

Broadening The Perspectives : Self-Reflected Benefits From International Student Study Tour

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ABSTRACT

International mobility among students and lecturers are becoming more important in various universities. This criterion is getting to be more significant because it contributes to several factors such as university ranking, employers' expectation and increased student's marketability. In light of this, a mobility programme which involved a group of students to a foreign country was planned to expose them to the study tour experience. Upon completion of the programme, the students were asked to provide a self reflection by answering interview questions based on their experiences during the study tour. The findings generally showed that the students enjoyed the programme organised and their self reflections managed to record positive feedbacks such as strengthening of self confidence, increase in motivation level and improvement in English language presentations and speaking skills. In conclusion, international student study tour has a vast potential as an impactful programme which offers a myriad of benefits for the students.

Keywords: *self-reflection, international study tour, motivation, self-confidence, fun-learning*

INTRODUCTION

ESL learners commonly have a variety of issues in their language learning process. Some of the issues may include motivational factors, language barriers, geographical settings and even cultural obstacles. In universities, these ESL learners who have been having these problems since they were in schools bring along their learning baggage to their university years. In UiTM for example, students have to pursue three to four English language papers at the diploma and degree levels, depending on the needs of their faculties. Knowing that these students carry with them numerous baggage throughout their experience in learning English, it is imperative to make them be aware and understand that learning English can be beneficial not just because they have to graduate but because mastering another language can bring them to unprecedented heights in many areas of their lives later on.

INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY PROGRAMMES

Internationalisation of higher education was basically understood based on idea networking, cultures, knowledge, and values (Knight, 2013). Consequently, it has become an pointer for quality in higher education as stated by Urban & Palmer (2013). Currently, internationalisation is conceived by different levels and scales, comprising the 'world, region, nation, state, community, organization and individual' (Li-Hua et al., 2011).

According to Abdullah, Kaiberg and Viskus (2007), Higher education internationalisation consisted of two different parts such as internationalisation at home and internationalisation of cross-border education. As defined by Knight (2003a), internationalisation at home refers to the intercultural as well as international facets of the teaching or learning process, curriculum and research, as a matter of fact other kinds of activities which can help the students to establish their intercultural skills and international understanding without leaving the campus. In the same vein, Daquila (2013) posited that internationalisation at home included those activities which could unify and integrate international students and local students, modifying the content of courses, offering different languages, diversifying curriculum and teaching materials, evaluating methods as well as using computer-based technology.

Increasingly institutes of higher education are encouraging students to have opportunities to travel abroad to learn about different cultures and to enhance their intercultural capabilities. Research suggests that students who undertake study abroad gain in global awareness and open-mindedness towards different cultures and are more focused on what they want to achieve in life (Daly, 2011). Many research have proved that one of the most effective means for graduates to develop international skills and communication competencies is through international academic mobility programs such as study abroad and student exchange (Clyne & Rizvi, 1998; Fantini et al., 2001; Gochenour, 1993; Lawson, 1969; Wallace, 1993, as cited in Daly & Barker, 2005). In light of this, international experience is distinctly perceived to be fundamental to education.

Internationalisation which is also known as cross-border education refers to activities for education purposes carried out abroad, or called internationalisation abroad (Naidoo, 2006).. It Internationalisation abroad is also known as transnational education because it takes place across national boundaries, and therefore involves scholars, students, lecturers, courses, curriculum and research among countries in the world (Gargano, 2009). Other than that, there are various types of cross-border education such as an individual going overseas to pursue his/her education which is called as students' mobility; an educational course or program being conducted overseas which is called as program mobility; and, finally, a university or education provider which is opened overseas which is called as institution mobility (Stella, 2006).

Internationalisation of higher education in Asia has been in practice for quite some time; especially since the latter era of the 19th century, when most of the Asian countries sent their students and faculty members abroad for the purpose of doing research (Huang, 2007). Malaysia too is caught up in this trend and now the concept of HEIs is towards becoming 'world class' and preparing graduates for work in a global environment. Therefore, universities are currently recommended to invest more in student mobility programs to expose more students to the international environment. Several reasons why HEIs in Malaysia are focusing more on internationalisation are due to the reasons such as the improvements of local and international students' thinking and sharing ideas by collaborating with each other, student's improvements in English language proficiency through socialising and better marketability for graduates at a global scale.

MOBILITY PROGRAMME : THE AUSTRALIAN – ACADEMY OF LANGUAGE STUDIES COLLABORATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE (TAACLE)

Understanding the myriad of benefits that internationalisation can bring, an international mobility programme with the objectives to expose the university students to using English in its native soil, experience inter-cultural communication and train the student to be independent learners was planned. This mobility programme was planned in accordance to the Ministry of Education Malaysia's blueprint which stated that Malaysia like other developing countries is striving to take its higher educational systems to a higher level, whereby internationalisation is one of the seven key thrusts of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) 2020 (Aziz and Abdullah, 2014).The internationalisation of education has grown rapidly in the last decade in Malaysia, and

this country is anticipating to become one of the greatest educational centres in the region (Malaklolunthu and Selan, 2011).

This programme which was named The Australian – Academy Of Language Studies Collaborative Learning Experience (TAACLE), was a short term mobility programme involving thirteen students from UiTM to a world-renowned university in Western Australia. This programme was initially opened to any students who were interested to travel to Perth, join English language classes there and explore the interesting spots in the Perth. Initially, countless number of students showed their interest to join the programme. However, due to the constraints of funding and space, only thirteen students were chosen based on their readiness to join the programme in terms of monetary means and capacity to plan the project. These students were from different like Accountancy, Business, Public Administration and Mathematics. The university contributed some funds to assist the students to undergo this programme but the students still had to use their money and worked hard to find sponsors to finance their trip. These students were guided by two lecturers-in-charge who helped them to manage the flights and plan their itinerary in Perth.

In Perth, the students attended eight hours of English language classes at the university. Since this is a customised study tour, the students did not have other students in their class. Their instructor was a native speaker of English language. The university was briefed that the students should have English classes which focused on increasing their levels of confidence, independence and inter-cultural awareness. Due to this, their English classes at the university were planned in such a way that the students had to share their personal experiences in Malaysia and abroad in group discussions and presentations.

Besides the classes, these students were brought to the petting zoo, short train-trips, town exploration and city trips. The students used public transportation, bought their groceries and managed their own meals. They went out in small groups of two to four people on their trips and they used google maps to navigate them and they also communicated with the locals in order to accomplish all their personal tasks.

METHODOLOGY

A focused group interview was conducted involving nine students who joined the study tour. The questions asked were meant to get the students to reflect on their involvement in the study tour from the beginning until the completion of the project. Reflection on one's experiences in a study tour programme has been described as extremely beneficial for students (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Hamman et al., 2010; Trent, 2011; Walkington, 2005, as cited in Shahijan, Rezaei & Preece, 2016).

The questions included :

1. Why did you choose to join this programme?
2. What did you expect to get when you join this programme?
3. Do you think this kind of programme is good for students? Why?
4. What were the challenges that you faced when you joined this programme?
5. How did you resolve the challenges?
6. Would you recommend this programme to your friends? Why?
7. Can you relate this programme to your life and your future?

8. Can you give recommendations on how this programme can be improved?

The students' responses were recorded, and they were categorised into the emerging themes shown by their answers. Inductive, thematic analysis was utilised to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2008; Simons, 2009 as cited in Tangen et.al, 2015). With inductive analysis, themes are strongly linked to the data itself rather than being theoretically driven; this enables the coding of data without trying to fit it into pre-existing themes.

FINDINGS

The students' responses have shown several emerging themes. Four of the most recurring themes in their self-reflective answers were **new** – experience, knowledge, place, surrounding, skill, friends and things, **experience** – new, culture, communication, **improve** – self-confidence, communication skills, English language, self and lastly, **enjoy** – self, shopping, fun.

Most of the students shared that the study tour experience had given them **NEW** experience. Not just experience, they also felt that they had gained new knowledge because they explored new places with new surroundings. When they were given the opportunity to soak all these new experiences, they were required to learn new skills and they also managed to get new friends. They also stated that they learnt new culture and lifestyles that they may adapt one they were back in Malaysia. Some of their comments included :

... the best part is, we could go shopping and enjoyed ourselves and gained new experiences

Yes, we learnt new skills in every aspect and visit new places.

I choose to join this programme because i want new environment that can open my eyes

Because i really excited to get to know other country culture and lifestyle and explore many places in their country

The second theme which emerged was **EXPERIENCE**. To most of the students, joining this study tour to a foreign country had mostly allowed them to gain experience which was highly valuable to them. Joining the tour had enabled them to experience the new place and surroundings. Other than that, given the chance to explore a foreign place, they were able to experience the different and new culture. Surrounded by native speakers of English, they also has the opportunity to communicate with the locals. This was also a different kind of experience for them. Sample responses were :

....new experience and get greater challenge

....a good program because I learn and experience something new.

The third theme identified was **IMPROVE**. Most students stated that they had managed to improve themselves in various aspects after joining the study tour. They reflected that their improvements were in terms of English language skills, communication skills, and their whole self generally.

Students claimed that :

.....improve my English language in term of communication and to gain new experiences.

.....To improve my English as well as to be in new study environment.

As this programme had given me opportunity to improve myself in terms of confidence, knowledge and explore many beautiful places, so i think this is so important to me to be more confidence in dealing with other people because in the future, if we are working, this aspect is so crucial to us to communicate with our department.

The last theme traced in the students' responses was **ENJOY**. To most of them, joining the study tour was an enjoyable experience. They enjoyed themselves doing the activities during the study tour such as their English classes with the native speaker instructor, shopping and exploring the new places.

Because I was really excited to get to know other country culture and lifestyle and explore many places in their country because this was my first time went to Perth

Furthermore, it enables students to improve their English communication skills. And the best part is, they can shopping and enjoying themselves and gain new experiences

Yes, because they will definitely enjoy and will miss every moment in Perth.

Learning English in a very fun way.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study tour which objectives were to allow students to experience new things, improve their English language in a native speaking environment and allow them to learn English in a fun and exciting way were successful if we referred to the themes which emerged from the students' answers. Most of the students who participated in the programme did find their plethora of experiences new and interesting. They also agreed that being in a surrounding where English is used everywhere had forced them to use the language in order to carry out their daily activities. This in turn had enabled them to be better speakers of the language. In short, despite the challenges of shortage of fund especially, the students found the programme to be beneficial to them in various ways.

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