

## Challenges and Intercultural Adaptation Among Japanese Students to Malaysian Culture: A Case Study

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### ABSTRACT

Outcomes of a case study based on the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE) released by the Council of Europe are presented in this article. The paper is created as a supplement to help students reflect critically on unique intercultural interactions. The study claims that the document may be utilised in its original question-and-answer format to examine intercultural experiences critically and as a framework for students to create intercultural encounter narratives. As a result, this document may be used to write reflective narratives on students' intercultural experiences, such as studying abroad. Two Japanese students on a short program in Malaysia were asked to create a story on their intercultural experiences for this research. The students then submitted their responses to the same experience's questions in AIE. They created their narrative using AIE as a framework, and content analysis of the two AIE narratives indicated that the narrative based on AIE was more critical in its perspective of intercultural encounters. According to the findings, the student found creating a story focused on AIE to be helpful to both herself and the audience. Therefore, it can be concluded that adopting AIE as a framework for writing intercultural encounter narratives might be beneficial, particularly in describing intercultural communication scenarios. Students might enhance their awareness of intercultural conflict situations and develop their communication skills by reading such collected narratives.

**Keywords:** *Autobiography, intercultural encounters, intercultural competence, narrative, critical thinking.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Nihongo Partners (NP) initiative helps ASEAN countries improve their Japanese language instruction. This program started from 2014 until 2020 and is one of the preparatory programs to welcome the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games (*NIHONGO Partners / Japan Foundation Asia Center, 2020*). Table 1 shows the distribution of NP's participation, where the countries that receive the most NP's participation is Indonesia. This is followed by Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia.

Table 1: Number of NPs participation across Asean countries

Countries	Number of NPs
Brunei	4
Cambodia	3
Indonesia	565
Laos	6
Malaysia	110
Myanmar	18
Philippines	52
Singapore	5
Thailand	375
Vietnam	112
Taiwan	30

Source: Japan Foundation (2020)

The NP program started in Malaysia in 2015 and until 2020, a total of 110 students have participated in it. Two types of NP programs have been implemented, namely Long Term and Short-Term which saw the students living in Malaysia throughout the duration. The length of the Long-Term program is nine months while the Short Term lasts for two weeks to a month (*NIHONGO Partners | Japan Foundation Asia Center, 2020*). The Long-Term Program was implemented in boarding schools and day schools while the short-term program was implemented at universities. So far, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UiTM), Universiti Pendidikan Malaysia (UPSI) and Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) have hosted participants for these programs.

#### *Importance of Narratives for Developing Intercultural Competence*

Personal narratives of real-life stories are valuable as it is through stories that people make sense of their lives. That is why analysis of narratives is increasingly used as a method in various disciplines including education. As stated by Webster and Mertova (2007, 1): "Narrative records human experience through the construction and reconstruction of personal stories; it is well-suited to addressing issues of complexity and cultural and human centeredness because of its capacity to record and retell those events that have been of most influence on us." Such issues play a significant role in many areas of human activity.

Narrative analysis also allows for an assessment of the function that culture plays in the formation of personal stories. According to (Wysocka, 2019), narratives serve three key functions: helping individuals organise and comprehend their experiences, facilitating dialogue, and exchanging ideas. The narratives might be utilised to start a conversation about intercultural communication difficulties. It is known that through the mobility adaptation process, globalisation between countries can happen widely (Ibnu & Ahmad, 2017). Regardless of whether the experiences were pleasant or bad, beneficial consequences can be obtained via the reflection they stimulate. The tales can aid in the development of intercultural competency in pupils.

To comprehend the behaviours, attitudes, and assumptions of oneself and others in an intercultural interaction, individuals must think critically and reflectively. Intercultural interaction autobiographies may be viewed as "stories of discomfort and failure, of an interculturality conceived more broadly in terms of nationality, language, religion, sex and sexuality, class, age" (Thurlow, 2004; cited in Méndez Garcia, 2017, p. 91). Méndez Garcia

(2017) posits that “Introspective accounts are characterised by an emotional undercurrent”. which may also include ambiguity and negative feelings that can be caused by the unpredictable behaviour of other people.

#### *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters*

AIE was formed in response to the Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2008) as a tool to help learners critically reflect on their experiences with various cultures which allows its users to consider one personal intercultural experience that was memorable to them. AIE is developed as a series of questions to be answered by users, based on Byram's (2020) concept of intercultural competence. In addition to the original form of this paradigm, AIE includes the action-taking component. As stated in AIE's companion paper, Notes for Facilitators, the following are the components of the intercultural competency model on which AIE is built (Byram Barrett, Ipgrave, Jackson & Méndez-García, 2009).

First is the Attitudes and Feelings which requires them to recognise others' identities, respecting uniqueness, have empathy, recognise good and negative emotions and linking them to attitudes and knowledge and have cognitive dissonance. Second component is Behaviour, which requires the participant to be flexible and put some sensitivity as a way of communicating. The third component is the Knowledge and Skills; being aware of other people's lives, understanding and relating things by comparing them to familiar characteristics in one's own environment, being scathing and to recognise one's own assumptions, biases, stereotypes, and prejudices. The fourth component is the Action Orientation which allows them to take action as a consequence of all the rest.

#### *Components of AIE*

The list below, based on AIE and its Notes for facilitators (Byram et al., 2009), depicts the components of AIR. There are ten components reflected as the main questions to guide respondents in writing the narrative. The first question would be regarding the characterization of the respondents towards themselves which is optional. Second, are questions which require respondents to describe the encounter's title, description, time, place, and significance. The respondents were asked to describe the occurrence that happened during the intercultural experience and the place, time, and the purpose of the respondents' existence in that place. They were also asked the reason they chose this experience.

Thirdly, the respondents' first impression towards groups or other people were asked as a part of the identity acknowledgement towards the new culture. Fourth, are questions about their emotions during the time they are experiencing the intercultural encounter. Along the way, as the fifth component, they were asked to consider the feelings of another person and their point of view towards the persons in the scene felt at the time (Tolerance for Ambiguity, Acceptance of Others). As the sixth component, the questions were regarding the similarities and differences between “How you felt at the time?” and “How you feel about what happened?” (Empathy), “How do you see your thoughts, feelings, and actions now?” (Communicative Awareness).

The seventh component requires the respondent to remember their experience of talking to the other people and the way they adjust their speaking or writing while interacting with them. The eighth component emphasises the discovery of knowledge and the way to find out more. By using comparisons to understand, the ninth component asked them to

compare and contrast their own culture with other people and whether the comparisons help the understanding of the situation. Lastly, the tenth component highlights the ability of the respondents to think back and look forward. Questions such as “What conclusions do you draw about the experience?” (Critical Cultural Awareness) “Do you think other people around you would have the same opinions as you?”, “Did the experience change you?” (Action Orientation) and “Did you decide to do something as a result of this experience?”

Studies have been conducted on investigating the influence of writing one’s accounts of intercultural encounters and their development of intercultural communicative competence. Hajar (2020) found that using first-person introspective accounts, especially reflective diary entries, were beneficial for short term sojourners’ intercultural learning. A study based on an analysis of the students’ narratives on intercultural encounters revealed that students’ reflections display intercultural development on many aspects of intercultural competence including action-taking (Diego et al., 2019). Studies have also been carried out which analyse the AIE of learners. A study using AIE concluded that English proficiency does not necessarily relate with the ability to be competent in intercultural encounters (Tajima, 2020). Méndez Garcia (2017) conducted a case study of three students’ using AIEs. Completing AIE was a requirement of one of their courses named Intercultural Approach in English Language Teaching. The findings of the study show that AIE fosters reflection, and it increases intercultural communicative competence as well as self-awareness.

As a summary of previous research, it can be stated that writing narratives of intercultural encounters foster reflection and learning in many aspects. AIE is a useful tool to analyse the experiences of students’ reflections. This study investigated the feelings and reactions of the respondents that they report using AIE documents of their encounters with differences. To contribute to the previous research, this study investigated the use of AIE as a framework to write narratives of intercultural encounters.

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

### *Research Questions*

Based on the components of AIE, the two versions of the respondents' narratives and the AIE document that was filled by the students were analysed to gauge their feelings and reactions to encounters with foreign and different experiences.

### *Respondents and Location*

There were four students that participated in the Nihongo Partner program in UMT. The students were four female undergraduate students at Ehime Prefectural University of Health Sciences (EPU), Kyushu, Japan, with age range 20-27 years old. Two of them were final year students whereas the other was 3rd year and 1st year students. Two of them majored in Nursing and the other two majored in Midwifery and Clinical Laboratory Technology.

Three of them have never been in Malaysia except one who just landed in Johor Bahru for her flight transit. Four of them did not know the Malay language and are more comfortable in using Japanese to express their thoughts. For the purpose of this research, only two students were chosen.

The research was carried out at one of Malaysia's public universities. Terengganu is a Malaysian state located on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. It is also known by its Arabic honorific, -Dārul-Īmān (“Abode of Faith”). Kuala Terengganu, located on the shore at the mouth of the Terengganu River, serves as the state and royal capital as well as the main city

in Terengganu. As of 2015, Terengganu has a population of 1,153,500 people. Malays account for 94.7 percent of the population, Chinese for 2.6 percent, Indians for 0.2 percent, and other ethnic groups make up the remaining 2.4 percent. Terengganu's ethnic composition is 97 percent Bumiputras, 2.6 percent Chinese, 0.2 percent Indian, and 0.1 percent others, according to the 2010 census. Terengganu, along with Kelantan, is one of Malaysia's most homogeneous states. Malay ethnicity accounts for more than 95 percent of the population. Terengganu's population is 96.9 percent Muslim, 2.5 percent Buddhist, 0.2 percent Hindu, 0.2 percent Christian, and 0.2 percent follower of Chinese folk religions or unknown affiliation, according to the 2010 Census.

### *Data Collection*

Students were asked to write a narrative on a meaningful intercultural experience in their lives. The email was used as a method of data collection and as a part of the e-interview. When writing down their experiences, the students were allowed to utilise their mother tongue which in this case, is Japanese. They were given ample time to respond to the AIE documents, and their answer will be emailed to them.

Researchers did not choose all components and only selected their most significant experience since they were here for only about three weeks. The students were asked to fill in their name, name of the program/activity they attended and date/day. They were free to choose any of the events to express their intercultural experience. The AIE was adopted and adapted, and only three components were highlighted to the students.

First is the Encounter component which comprises five questions related to the title, description of the meeting with the other person, the time and place of the encounter and the reason the respondents were there. Second is the Feelings component where they describe their feelings while completing a given sentence such as "My thoughts at the time were...", "My feelings or emotions at the time were..." and "What I did at the time was...". (For example, did you pretend you haven't really seen something odd? Did you shift the subject of the now-embarrassing conversation? Did you inquire about what you found odd?). Lastly, in the Same and Different component, questions developed were "Consider the similarities and differences between how you thought and felt about the circumstance and how others thought and felt about it", "Were you aware of any parallels at the time, and if so, what were they?", "Were you aware of any distinctions at the time, and if so, what were they?", "When I reflect about the circumstance...", "Are you now aware of any additional parallels, and if so, what are they?", "Are there any additional distinctions you've seen, and if so, what are they?", "How do you now see your own thoughts, feelings, and actions?", first impressions of the respondents towards other people, "Fill in the blanks with one or more of the following sentences OR make up your own.", "My behaviour during the encounter was proper since what I did was...", "I believe I could have responded differently if I had done the following...", "I believe my best reaction would have been...", "My reaction was positive because...", and "I kept my emotions hidden by...".

The researcher read the answer once the student wrote and submitted her account. If the researcher is unsure about something, an email will be sent to the respondents for clarification. In addition, the students involved were more comfortable expressing their ideas and feelings in Japanese. Hence, the AIE documents were written in their native language.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Procedure*

The era of technology has allowed us to utilise it for research purposes, including qualitative research, which usually requires physical interaction. Hence, due to the pandemic, it is convenient for both sides to conduct the research using an e-interview, and in this case study, continuous replies of electronic mail (email) were used to acquire data. Below is the research procedure:

- a) The AIE document (Byram et al., 2009) was adapted and adopted for this study.
- b) The students were briefed about the AIE document face to face.
- c) The students signed the consent letter.
- d) The student wrote her experience as a narrative in the AIE document and were given ample time to respond to the AIE document. The student shared their feelings and thoughts using the AIE document.
- e) Once they were done with the AIE document, they will email the response to the researcher.
- f) The researcher will read the answer and will respond to them through email if the researcher needs an elaborate answer.

The students were given some leeway in responding since the Covid-19 epidemic broke out in Malaysia during their stay, and they had to depart in the middle of their mobility program. As a result, during the Covid-19 issue, replying by email was the most convenient method.

The consent of the students was taken to analyse their narrative. To assure confidentiality, which is an important issue for facilitators to consider when using AIE (Byram et al., 2009), the names of the characters are changed in the study. A second researcher was involved in reading the narratives and identifying the themes, to ensure reliability. The translation of the narrative from Japanese to English and Malay was also made by the second researcher.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The content analysis of the student's narratives and their AIE revealed the following findings. Firstly, the findings discussed the feelings and reactions of the respondents based on the events that they attended during their program at UMT: homestay, daily life, and COVID-19 experience. From these experiences, the data were extracted and coded into themes.

### *Homestay*

This event is where the respondents need to spend about two days and one night at a selected Malaysian family home. The Malaysian family home was selected by the Japanese based on a list of UMT staff who voiced their interest to host the respondents. Through this event, the respondents discussed their feelings and experiences during their stay with their host family.

a. *Treating a Guest*

Respondent One expressed her feelings about the food serving practices that she observed during her stay at her host family. She found out about the way Malaysians treated their guests was by showering them with a generous amount of food. She was amazed that Malaysians ate a lot of time in between breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She thought six servings of food for a day was quite overwhelming. The action of her host family towards the serving of food makes her wonder about the effect of the food to healthy eating.

Why not just breakfast, lunch and dinner but eat a few times. Doesn't the stomach become full and will not be able to be consumed during the actual mealtime? (Respondent One)

Her reaction towards the treatment was positive. She tries her best to adjust to the time of having food during her stay because she does not want to offend her host family. She tries to be adventurous enough to try new cuisines. She also compliments the food so as not to upset the host family.

In Malaysia, it is common to treat the guest with food which are frequently served, especially in Malay Muslim families. The hospitality relationship in Islam is in the form of triangle; it consists of the host, the visitor, and God. Hospitality is a right, not a gift, and the obligation to provide hospitality is a duty to God. This is in accordance with Islamic teaching. (Siddiqui, 2020). This is what the host family was trying to do to Respondent One. They tried to make their guest comfortable, graciously greeted and welcomed her. They also make an effort to provide her with food and water as soon as possible so they don't have to beg for it. This is in line with the sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W which explained in a hadith below:

مَنْ كَانَ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ  
الْآخِرِ فَلَا يُؤْذِ جَارَهُ وَمَنْ كَانَ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ  
الْآخِرِ فَلْيُكْرِمْ ضَيْفَهُ وَمَنْ كَانَ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ  
الْآخِرِ فَلْيَقُلْ خَيْرًا أَوْ لِيصْمُتْ

*The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, should not hurt his neighbour and whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, should serve his guest generously and whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, should speak what is good or keep silent."*

(Sahih al-Bukhari 6136)

A guest enjoys a special place in Islam. Entertaining a guest is important - it signifies the respect and concern of a host towards his guest and towards God.

Respondent One might need to be briefed about this information so that she will get a better understanding of the concept of honouring guests and serving them. This surely will avoid the misunderstanding or misconception that Malaysians are extravagant when it comes to food. However, judging from her reaction, she was trying to be polite, as to refuse someone that would seem rude to Japanese culture. Manners and politeness are vital in Japanese society and saying 'NO' in a straightforward way will not be tolerated. Even though they would say 'NO' in their mind they will try to avoid that so that the other person or the receiver will not think badly about them or what they say. A 'NO' is communicated gracefully in this case and in a unique way by Respondent One.

b. *Ikumen Concept*

Respondent Two shared her feelings towards the feminine-masculine concept that she found out during her stay at the host family. She named this concept as “Malaysia *Ikumen Papa*” in her writing. She was amazed that during her stay with the host family, the father of the family took care of their children when she was having a conversation with the mother of the host family. She thought that this was a very rare scene because this is so different compared to Japanese culture.

She reacted towards this feminine-masculine concept by asking the host family directly so that she could get a clear and correct answer.

*“My action was appropriate because I think that by asking the person directly, I was able to resolve my doubts about cultural differences....”*

She properly asked the host family directly about the feminine-masculine concept as this concept is very different from her culture. Japanese culture scores higher for masculine dimensions that indicate this society values assertiveness and competitiveness. Their drive for excellence and perfection is reflected in their material production, services, gift presentation, food culture and almost everything as their ways of living (Hofstede Insights, n.d.). This includes their family life where fathers were seen as the only breadwinner and the patriarch of the family. As Respondent Two tried to relate this to her culture, she was impressed that this host family does not have this kind of concept as compared to Japanese culture known as *ikumen*.

*Ikumen* is a term coined by an ad salesman in the 2000s. The Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare launched the national *Ikumen* Project in 2010 to encourage greater paternal involvement in family life. It is a combination of *ikuji* (childcare) and *ikemen* (hunk) (Brüning, 2020). *Ikumen* gained its present degree of popularity in 2010, when it was named one of the Top Ten Words of the Year (*rykgo*), and Nagatsuma Akira, Minister of Health, Labour, and Welfare at the time, declared that he wanted to popularise the phrase as a countermeasure to the plummeting birth rate.

Starting from this point, the term also became much more frequently used in newspapers (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher & Schimkowsky, 2016). The emergence of these terms, highlights Japan’s increasing engagement with male childcare (Ishii-Kuntz, 2013). In the 1980s, the average Japanese father spent fewer than 40 minutes interacting with their children on the average workday. Without their wives’ help, some men couldn’t even prepare tea or find their own clothes. When the father did engage with his children, he was generally distant and demanded respect, if not outright terror, as seen by the popular phrase “*jishin, kaminari, kaji, oyaji*” - “earthquake, thunder, fire, and father.”

Fewer than 45% the Japanese now support the idea that “men should work, women should stay at home” - a drop of 15% since 1992 and they follow a global trend of “new fathers”, defined by their more active participation in the physical-affective care of their offspring and by more egalitarian relationships with their wives. The take-up of paternal leave, while still low, has significantly increased since the *Ikumen* Project was first introduced.

This is reflected by Respondent Two, in which she compares the *Ikumen papa* concept in Malaysia and the *Ikumen papa* concept introduced by the Japanese government. While in Malaysia this concept is not forcefully introduced and naturally happens in any household. In a Japanese family, women are expected to take care of the children, and this has become a



reason for some Japanese women to stay at home even though there are child-care facilities. This is because the responsibility of developing a child's character is left in the hands of the mother, including teaching the children. The mother's main responsibility is for child care even if both parents are working. The mother's physical presence is viewed as particularly significant in Japanese society; moreover, a child's scream is regarded as indication that mother should not leave them alone (Imamura, 1992). Even though these traditional roles nowadays slowly shifted to *ikumen* concepts, the Japanese society struggled in adapting to this concept and needs the government's involvement in this matter (Ishii-Kuntz, 2019).

c. *Reflection Towards Islam*

Both respondents shared their feelings about kindness and warm greetings. They also share their thoughts about religion which in this case is Islam. Both find out that Islam is not a very strict religion as they first thought it was.

Before joining the homestay, I was worried when I thought that the lives of Muslims are based on strict rules, but when I joined the homestay program, I was relieved because it was different from what I thought. The first time I met the whole homestay family, they welcomed me very warmly. I feel that they are all among the kind (warm) people.

Respondent Two shared her thoughts about religion. She thinks Islam contribute to the roles that the father plays in the Muslim family.

I also thought that it might be one of the teachings in Islam, to cherish the family, and to cooperate with housework and raising children.

Respondent Two was surprised with the Malaysian *Ikumen* papa concept, and she asked in detail about the roles of the partner in a family to clarify her thinking.

I also asked whether Muslim teaching about housework and child-raising responsibilities is shared by couples.

Her thinking was then elaborated in her writing, in the AIE documents:

The father conveyed the teachings of Islam to his children. I feel through religion the bond between parents and children deepens.

Respondent Two finds that this discovery is interesting as fathers were involved in teaching the religion, sharing the workloads of the house chores as well as raising children when she stays with her host family. She also tried to connect religion and the roles of the father as a bonding act between the family members.

In Islam, both parents play an important role in the households. To have a balanced and harmonious household, it is crucial for both parents to help each other. The role of the father in the life of the child is paramount. Fatherhood is a great honour representing one's ability to pass on the prophetic legacy to his offspring. Finally, it is required in Islam that parents do their utmost for the betterment of their children. As a result, we should do our

utmost to do good to our children while also seeking Allah's blessings, as Allah (swt.) instructs in the Holy Quran:

Our Lord, grant us from among our wives and offspring comfort to our eyes and make us an example for the righteous). (Quran, 25:74)

Both respondents had a positive worldview towards Islam even though they have only been with the host family about two days and one night. This is a positive indication as their cultural experience changes their views towards others' beliefs and culture. They also learnt a few Islamic values such as the parent's roles especially the fatherhood roles in Islam, the warm attitude of the Muslim and the Muslim people ways of life, even though it is not deep enough yet positive enough to influence their worldview.

### *Daily Life*

#### *a. Greeting Teachers*

Respondent One shared her feeling about the greetings culture in the classroom. She was amazed that the local students in her class greeted the teacher after the class ended. She elaborates in her writing as below:

At a Japanese university, I have never seen anyone go to greet a teacher after class ends. Why would you say such a greeting? Is there any connection between this conduct and religion?

First thoughts:

When I first saw the scene, I was very shocked and wondering, but now I feel that it is a wonderful culture, seeing many students greet teachers in the same way. The act of honouring older people, which Japanese people do not have, is ingrained, and I feel that it can be done naturally, and I think it is a culture that Japanese people should learn.

She described her feelings about the greeting culture that she observes in her class. Greetings after the class in this context is an act of *salam* (handshake) for Malay Muslim students and greets by saying "Thank you" for non-Muslim students. The picture below describes the '*salam*' action as practice by the Malay Muslim students.

In Malaysia, the action of *salam* is an indication of respect to the elderly. She tried to practice the same culture and learn the norms in the classroom by asking a classmate about the greeting. Her reaction towards the greetings culture was by asking the classmate.

#### *b. Using the Toilet*

Most Malaysians prefer to use water instead of tissue paper, therefore wet toilets are prevalent. Malaysians normally use water to accomplish their tasks, so several tourists had no choice but to use water. There will be no tissue paper in certain toilets. In relation to this, Respondent Two did mention that the Malaysia toilet is dirty and wet and associated this to the Islamic practice. In her culture the toilet must be cleaned every day, and dry. Through her observation she finds out this might have something to do with the religion.

Malaysian use water in the toilet, this probably related to the teachings of Islam. (Respondent Two)

This reflection of hers is true as majority of the Malaysian are Muslim. For a Muslim, using water to wash after defecation is a must unless there is no water presence at the time. Islam also has a set of rules on toilet etiquette, with silence while on the toilet and cleaning after oneself with the left hand (Rahmadhani & Hamid, 2018).

Toilet culture varies by location, with some Westerners unfamiliar with the concept of bidet showers, which are widespread in Malaysia and other Asian families (Noel, 2020). The culture of cleanliness or the concept of cleanliness of Malaysians towards the standard of toilets is very different from the Japanese. For Malaysians, the most important thing to have in a toilet is water. People tend not to realise it, but the toilet is what keeps Malaysians safe from horrible bowel-related diseases such as dysentery and typhoid (Lee, 2019).

Respondent One also explained in her writing about her reaction towards the toilet culture.

What I did at the time: wipe the toilet, Googled, asked a teacher at JFKL about the manners and how to use the toilet.... Since I spend most of my time in Malaysia, I think I should try to imitate Malaysian culture instead of sticking to Japanese customs (using toilet paper).

She tried to adapt to the Malaysian toilet culture by using water instead of toilet paper. This indicates that the respondent is trying to adapt to the norms of the Malaysian toilet culture even though it is conflicting from her own culture. Even though back in 1960's most of all Japanese toilet is squatting style toilet but in a 90's almost all Japanese toilet was replaced by the Western style toilet using a toilet seat. With the rise of the Western style-toilet the Japanese style toilet that uses water was replaced by tissue paper. Some of the Japanese, especially the elderly uses the western style toilet and refrained from using water hence the Japanese toilet nowadays is equipped with toilet paper. But still some Japanese people use water but many will choose the toilet paper (Satoshi, 2020).

In addition, the design of Malaysian toilets and Japanese toilets are different. Japanese toilets are fancy and equipped with special features such as seat warmer, glowing night lights in the bowl and various washing and drying modes. The Japanese toilet is an electronic one whose lids lift on approach. The Japanese brand has pioneered the design of techy toilets since 1980, with sleek remote-controlled units (the latest model, the Neorest NX, is a sculptural shape that resembles an egg) and special features including a feminine wash setting, deodorising charcoal filter, patented ceramic glaze for optimal bowl surface hygiene, and "tornado" triple jet flush (Baum, 2020). Therefore the way of using this high technology toilet in comparison of Malaysian style of toilet is very different. This explains even though both toilets use water, the Japanese toilet is a high-tech toilet with a bidet while the Malaysian toilet is just an ordinary toilet with manual use of a water hose. Through this YouTube link, ones also can view and understand how the Japanese and Malaysian toilet works:

### *Covid19 Experience*

Respondent One shared her feelings when she stayed in Malaysia during the pandemic Covid-19 outbreak. She was worried however, very impressed by the fast response from Malaysian citizens towards Movement Control Order (MCO). She describes this as Malaysian patriotism sentiment because all Malaysians seem pursuant to the order of the Malaysian government.

In Malaysia, I felt that it was wonderful that all stores responded to the instructions for closure and that I could not see a rebellious attitude against it. I thought it might be because of Malaysia's patriotism.

However, she did mention in her writing about her experience in racial discrimination yet feeling safe because of the staff treatment towards her and her friends. She also elaborates in her writing about being thankful to the Malaysian and UMT staff.

Thank you to those involved in the program in Malaysia, even though it was a tough time during the CoronaVirus, I would like to sincerely thank them for accepting us and for backing us up.

During the outbreak, anyone that look like a Chinese will experience racial discrimination since the pandemic of Covid-19 started at Wuhan, China. Even though the respondents are Japanese, yet Malaysians, especially the locals, cannot differentiate based on their physical appearances that the respondents are Japanese. Racial discrimination not only happened to these respondents but also to those people that physically look like a Chinese as reported by the social medias and mainstream medias such as TV's and radios. This happens around the world as to name the few such as at United States of America (Cheah, Wang, Ren, Zong, Cho & Xue, 2020), Europe country, Australia, and event Asian country (Wen, Aston, Liu & Ying, 2020, Devakumar, Shannon, Bhopal & Abubakar, 2020). Even the Wikipedia produced a "List of incidents of xenophobia and racism related to the COVID-19 pandemic" all over the world and the racial discrimination were varied from the verbal slur to non-verbal abuse to body contact.

Respondent One also shared her experience when they returned to Japan during this pandemic.

When I returned to Japan, I felt that the quarantine at the airport was quite loose and insufficient to take measures compared to Malaysia. I thought that Japan only prioritises the economy over human life, and there are big differences between countries.

Respondent Two revealed her feelings during her stay at Malaysia throughout the pandemic. She feels the warmth and support from the staff, and she believes this must have to do with the religious teaching. She was amazed by UMT's fast action in converting the class into online class and surprised by the Malaysian government's action towards restricting the movement of the public transport and the incoming foreigners into Malaysia to combat the pandemic. She thinks that the Malaysian government was very efficient, and it is an excellent

response towards Covid-19. She stated in her writing about one of the Malaysian teachers that teach Japanese at UMT in her writing and touched by the teacher's word:

Rohani sensei said to us, we pray for you, so please pray for us too. Those words are very hard to hear in Japan where religion is very weak. (Respondent Two)

From her view, the teacher treats her nice and warm because of the religion of the teacher. As the teacher is a Muslim, she thinks Islam must have something to do with the act of kindness.

However, just like Respondent One, she also experienced the racial discrimination because of the physical appearances that resemble Chinese people (refer to Mainland Chinese, not a Malaysian Chinese). Both respondents wrote about their experience after returning to Japan during the pandemic. They feel that the Japanese government prioritises the economy over people's life. They were worried about the current condition of the Covid-19 in Japan yet they still needed to go to the campus.

### *Discussion*

Rather than starting with filling out the AIE document first, in this study, the student was first briefed about the document and were given an example and Q&A session was held if they did not know how to answer the question in the AIE document. As Méndez Garcia (2017: 109) claims "action-taking is a fundamental dimension of the experience at the time of the encounter because the outcome of the story or mishap recounted largely depends on it". The narrative shows that respondents were able to take action which is a component of intercultural communicative competence (Barrett et al., 2014). When she was faced with a negative situation about the toilet culture, she tried to imitate, to ask and to Google to get more information on how to behave and react.

One of the downsides of highly personal documents like the AIE is that, if the experience is negative or disturbing, narrating it may be painful. In the analysis of AIEs, suppressed ideas, emotions and experiences are brought into consciousness, relieving the author's uneasiness and tension; hence, the AIE may not only be therapeutic (Trahar, 2009), but also providing psychological relief through the open expression of emotion.

The analysis of the student's AIE confirms previous research that AIE is helpful in facilitating reflection on an intercultural encounter and enabling a critical perspective in such reflection. Different from studies which used AIE on its own, this study aimed to find out whether AIE can also be used as a framework to guide learners in writing a critical personal narrative on an intercultural encounter. The analysis of the narratives of the student shows that the narrative of the student is much richer in terms of addressing the key elements of intercultural communication such as critical cultural awareness, feelings, empathy, and action orientation. The researchers had very little influence in the production of the narrative shows that AIE can be easily used by the learners themselves as a guide in writing a personal narrative of an intercultural encounter.

This critical reflection about the encounter shows that the students gave the most importance to the positive outcome of the experience. It is a sign of action orientation and critical cultural awareness. By giving readers information about how she was welcomed positively in Malaysia, the student indirectly emphasises the contrast of attitudes she faced.

Therefore, although not stated explicitly, it can be claimed that the component of 'using comparisons to understand' is included in the narrative while talking about the importance of the experience. This also shows that, depending on each person's encounter, some components of AIE can overlap when writing a narrative.

Although there are templates available for enabling learners to write experiences of their intercultural encounters, they are not as detailed as the AIE (Spencer-Oatey & Davidson, 2013; Berardo & Deardoff, 2012). The narrative shows that the student was able to add many details. Méndez Garcia (2017) points out that it may be disturbing for some students to fill in AIE especially when the encounter is about a negative incident. In this study, it was seen that the student did not want to include all the details of her AIE document in her narrative. This was due to the concern of the student not to emphasise the negative sides of the encounter but to try to focus on the positive outcomes. If the readers would read the student's AIE instead of her narrative, they would have more information about the details of the encounter.

The study shows that writing a narrative requires additional effort and sensitivity for the writer in terms of what to include and what to avoid stating explicitly. Hence, although the students were not disturbed about writing about her negative experience in the AIE, they wanted to be more cautious about directly stating their views in the narrative.

However the cultural differences mentioned in the findings is not for the purpose of looking into the differences per se but more in appreciating the others cultural differences. Both cultures are unique in their own ways and one is not better than the other. Therefore, these differences should be celebrated.

#### CONCLUSION

The study shows that AIE can be used as a framework for writing narratives of intercultural encounters. This study could help the university or Japan Foundation to prepare the cultural briefing to reduce Japanese students' culture shock when participating in a mobility program.

AIE can assist international students since it promotes the development of intercultural competence. Activities that use the AIE as a material in the classroom can be utilised by lecturers teaching intercultural subjects or language teachers. In this study, the students' intended audience when writing their narrative was Japanese and English language students interested in reading about their intercultural communication experiences while studying abroad.

In an intercultural communication setting, the study also shows how they use their native language. This also emphasises the necessity of gathering intercultural contact accounts in the original language which will help enhance the motivation of other language learners who want to apply for study abroad programs.

Depending on the goal of future studies, narratives created with AIE as a framework may be collected from a wider number of students, and the impact of reading such narratives on English or the native language should motivate respondents to participate in intercultural exchanges.

#### BIODATA

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