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# Exploring the Impact of a Year-Long Study Abroad in Japan on U.S. Students' Intercultural Competencies and Career Readiness Awareness

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## Abstract

In recent years, more American students have participated in study abroad programs for developing language skills, intercultural competencies, broader perspectives, and personal growth. Universities emphasize "career development" through study abroad experiences. However, there are limited qualitative studies focusing on Asian regions, especially Japan, where cultures and social values greatly differ from those of the United States. This study explores how a one-year study abroad experience influenced the intercultural competencies and career readiness of four American students, including two of the researchers, who reside in U.S. communities with a low Japanese population. The findings revealed that an extended study abroad experience in Japan not only enhanced students' intercultural competency skills and career preparedness but also demonstrated how each student developed critical thinking skills. Also, they became more aware of the concepts of equity and inclusion and experienced personal growth during their time abroad.

## Abstract in Japanese

近年、語学力の向上、異文化への深い理解、視野の拡大、自己成長を目的として留学プログラムに参加するアメリカ人学生が増加している。とりわけ、大学において

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は、留学経験を「キャリア形成」の一環として位置づける傾向が強まっている。しかし、アジア地域、特にアメリカと文化的・社会的価値観に大きな相違を有する日本を対象とした質的研究は依然として乏しい。本研究は、日本における一年間の留学経験が、アメリカ国内の日本人居住者が少ない地域に暮らす四名のアメリカ人学生（うち二名は本研究の研究者）に与えた影響を明らかにすることを目的とする。分析の結果、長期にわたる日本留学は、学生の異文化理解力およびキャリア準備能力の向上に寄与しただけでなく、各学生が批判的思考力を発展させた過程も浮き彫りにした。さらに、彼らは公平性および包括性の概念への認識を深め、個人的成長を遂げたことが確認された。

## Keywords

Career readiness; intercultural competencies; intrapersonal skills; Japan; year-long study abroad

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, many U.S. students have been participating in study abroad programs. The reasons for the popularity are that the study abroad experiences help participants not only develop their language skills, cross-cultural and/or intercultural competencies, but also broader perspectives and personal growth (e.g., Anderson et al., 2015; Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013; Iwasaki, 2007; Maharaja, 2018; Watson, 2013). Open Doors, an organization that provides study abroad data that reflects information on student mobility from the United States, demonstrates that during the academic year of 2021-2022, U.S. study abroad rebounded to more than half of pre-pandemic levels; over 188,000 students went abroad to gain academic credit. According to this report, while many of the students participate in short-term study abroad programs such as summer programs or one-semester exchanges, 4,757 American students (2.5% of the total) experienced long-term (one year or calendar year) study abroad (Open Doors, 2023). More than 300,000 American students studied abroad before the pandemic, and the number of students in these programs is expected to continue to grow.

Today, many US universities focus on student career development, encouraging students to acquire a variety of skills while they are in school (Anderson et al., 2015; Camara, 2013). National Association Colleges and Employers (NACE) defines career readiness as “a foundation from which to

demonstrate requisite core competencies that broadly prepare the college educated for success in the workplace and lifelong career management” (p. 1) and lists the following eight skills as the competencies for a career-ready workforce—Career and Self-Development, Communication, Critical Thinking, Equity and Inclusion, Leadership, Professionalism, Teamwork, and Technology (NACE, 2021). College life offers various opportunities for students to deepen their specialized knowledge and acquire professional skills. By engaging with peers, supervisors, and professors through club activities and lab work, students can also develop leadership and teamwork skills. Furthermore, students can enhance their career readiness through studying abroad (Clarke et al., 2020; Hubbard & Rexeisen, 2020; Jenny et al., 2017) or by immersing themselves in different environments. These experiences often challenge students to navigate unfamiliar cultural contexts, fostering self-awareness, adaptability, and the development of intercultural competencies (e.g., Fukuda & Nishikawa Chávez, 2021; Pedersen, 2010; Salisbury et al., 2013). These skills are especially important in an increasingly globalized workforce, where effective intercultural understanding is essential. This is particularly evident in Japan, where the national character, culture, and societal aspects differ significantly from those of the U.S. or other Western countries (Rivers, 2019; Sullivan & Schatz, 2009; Takamizawa, 2001).

As of today, although many research studies explored the relationship between studying abroad and intercultural competencies as well as career readiness, little qualitative research, particularly focusing on the Asian region including Japan, is available. Iwasaki (2007) and Stebleton et al. (2013) argue that qualitative research is crucial for understanding how each individual achieved their personal goals and how each of the study abroad activities investigated can result in diverse outcomes. In many workplaces today, diversity is highly valued (Guillaume et al., 2013; Roberson et al., 2017). Thus, having an environment where people from diverse backgrounds can comfortably express their opinions, respect each other, and mutually support one another, is crucial.

Therefore, this research aims to investigate how long-term study abroad experiences in Japan impact American students' mindset, foster intercultural competencies, and contribute toward their career readiness, particularly in terms of the key skills proposed by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2021), a framework commonly used by the target institution to conceptualize and assess career readiness.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Outcomes of Working in Diversity

Today, recognizing and embracing diversity are essential, and several scholars emphasize its importance in the workplace. (Deloitte, 2022; Guillaume et al., 2013; Roberson et al., 2017). Roberson et al. (2017) discuss the changes in the U.S. work environment driven by increased diversity. Their study also provides a figure of the nomological network of the diversity research domain, showing that diversity is related not only to culture, demography, social identity, categorization, and societal factors, but also to prejudice, stigma, and discrimination. Therefore, creating a work environment free of prejudice and discrimination, where different cultures can be understood and coexist is essential.

Regarding the effects of intercultural understanding, Chen et al. (2012) suggest that individuals with high motivational cultural intelligence tend to have more successful cross-cultural sales interactions. Furthermore, Leifels and Zhang (2023) highlight that cultural diversity can influence group dynamics and social resources and demands. Their research findings indicate that the makeup of the team in terms of cultural diversity does affect how social demands relate to the wellbeing of individual team members.

While the prominence of diversity is recognized, results from *the Deloitte Global 2022 Gen Z and Millennial survey*—conducted in nearly 50 countries including the U.S.—show that more than 50% of Gen Zs (those who were born between 1981 and 1996) and millennials (individuals born between 1997 and 2012) do not feel their current organization’s progress in creating a diverse and inclusive workplace is sufficient (Deloitte, 2022, p. 14). These findings suggest that significant challenges remain in achieving workplace diversity, highlighting the importance of empowering younger generations to take a leading role in addressing these issues. Given these factors, examining how an understanding of diversity—including cultural and social value differences—contributes to career readiness offers deeper insights into the educational value of study abroad experiences.

### 2.2. Different Characteristics or Social Values Between Japan and the U.S.

Although there is not clear definition to describe Japanese people or culture, Japan is often considered a collective society (Miyamoto & Kuhlman,

2001; Spring, 2007; Takamizawa, 2001). As Takamizawa (2001) notes, “Japanese society is structured based on frames. Whatever institutions or groups, such as *ie* (household), *mura* (village), *kaisha* (company), or *kuni* (nation) function as frameworks in Japanese society. The frame that the person belongs to determines their primary identification” (p. 35). In Japanese society the group or organization is considered more important than the individual. Furthermore, *omoiyari* (compassion), *yasashisa* (kindness) (Tsuneyoshi, 2013), *enryo* (modesty) (Spring, 2007), and *giri-ninjo* or “affection and duty in interpersonal relations” (Hayashi, 2002, p. 103), are also considered as Japanese value traits. To corroborate this, a Japanese national university, Nara Institute of Science and Technology (NAIST), provides information for international students arriving from overseas. This includes a summary of the characteristics of Japanese people and Japanese culture as experienced by foreigners who have previously lived in Japan. The following traits are examples of many in the list: “They tend to act in groups.” “They prefer uniformity (being the same as others).” “They do not prefer standing out.” “Out of consideration for others, they often use indirect expressions (to avoid conflict of opinions) and tend to align their opinions with others,” and “They do not show much emotion outwardly.” (NAIST, 2016).

Likewise, because over 46 million immigrants reside in the United States and those people are from different cultural backgrounds (Allen & McGuire, 2020), the explicit definitions of American social values do not exist; however, several studies commonly introduce “individualism” as a representative social value in the U.S. (e.g., Allen & McGuire, 2020; Chiou, 2001; Kohls, 1984). Similarly to NAIST (2016), several US university websites also introduce social values of the United States to international students as, “Individualism,” “Equality,” “Privacy,” “Democracy,” “Independence and self-reliance,” “Directness,” and “Informality” and so on (e.g., Boston University, n.d.; University of Portland, n.d.; University of Rochester, n.d.).

From these differences of traits, studying abroad in areas that have unique cultural and social perspectives, such as Japan, will allow students to learn new cultures and values that they may not experience in their home country. Furthermore, by acquiring new social values, they will be able to enhance global awareness as well as their career readiness on an international level. However, we highlight that these characteristics represent an overall image of Japan as well as the U.S. are not meant to be generalizable. In this study, we respect the individual personalities and feelings of the participants and respond with openness to the events they experienced in Japan.

### 2.3. Fostering Intercultural Competencies Through Study Abroad

Hammer (2004) defines intercultural competencies as “the capacity to generate perceptions and adapt behavior to cultural context” (as cited in Watson et al., 2013, p. 64). These competencies are essential in preparing students to navigate diverse cultural settings and are often cited as key outcomes of study abroad programs.

Many studies highlight the benefits of studying abroad, including the development of intercultural competencies, adaptability to new environments, and enhanced self-awareness and critical thinking (e.g., Clarke et al., 2020; Gillespie, 2019; Jenny et al., 2017; Salisbury et al., 2013). Kehl and Morris’ study (2008) reveals that by acquiring experiences that can only take place abroad, students (who studied overseas for eight weeks) have greater global mindedness, or “a worldview in which an individual perceives his or herself as connected to the world community” (p. 69), than students who remain in their home countries. Additionally, several studies report that taking pre-abroad language and cultural understanding classes results in greater growth. In Pedersen’s research (2010), students who received intercultural training before an 8-week study abroad program in the UK showed significant improvement in cultural awareness compared to those who did not receive such training. Pedersen (2010) concludes that direct pre-study abroad instruction is effective and fosters intercultural competencies rather than simply sending students abroad. Other studies also support this finding. Iwasaki (2007) examined junior students who studied Japanese prior to a one-year program in Japan and found significant gains in language proficiency, cultural understanding, and personal growth. Watson et al. (2013) reported that a three-week pre-immersion seminar significantly improved language skills and cross-cultural competencies among students participating in a one-semester program. Similarly, Fukuda and Nishikawa Chávez (2021) found that a 6-week program in Japan, combined with four weeks of pre-departure instruction, led to significant development in students’ interpersonal engagement, self-awareness, and cultural exploration.

However, most students choose short-term programs (Open Doors, 2023), ranging from a few weeks to a semester. Cubillos and Ilvento (2013) stated that “the highest benefits are associated with longer stays” (p. 505). Their research findings indicate that longer stays foster personal growth, including self-confidence, in addition to enhancing language skills. In this context, although numerous studies have examined the effectiveness of study abroad in promoting intercultural competencies and career readiness, there is still a lack

of research focusing on long-term study abroad programs (i.e., two semesters or one year). Additionally, there is a similar lack of research on career development while studying abroad in Japan or in regions where social characteristics or values differ from those of the United States.

### **3. The Study**

This study examines how a one-year study abroad experience in Japan contributes to exchange students' intercultural competencies and career readiness. In this study, intercultural competencies refer to the ability to perceive cultural differences and adapt behavior accordingly (Hammer, 2004; Watson et al., 2013). Career readiness is defined as a set of core competencies necessary for workplace success and lifelong career development (NACE, 2021). This definition is broad in scope and is not limited to specialized knowledge or technical skills.

To explore the impact of a year-long study abroad experience in Japan—a country with social norms and cultural values distinct from those in the United States—on participants' intercultural competencies and career readiness, this study adopts a descriptive case study approach. This methodology allows for the analysis of both the phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Yin (2014) notes, “A case study allows investigators to focus on a ‘case’ and retain holistic and real-world perspectives” (p. 4) and indicates that case study is effective for explaining present circumstances. Namely, this methodology is suitable for studies whose questions require a widespread and in-depth description of some social phenomenon.

#### **3.1. Participants**

The students this study focuses on are those who had taken courses on Japanese language and culture before going to Japan for a year as exchange students in their junior or senior year. Their home institution is a public university located a couple of hours drive away from the state capital in the Southwest. The Japanese population in the city and the Japanese enrollment at the institution are very small, with about 30 exchange students from Japan each year. Although the university offers courses and events on Japanese language and culture, the opportunities to interact with Japanese people or to access cultural resources outside of campus are very limited due to the small Japanese population or social connections.

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, emails were sent to students meeting these criteria (Yin, 2014). As a result, four students, including co-researchers, Luke and Ashley, agreed to participate and share their experiences in Japan. After returning to the U.S., Luke and Ashley took the primary investigator's (PI, first author) capstone course, where we discussed their study abroad experiences and various life events. Their real-life experiences while abroad revealed various growth and self-awareness. To conduct this study, considering the importance of spreading their "truth" or actual voices (Mansfield & Wagner-Egelhaaf, 2019) and with the wishes of these two students in mind, Luke and Ashley joined the research not only as participants sharing their experiences but also as investigators who transcribed, coded, and analyzed the data collected from all participants with the PI. Therefore, these two are participating under their real names. In this study, we use pseudonyms for all personal and university names except for Luke and Ashley, who are co-researchers on the study.

The participants are majoring or minoring in Japanese and studied in different areas of Japan (i.e., Kyushu region, Chugoku region, and Tokyo) as exchange students from September 2022 to July 2023. Participant information is summarized in Table (1).

TABLE (1)

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS AND STUDY ABROAD INFORMATION

Name	Ethnicity / Gender	Year in School	Major(s)/Minor	Host University in Japan	Prior Experience in Japan
Luke	White male	Senior (5th)	Japanese, Biology	National university in the Kyushu region	2-week summer program in high school
Ashley	White female	Senior (4th)	Japanese, Comparative Cultural Studies	Private university in Tokyo prefecture	First time
Luna	Latina	Senior (5th)	Biomedical Science, Comparative Cultural Studies/Japanese minor	National university in the Chugoku region	First time
Alicia	African American female	Senior (5th)	Mechanical Engineering, Comparative Cultural Studies/Japanese minor	National university in the Kyushu region	First time

Van Manen (1997) proposed that communication plays a significant role in understanding human experience in depth. The four participants had enrolled in the PI's Japanese courses before studying abroad, and the PI had known each participant for two to four years by the time they participated in this research. Additionally, the PI served as their language mentor and/or work supervisor, which allowed her to closely interact with them outside the classroom. This familiarity helped build trust and enabled smooth communication.

### 3.2. Methods

After receiving an explanation of the study and submitting informed consent forms, the PI conducted one-hour individual interviews with Luna and Alicia in English. These interviews, held in the spring semester of 2024, one semester after their return from Japan, followed a semi-structured format commonly used in qualitative case studies (Yin, 2014). The recorded conversations were transcribed by co-researchers. Additionally, as Luke and Ashley were familiar with the interview questions in advance, their answers to the interview questions were provided as written responses before reviewing Luna and Alicia's interviews.

Telling personal experiences or truth is significant in autobiographical study; however, an individual's right to privacy must be considered (Mansfield & Wagner-Egelhaaf, 2019). Thus, the PI informed Luke and Ashley that their dual roles as researchers and participants might compromise their anonymity. Like Luna and Alicia, they were given the chance to review and edit their written responses after data collection, removing any content they did not want to share in this study.

After transcribing the interviews, the PI and co-researchers read each participant's response repeatedly and discussed follow-up questions for each participant based on any parts that needed clarity, depth, and further explanation as well as new questions that arose while reading the stories. The participants were asked to answer these follow-up questions in writing. Furthermore, Luke and Ashley wrote about any additional study abroad experiences they wanted to share as they analyzed the interviews. In the follow-up questions, we indicated NACE's "*Competencies for a Career-Ready Workforce*" (2021) to the participants, as this framework is widely recognized and utilized at the institution to which the PI and the participants belong as a key reference for career readiness. Given its familiarity among students, it served as a useful

and accessible tool for prompting reflection. Within one month of the interviews, all participants—including the co-researchers—were asked to submit a written reflection in English, identifying which competencies they felt had been developed during their study abroad experience and explaining why. Participants were invited to submit their responses online in free-form text.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Although the four participants stayed in Japan during the same period, their experiences were unique, and we believe they would interpret these experiences in different ways. Therefore, phenomenographic analysis, which focuses on the different ways a group of people understands a phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2005; Marton & Booth, 1997), was used to analyze their lived experiences.

Following Åkerlind (2005), we analyzed the data—transcribed interview documents and written reflections on career readiness—in three steps. The first step was to create categories: by repeatedly reading the collected data, we extracted keywords from our experiences that were specifically related to intercultural competencies. Then we created "pools of meaning," or more specific classifications consisting of two or three keywords along with detailed explanations of their connections. This process led us to understand how the participants perceived certain phenomena and explore the similarities and differences in their perceptions of studying in Japan as exchange students for a year. Lastly, we explored the differences and similarities regarding how each participant experienced their study abroad, which is known as "outcome space" in phenomenographic research (Marton & Booth, 1997).

Furthermore, we analyzed which of the eight skills proposed by NACE their experiences associated with or corresponded to. While participants answered questions about which skills they think were influenced in the follow-up questions, we analyzed that their various other experiences were also related to career development skills; thus, we incorporated those outcome spaces into the career-ready skills. In the next findings section, we discuss the skill items that were particularly impacted, reflecting their real-life examples.

## 4. Findings

As shown in previous studies, the findings of this research also demonstrate that studying abroad significantly enhances students' intercultural competencies. Participants who studied in Japan for one year showed notable

growth in four NACE (2021) competencies: *Communication, Career and Self-Development, Critical Thinking, and Equity and Inclusion*. However, competencies such as Leadership, Professionalism, Teamwork, and Technology were less evident, possibly due to the short duration (3–4 months) of their internships, which limited their roles and responsibilities. Additionally, because students were required to take courses as part of the program, they did not engage in internships on a daily basis, further limiting their opportunities to develop these skills. Another key theme that emerged was the unique nature of participants' experiences in Japan—opportunities that would not have been possible in their home country. Immersion in a setting with different cultural norms, values, and language fostered both intercultural and personal development, particularly in autonomy, decision-making, and self-awareness (Doyle, 2009; Jenny et al., 2017; Maharaja, 2018). The following sections explore how each participant built these competencies through their study abroad experiences.

#### 4.1. Communication

NACE (2021) defines communication skill as “Clearly and effectively exchange information, ideas, facts, and perspectives with persons inside and outside of an organization” (p. 3). This definition includes non-verbal communication, active listening, appropriate manners, and respectful attitude to diversity and different cultures, and so forth (NACE, 2021). Ashley and Luna realized the importance of knowing how to speak Japanese and of correctly adjusting their speech according to the situation, as well as the ability to discern how words are used in different contexts.

Ashley recounts her experience at a bar where she met and communicated with several Japanese people. One day, she had an opportunity to speak with a man, who was much older than her and seemingly a person of high social status such as a CEO, and they spoke Japanese the entire time. He initially seemed impressed by her Japanese proficiency. However, later, she felt the man was upset with her speech—she had unconsciously spoken to him in a casual manner. The man suggested to her that she should speak properly, which embarrassed her. Reflecting on this incident, Ashley learned: “If I am at my level [of Japanese], I need to study Japanese more and use *keigo* [honorific speech in Japanese] appropriately.”

Higuchi (2008) emphasizes the importance of confirming each other's social roles using language forms such as honorifics, indirect expressions, and

nonverbal communication in Japanese face-to-face interactions. There are various views on the concept of honorific language; for example, Satake (2021) addresses, “honorifics are generally understood in terms of hierarchical relationships” (p. 319) especially in the business world, and Carroll (2005) cites, “*keigo* was to be used to express mutual respect rather than social rank and relative status” (p. 234). These show that in Japanese society, when serving customers or speaking with superiors, people are expected to show respect and speak in an appropriate manner depending on the situation. However, Satake (2021) emphasizes that human relationships are not determined solely by hierarchy; the degree of familiarity is also an important factor. He cites the example of the relationship between a customer and a shop clerk, explaining that if the relationship lasts for a long time, it can become more intimate, and the way of speaking can change accordingly. Satake (2021) therefore stresses the need to judge the level of honorifics based on the balance between hierarchical and familiarity relationships. We reflect that to recognize Japanese culture and social values, like Ashley’s experience, it is a highly meaningful experience to realize the necessity of adapting one’s speech based on the social status of the listeners and the degree of familiarity with them even in a casual social setting, such as a bar. Her experience illustrates that no matter how much you study Japanese, it can be difficult to know when and how to use *keigo*.

Like Ashley, Luna also said, “I should grow more in my *keigo*.” Luna studied at a national university in the Chugoku region of Japan—the area she describes is very quiet, with few foreigners outside of the university. She mostly used Japanese in her daily life, including communicating with bus drivers and store clerks. In Luna’s case, as a listener rather than a speaker, she came to understand how customers are perceived in Japanese society through the way honorific language is used. Luna brought a conversation with a bank teller at a regional bank as an eye-opening experience. When she was talking to a bank teller, the teller asked her many questions throughout the conversation. Luna could not clearly understand what the teller was asking her because the teller used many honorific expressions—the verb form changes drastically, or the words themselves change to show respect or politeness. She stared at the bank teller in confusion and tried to show her some documents she had, but they were not what the teller requested. Luna stressed: “One thing I found very interesting was, no matter how I struggled with her *keigo*, the bank teller wouldn’t change the speech [to informal speech or less complicated speech].”

Luna's experience is a clear example of the social relationship between service providers and customers in Japan (Carroll, 2005), and Luna learned a glimpse of Japanese professionalism. However, this does not mean that all workforces use honorific language to customers in every situation. Ashley cites an example of a conversation with a station attendant when she got lost and got off at the wrong station. In her conversation with the station attendant, he initially spoke to her using polite language. However, when he noticed that Ashley was having difficulty understanding him, he began explaining everything to her by connecting words briefly, "as if he were speaking to a child," according to Ashley.

Also, improving (NACE's) communication skills is related to cultivating intrapersonal skills. Sambaiah and Aneel (2016) define the intrapersonal skill as "an individual possesses, including characteristics such as personality, attitudes, self-concept, and integrity," and as "self-management abilities." (p. 226). For this, Luke's self-dialogue is a good example of the development of his intrapersonal skill. Shortly after he started studying abroad, he experienced a period of difficulty in establishing his relationships with Japanese and other international students, and that resulted in losing his confidence. During that time, Luke reflected deeply on himself and realized that his inner dialogue was very meaningful. He felt a strong connection between his mind and body in terms of health, and by listening to himself and understanding what he wanted during that difficult time, he was able to discern what worked well for him and what did not. Luke emphasizes that intuition is a powerful force that creates effective self-communication. The improvement in intrapersonal skills also led to a significant change in Luke's self-esteem, another significant finding of this study that is examined in the next section.

## 4.2. Career and Self-Development

The primary definition of this skill is an active development of one's career through ongoing personal and professional learning. Additionally, it aims at developing oneself, especially, "awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, navigation of career opportunities, and networking to build relationships within and without one's organization" (NACE, 2021, p. 2). As part of the study abroad program, Luke, Alicia, and Luna completed 4-6 months internships at their host universities, which helped them gain professional experience. In this section, we especially delve into the students' personal growth while abroad.

Luke's study abroad experiences greatly influenced his current mindset and self-confidence. Especially, he learned the importance of not comparing himself to others. He faced challenges to build friendships that negatively impacted his self-esteem. Additionally, the difference in the way Japanese classes are taught compared to the home university and the rapid pace of the classes affected his confidence. He describes how he felt during that time:

It was a little unfortunate that I had such strong feelings of loneliness and sadness during my first semester, because that's obviously when I took these Japanese classes and in them, my self-confidence was just destroyed. I constantly compared myself to others in my class and making mistakes became a serious fear for me. And seeing that I was always thinking about the mistakes I was making, it just made me make even more, even silly mistakes where I definitely knew the right answer, but I was overthinking too much.

Because of this, he started to avoid speaking up in class altogether, worried that even small mistakes would be embarrassing in front of others. To overcome this circumstance, Luke tried to change himself. He joined volleyball clubs at the host university, where he had the opportunity to interact with various peers. Also, communicating in Japanese outside of class had a positive influence on his confidence:

I was in two volleyball clubs at Seikyo University, and I felt comfortable speaking with my Japanese friends in these clubs, and I didn't feel embarrassed to make mistakes because they were practicing their English with me too. It was a nice two-way learning experience that allowed me to feel more confident and comfortable speaking Japanese outside of the classroom.

He reflected that, given the fast-paced nature of volleyball, there was little time to think or fully process what was said. This experience helped him develop the ability to respond spontaneously in Japanese, which boosted his confidence. Luke also highlights the moment of making a huge determination during his study abroad:

After those very depressing 3 months, I essentially told myself that I desperately needed to fix my situation. So, I gave myself the mission to find and make friends with people that I genuinely could get along super well with.

In his Japanese classes, he had a French classmate, Sophia, who always sat with him and communicated with him—describing a feeling of genuine self-expression, he states, “I could be myself.” One day, he mentioned to Sophia his plans to visit Osaka to meet a friend from his home university. She responded that she was also planning to travel there with her friends, which gave him an idea. He decided to boldly ask if he could join their trip. Although he essentially invited himself, he later regarded it as the best decision he could have made. This led him to find a perfect group of friends, who became his closest friends in Japan and remain so to this day. Luke reflects that the experience of being the saddest he has ever been in his life and then overcoming this by finding some of his closest friends, was what ultimately made him the most confident version of himself.

Differences in environment, which include language and culture, affect self-esteem and motivation during study abroad (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013; Jenny et al., 2017), and a sense of belonging are all essential factors (Akiyama, 2016; Clarke et al., 2020) to empower the learner’s success. Luke faced difficulties at first, which caused him to lose confidence. But in that situation, he thought about changing himself, made a bold decision, and that led him to find his best friends and a place to belong to. Although many studies report that study abroad experiences can increase learners’ confidence and self-esteem (e.g., Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013), this was only possible after overcoming such hardships. Luke reflects his change and growth as follows:

I have always thought that I was less passionate than my classmates who showed serious interest and dedication in becoming fluent or in cultural aspects...I always struggled to pinpoint a reason why I kept myself on this path of Japanese language and cultural learning, but I found my answer while abroad. Japanese gave me opportunities to experience what else the world had to offer me other than my relatively sheltered life back home in the United States.

Alicia also showed a change in personal values. She realized the importance of caring for her health in addition to her academic success. Alicia also studied at Seikyo University. During the interview, she mentioned that the residence hall manager often cared for the students and showed concern for their health, and her advisor at the host university encouraged her to enjoy her time abroad. Her story highlights one of the benefits of exchange programs. Through her study abroad experience, she learned to be aware of the

importance of prioritizing her well-being, both mental and physical, through conversations with mentors and supervisors:

I have a lot to thank for Japan...I'm involved in learning more about myself. [Before going to Japan,] I was more focused on studying or just like classes. [By communicating with her mentors and advisors] I really valued my health, and it continues till this day of just going outside. Once again, my supervisor stressed out to me to go and experience Japan, not just always being in the lab.

Liu (2011) describes today's US higher education as, "the 'gatekeepers' of class position and access to them determines the future stratification of society" (p. 384), and in a society that values merit, an individual's social status increasingly hinges on their level of education. Therefore, many students, including Alicia, are driven to work hard every day to achieve academic success. Importantly, study abroad programs, even in a short period, let students expand their knowledge and experience things they would not encounter in daily life. With her supervisor's advice, "You're in Japan for a year. Just enjoy life," Alicia determined to take care of her health:

Now, I do take my grades seriously, but not to the detriment of my health. While I was doing an internship at a lab on campus, I biked to the beach and read a book for an hour every day.

Besides this, she cared for her nutrition. After arriving in Japan, Alicia would often buy bento lunches from convenience stores, but she started baking and cooking with her roommate, and she discovered the joy of cooking.

Luna's case demonstrates another example of career and self-development; she gained an understanding of the professional work ethics in Japan through her on-campus internship and work experience at a Japanese-style restaurant outside of university.

Through my work [as a server at a local restaurant] and laboratory setting [at her host university], it helped implement more career and self-development ideas because they shaped my professionalism for the corresponding position I had. Of course, there was a way I had to behave with the customers and my boss [supervisor]. It showed me what it's like to work in a different area than being in an office, since this was my first restaurant style to work.

Before studying abroad in Japan, Luna had never been to a country other than the U.S. and Mexico. This study abroad experience has greatly increased her sense of independence and confidence:

I feel like the way I have thought has changed a bit. I feel maybe being alone in a different place has really caused me to mature a bit in my decisions and really think clearly of what I do or how I present myself.

Luna had the opportunity to visit local elementary schools and interact with students. One day, Luna introduced her own culture to them, as a person who was born in Mexico and grew up in the U.S. This event had a major impact on her future career choices:

I saw a lot with Japan too, and especially in the rural area that I was in, a lot of kids were kind of just like, it's Japan and then there's like some of the country is how they would see it. So, I felt it was really eye opening to kind of not only go and explore, but also to share. So, I would visit children in elementary schools...and a lot of them [students] didn't really know where certain places in the world were. They didn't really know where Mexico was.

This experience assisted her in deciding what she wants to do after her graduation. After returning to the U.S., she applied for a position to teach English as an assistant language teacher (ALT) in Japan, instead of going to medical school.

Referring to increasing autonomy, Ashley also developed her independence. To answer the question: Why study abroad? She responded, "To change. It's a broad answer, but university is meant to be a place to find yourself and grow into who you are as an adult." While attending a private college in Tokyo, unlike the other three participants who lived in a university dorm or international house, Ashley lived by herself in an apartment. She recalls the environment as "an extremely busy place with all kinds of people to meet and things to do." Soon after arriving in Japan, she faced a challenging moment when she went to a city hall alone to get her residence card:

I realized I was a [the only] foreigner as when I entered a government office. It was filled only with Japanese people, and everyone would stare at me or look at me when I needed to do something. There was no one speaking English there, so, I had to communicate with people using broken Japanese.

Unlike the other three participants, Ashley had to handle almost all the procedures by herself at her host university. For example, at Seikyo University, where Luke and Alicia went, there was an event offered by Japanese students to welcome international students soon after they arrived. In contrast, Ashley recalls that it took her several weeks to get to know the Japanese students. Additionally, at Fuji University, where Luna studied, several Japanese students supported exchange students by going shopping with them to help establish their living conditions. Ashley was surprised when she reviewed their interviews because there was no such support at her host university. However, she regards these circumstances as a positive experience that contributed to her self-growth.

### 4.3. Critical Thinking

This skill is defined as, “identify and respond to needs based upon an understanding of situational context and logical analysis of relevant information” (NACE, 2021, p. 4). Namely, skills of: decision making using sound, inclusive reasoning, and judgement; information gathering and analysis from a diverse set of sources; and summarizing and interpreting data with an awareness of personal biases. In this section, we particularly focus on the experiences of Luke, Ashley, and Luna.

Luke's decision to make friends with whom he can connect is related to the development of his critical thinking skills. Feeling isolated and sad, he assessed his situation and sought the best course of action. His strong desire to avoid further hardship led him to make the best decision possible:

I had to really dig deep down inside of me to look at myself in a broader sense, to understand the things in my life that really provide meaning and satisfaction in my life...So I asked myself what would make me feel better and I made the changes in order to feel good about myself again.

Finding a best friend and a place to belong helped him increase his confidence and self-esteem. Luke emphasizes that this outcome also boosts his career readiness development:

As I am not afraid to ask questions or talk to people that I believe can help me take those next steps in life. I don't have a fear of “what if” and I just go for it because that's all that I really can do.

Particularly, Luke learned the importance of showing himself as he is when taking on a new challenge. He explains that the only thing he can do is put his

best self out there for others, and that there is no greater satisfaction than presenting his true, genuine self to the world and reaping the benefits of doing so.

Ashley values her stay in Japan as there were many things she would not experience or understand if she did not study abroad. In addition, she points out that exposing herself to a different culture and language for an extended period of time has allowed her to encounter a variety of situations and develop the ability to make her own judgments about each one of them (e.g., DeGraaf et al., 2013):

Including navigating a land foreign to you where no one speaks your language, learning to adapt to a culture [not just understand] that you have no true idea about, and to do it all on your own... As fun as Japan was, I did experience hardships where I felt lost and had no idea what to do such as getting lost using the train system or getting out of bad situations especially when I would be with other people who didn't know what to do either [e.g., the experience city hall when she was going to get a residence card]. So, I had to evolve and become better at thinking of a plan on the spot.

In addition to fostering decision making and judgment skills, long-term study abroad experiences can provide an opportunity to observe the given environment, and it leads to develop a cultural adaptability skill (Jenny et al., 2017; Savicki, 2010). Luna shared the occasion where she understood social expectation in a Japanese work environment through her conversations with her lab supervisor during her internship, and she learned how to react appropriately. When speaking with her lab supervisor (a professor), he often said things to Luna such as, "It may be better to do it this way" or "Maybe you should do it at this time instead of [the original plan Luna attempted]." Luna was unsure what they meant or whether they were instructions she needed to follow or simply advice. This ambiguity often confused her. Sensing her confusion, the professor would then say, "Ask Tanaka-san [the professor's assistant]." So, Luna consulted Tanaka; then he responded, "Let me ask the professor again." To the question why she did not ask for the clarification to the professor directly, Luna said:

Usually, I am very cautious because I don't mean to be disrespectful [to her supervisors]. My professor would tell me certain things, and I feel

like he just expected me to know everything... I think it happened a lot in my internship time.

Expectations that learners carry from their home cultures do not necessarily apply in their host culture (Savicki, 2010). Luna also mentioned that if she were in the same situation in the U.S., she would confirm with her supervisors what they expect from her to ensure she has all the details. This demonstrates her understanding of the differences in cultural norms and gaining capability to respond properly.

Furthermore, the growth of these three students demonstrates that exposure to a different culture, facing difficulties, and experiencing the nuances of Japanese society enable students to adapt more appropriately and behave suitably during their long-term study abroad experiences (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013; Jenny et al., 2017). This growth contributes to the development of their Equity and Inclusion skills as well, and their experiences will continue to be introduced in the following sections.

#### 4.4. Equity and Inclusion

The four participants indicated that their study abroad experiences enhanced their Equity and Inclusion skills, reflecting the awareness, attitude, knowledge, and abilities needed to engage and include people from various local and global cultures equitably (NACE, 2021). This includes maintaining an open mind toward diverse ideas and new ways of thinking, showing flexibility by adapting to different environments, and advocating for inclusion, equitable practices, justice, and empowerment for historically marginalized communities.

Alicia, who is African American, showed her identity development during her stay in Japan. She candidly shared her concern about being a racial minority in the region in Japan, but while staying there, she realized that there was no need for such worries:

My insight about Japan when it came to being the racial minority in the Kyushu region was a little bit of a concern due to how America views African people in general... [After spending time in Japan, she felt] being racially profiled was not going to be one of the main problems I would have living in Japan.

Alicia mentioned that her study abroad experience prompted her to think more deeply about her Nigerian roots and the culture her grandmother taught to her.

Interactions with people in Japan, including other international students, significantly influenced her sense of identity:

My experience being a Naija-American on campus showed how being different in both cultures and looks isn't a negative thing in Japan. It was more of accepting me as being Nigerian or African rather than just being American. I have been to different countries, and they treated me differently once I told them I'm American. This was an interesting experience due to the natives being surprised and seemed more accepting of interacting with me before telling them.

Furthermore, Alicia met several African students who were earning their master's or doctoral degrees at Seikyo University, and she had opportunities to communicate with them. This also impacted her sense of identity and encouraged her to set higher academic goals:

I felt accepted from the African scholars during spring break that it helped me dive more into my heritage and to embrace it; especially being in a different country that didn't have many Africans and African Americans in the city that I lived in. This made me more comfortable because most of these scholars were studying for their master's and Ph.D. in engineering and that inspired me to want to seek my graduate degree either at the school [Seikyo University] or a school somewhere in Japan. Also, one of the Sensei [professors] that had his own lab in the same college...was from the same tribe as me, and that added a lot of aspirations to pursue a higher education there as well.

There were also cases where participants learned about culture and social values by staying in Japan for an extended period and gained a deeper understanding and about diverse cultures (Doyle, 2009; Jenny et al., 2017; Maharaja, 2018). For example, Luke showed significant growth in flexibility and adaptability. His building friendship with Sophia was particularly influential. At first, they sometimes misinterpreted each other due to cultural differences, and that made him perplexed.

Coming from completely different cultures, the way we did certain things sometimes confused each other. The biggest example I can think of is that French people are known to be very direct and blunt people, but most Americans have fears of confrontation and often "beat around the bush." Sometimes it shocked me that she would say direct things to me because at that time, I was very bad about being direct to people.

At first, Luke thought this frankness was rude based on his own values. However, he learned that frankness is *proof of trust* in her culture. Despite an initial barrier, he succeeded in building a better relationship by understanding the other person's cultural value. Reflecting on this, he said:

We completely understand each other despite the misunderstandings. I thought that directness implied something negative, but Sophia taught me that directness is not a negative thing. It can also be a sign of trust. She trusted me enough that I was able to take the directness and that I knew that she only wanted what was best for me. It was never of negative intention.

Luke also had a similar relationship with another French friend, Claire. Claire spoke candidly not only about his clothing but also about his behavior. When Luke did not seem like his usual self, Claire would openly ask what was wrong. While such comments might seem confrontational, they were not perceived that way in context. Even though there were cultural misunderstandings, he gained meaningful insights from what initially felt awkward. From then on, he said he no longer felt awkward, as such events seemed “beautiful” to him. Luke considers interacting with people who are completely different from him in every way to be a valuable experience.

Luna learned about the unique social culture of Japan, particularly the practice of being evasive or indirectness and reading the air or atmosphere (NAIST, 2016; Nishikawa, 2020). Nishikawa (2020) explains that *reading the air* means instantly grasping the moods and conditions around oneself, as well as the environment, habits, and atmosphere of the situation, and responding appropriately. Experiencing such non-verbal communication, Luna has shown an understanding of how to behave appropriately, which relates to her conversation with her supervisor in the previous section.

Making a promise with peers can be another good example of being evasive and reading the air. One day, Luna talked with some Japanese peers about taking a day trip, and she noticed that one of her Japanese friends responded with, “Um... yeah...!” This response was indirect and unclear, and Luna sensed that the friend likely had a scheduling conflict. The PI, who was born and raised in Japan, understands why the friend avoided saying, “No, that day doesn't work for me.” Reflecting on the people involved in making the plans or the overall atmosphere, she (PI) personally finds it very challenging to say “no.” Instead, she would respond vaguely—saying something like, “I'll join you

if my schedule allows”—as a way of navigating the situation. Reflecting on this situation, Luna shared her viewpoint:

Especially since in Japan they are more about reading the air, than the room as we do in America. It allowed for me to try and put myself in the shoes of the native Japanese people around me and see from their standpoint the different situations and how they may feel or interpret things.

Ashley has come to appreciate Japanese religious rituals with deep respect. A few months after arriving in Japan, she first heard about the *Onbashira* Festival in Nagano Prefecture, which includes *Ki-Otoshi*—a traditional event held every seven years, where participants ride large logs down an 80-meter slope. This physically intense ritual has been associated with accidents and injuries, and she was initially shocked by its nature. Reflecting on her evolving understanding, she explained that had she encountered this festival immediately upon arrival, she would have reacted quite differently:

If I witnessed the festival or heard about it when I first arrived, I would have been very caught off guard. ... I would have thought, “That’s so crazy! Who would ever participate in something like that and why do people still want to watch people die!?”

She attributed this reaction to her American cultural background, where placing others in danger is strongly discouraged: “My way of thinking may have followed the path that would get protested against and dissolved due to the constant cultural belief conflict.”

However, through her extended study abroad experience, Ashley developed a deeper understanding of and respect for cultural practices different from her own (Salisbury et al., 2013). Rather than reacting with judgment, she came to recognize that rituals such as *Ki-Otoshi* carry meanings that may not be immediately apparent to outsiders. Her reflections on the *Onbashira* Festival demonstrate how intercultural experiences can foster thoughtful engagement and appreciation across cultural boundaries.

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of extended (one-year) study abroad experiences in Japan on the intercultural competencies of American students and how these experiences influenced their career readiness. Using the career

readiness competencies outlined by NACE (2021) as a framework, we conducted a qualitative study in which participants engaged in interviews and written reflections, exploring their personal experiences to examine different influences and outcomes (Stebleton et al., 2013). In terms of career-ready skills, the participants demonstrated particularly significant growth in four areas through their long-term study abroad experiences: *Communication*, *Career and Self-development*, *Critical Thinking*, and *Equity and Inclusion*. It is anticipated that they will be able to leverage these strengths in their future job search.

In addition to career-related development, this study also offered insight into the process by which the students deepened their intercultural understanding (Gillespie, 2019; Pedersen, 2010; Stebleton et al., 2013) and developed intrapersonal skills (Doyle, 2009; Jenny et al., 2017; Maharaja, 2018)—such as independence, decision-making, self-judgment, and self-awareness—through experiences and events they would not normally encounter in their daily lives in the U.S. Understanding not only the outcomes but also the internal shifts, challenges, and reflections that shaped their learning can inform how we advise future study abroad students. These findings are valuable for educators and advisors who support students throughout their academic journey, from enrollment to graduation.

Gillespie (2019) emphasizes the value of experiential, transformative, and intercultural learning in education. Montrose (2002) similarly highlights that experiential learning extends students' development beyond the classroom into a complex and interconnected world, challenging their existing worldviews and promoting self-directed growth. Gillespie (2019) further explains that transformative learning often involves feelings of disorientation, dissonance, and uncertainty, as well as a critical examination of one's assumptions—experiences that may emerge through interactions with individuals who hold different perspectives or through exposure to unfamiliar realities. Additionally, Savicki (2010) argues that intercultural skills will be increasingly essential for future employment. He notes that “with the increase in globalization, fields such as international education as well as those of business and political science will be facing an increase in numbers of students and workers adapting to foreign cultures” (p. 205).

The participants in this study engaged in a wide range of intercultural, experiential, and transformative learning experiences throughout their year abroad. These experiences contributed to deeper and more holistic personal development. Furthermore, living in a country where social norms and values

differ significantly from their own enabled them to develop respect for other cultures and to cultivate a more global perspective.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that studying abroad contributes to personal growth. However, as the participants' lived experiences in this study suggest, it is not merely the act of going abroad that fosters such development. Rather, it is the process of confronting various challenges, discomforts, uncertainties, and moments of questioning that significantly enhances intercultural understanding and promotes personal growth (Gillespie, 2019). Within this context, qualitative research proved particularly effective in examining how the four participants made sense of their experiences and developed in response to specific cultural and situational contexts (Iwasaki, 2007; Stebleton et al., 2015).

The students' voices also provided valuable insights for administrators and mentors who support students studying abroad. In Luke's case, extracurricular activities—such as participating in volleyball—served as important catalysts in helping him regain confidence. While such activities are widely recognized as contributing to cultural understanding during study abroad (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013; Pedersen, 2010), they also appear to support students' emotional well-being (Akiyama, 2016).

In addition, Luke highlighted the significance of inner dialogue in processing his experiences (see 4.1. Communication). Along with Luna and Alicia, he took an asynchronous course offered by the host institution that involved writing reflections on daily life and sharing thoughts with peers. He found this reflective practice to be particularly effective in making sense of his experience abroad:

This class had weekly discussion posts where we would talk about our experiences studying abroad and to be frank, I really just used these discussion posts to process and vent my feelings. This actually worked out really well for me because since I was given this avenue to process all of these deep emotions I felt, I eventually was able to then work through them by myself.

These findings offer valuable insights for developing more effective support systems for students preparing to study abroad.

Lastly, Luna discovered a new career path she felt passionate about during her study abroad experience in Japan, ultimately deciding not to pursue

medical school upon returning to the U.S. This life-changing decision likely would not have emerged without the opportunity to live and learn in a different cultural context. When asked about the meaning of studying abroad, she reflected:

I feel it's important, if you can study abroad, to go and kind of explore the world or see the different cultures and the different aspects of life that are different from what we know. I feel by having a global perspective allowed me to become not only flexible but also adaptive to any area or situation I may be put in an environment.

Through this long-term study abroad experience, Luna not only broadened her worldview but also gained the confidence to reimagine her future. Her story illustrates how extended time abroad can foster deep self-reflection and open new possibilities that might not have been visible otherwise.

## **6. Limitations and Research Directions**

This study has two main limitations. First, while this study employed an autobiographical approach in which co-researchers served as both participants and collaborators, ethical considerations limited the inclusion of certain sensitive experiences (Mansfield & Wagner-Egelhaaf, 2019). Because co-researchers were identifiable by name, some important yet deeply personal intercultural experiences were omitted to protect their privacy. This ethical decision may limit the scope of perspectives presented, particularly regarding more complex or challenging aspects of study abroad experiences.

Second, at the time the interviews and reflections were conducted, it has been less than a year since the students who participated in this study returned to the U.S. As a result, it is currently not possible to assess how the skills they gained are contributing to their careers. Paige et al. (2009) surveyed over 6,000 students who had participated in a study abroad program over the past decade to assess its lasting effects on their careers, personal beliefs, and other benefits. The findings indicated that 98.4% of respondents perceived an impact from their past experience. This impact included significant increases in civic engagement, knowledge acquisition, philanthropy, and social entrepreneurship related to their current occupations (as cited in Jenny et al., 2017). We can gain deeper insights into how their study abroad experiences have benefited them in their future careers by tracking these four students after graduation as a follow-up study (e.g., DeGraaf et al., 2013).

Lastly, this study examined cases of students studying abroad in Japan, highlighting instances where students learned about the distinctive Japanese social culture and experienced career readiness development as well as personal growth. For future research, it would be valuable to leverage these findings to explore the types of growth observed through study abroad experiences across a broader spectrum of countries (including Asian countries, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America), aiming to enhance the success of a larger number of students.

## Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Northern Arizona University (Approval No. 2125233-1).

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this study.

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