foreign learning environment.

There is then a need for educational institutions who offer secondary education to provide opportunities for cross-cultural immersions. High school learners have the capacity to do critical reflection and develop cultural competence. In order to take full advantage of this, it is necessary to create an environment where there are interactions with people from other cultural backgrounds. For further research, since this study is limited to one group of students, at one institution, participating in one trip, expanding this study to a larger group of students at multiple institutions may provide more understanding about how secondary learners reflect on their learning specifically through short-term cross-cultural immersions.

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