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## PREFACE

It is with great pleasure that we present you a selection of the works presented at the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) Intercultural Communication in Language Education Special Interest Group (ICLE SIG) 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference, which was held on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022. These proceedings are meant to serve as a tangible showcase of the ICLE SIG's mission; which is to bridge the gap between theory and praxis of intercultural communication in language learning by addressing:

(1) various approaches for teaching intercultural communication in a language classroom, allowing educators to become better informed about teaching a L2 from an intercultural education perspective

(2) the development of resources appropriate to a foreign language teaching environment, taking into consideration the practical challenges of bringing culture into the language classroom

This *raison d'être* as a JALT SIG is underpinned by the need for language learners to be prepared to engage in meaningful cross-cultural exchanges, whether in business, diplomacy, academia, or personal relationships. Given our increasingly globalized and interconnected world, the ability to comprehend cultural cues, navigate differences, and communicate effectively is no longer an optional skill but a necessary one. In this sense, the articles presented hereupon approach this need through 5 different points of view. *Ostman & Xethakis* present an innovative way for using the Database of Immigrant Narratives (DIN) for facilitating the exposure of students to alternate cultural perspectives. *Ryan*, on the other hand, describes a thought-provoking (and rather mnemonic) way to approach the issue of Stereotypes in the classroom; using the metaphor of a lawyer riding on an elephant (the lawyer -slow-thinking mind- might be able to rationally explain the negative side of stereotypes, but it rides the actions of an elephant's -fast thinking mind- having no control over them). *Johnson & Kang* relate their experiences of taking a group of students on a study abroad trip during the COVID 19 pandemic, describing all the travails and intercultural insights derived from this experience. In addition, *Thanh* applies Bennett et al's' (2013) ideas on cultural awareness through self-reflection on a storytelling-centric strategy that can elicit intercultural competence development in students. Lastly, *Jactat* gives a detailed theoretical rationale of how an in-class activity (BARNGA) can be used for simulating the kind

## Reflections on Japanese University Students Participating in an International Summer Workshop in 2022

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### Abstract

One of the most transformative intercultural experiences a student can have is to spend time abroad. During 2020 - 2021, most travel abroad educational programs were put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic but in 2022 some started to cautiously resume. This paper provides a report of an experience in which students and instructors traveled from Japan to Thailand in August 2022 for the International Summer Design Workshop (ISDW) as countries were beginning to open up. After a brief introduction to this workshop, the process of gaining approval from the universities involved, precautions taken while abroad, and the opinions of students and instructors regarding the experience will be discussed. While global travel restrictions resulting from COVID-19 are no longer in place, it is hoped that sharing travel experiences will help instructors make informed decisions regarding travel abroad activities in case another pandemic occurs.

### 要旨

海外へ渡航し、過ごすことは学生にとって最も変容的な異文化体験の一つである。しかし、COVID-19のパンデミックにより、2020年～2021年の間はほとんどの海外への渡航体験が保留されていたものの、2022年に入り、海外渡航体験の一部が慎重に再開し始めた。本論文では、各国が新たかに開国し始めた2022年8月に、日本からの学生と教員がInternational Summer Design Workshop (ISDW)のためにタイに渡航した経験を題材にしている。そのISDWに関する紹介と共に、関係した大学から承認を得るまでのプロセス、海外滞在中の注意事項、そして体験に対する学生や指導者の意見などを述べる。今は、COVID-19に起因する世界的な渡航制限はもはや実施されていないが、本論文で渡航経験を共有することによって、再びパンデミックが発生した場合に備え、関係者が海外渡航活動について十分な情報を得た上で積極的な決断への助けになることを期待される。

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MEXT has encouraged Japanese students to be more engaged in global society through various initiatives (e.g. Global 30 Project, Tobitate) (MEXT, 2017; MEXT, 2020; MEXT, n.d.). While the initiatives MEXT has implemented aim to result in students who are able to successfully represent Japan in the international workforce, the benefits go beyond that (Yamada, 2022). Through first-hand international experiences collaborating and communicating with people from diverse backgrounds, students are often able to experience the world in a new way, gain new awareness and perspectives, and realize that multiple perspectives can co-exist (Yamada, 2022). Even commonplace activities such as sharing a meal or walking around a new neighborhood with a local guide, all while overcoming communication challenges and negotiating meaning, can be part of a transformative experience which shifts one's perspective.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected virtually every aspect of our lives, including shopping, work, travel, healthcare, education, and relationships. According to the World Health Organization, by December 2020, there were over 66 million confirmed cases and over 1.5 million deaths (WHO, 2020). With regards to education, in August 2020, the United Nations stated the pandemic had affected 1.6 billion learners in over 190 countries (UN, 2020). This disruption took various forms from the switch to online lectures and new assessment methods, to the closure of dormitories and social hangouts (Aristovnik et al, 2020; Crawford et al, 2020). The cumulative effect of all this resulted in students reporting a variety of feelings such as isolation, anger, anxiety and boredom (Aristovnik et al., 2020). While not attributed to any single cause, the Japanese government campaign in 2020 to take preventive measures against the spread of the coronavirus was widely accepted (Oshita, 2022) and official infection rates remained relatively low in Japan during 2020. Without downplaying the serious psychological, political and economic effects that many felt in Japan, in some respects, the effects resulting from the pandemic on the educational system were less severe in Japan compared with many other countries. For example, according to UNESCO, the length of school closures due to the pandemic in Japan was 11 weeks while it was much higher in some countries (United States: 71 weeks; United Kingdom: 27 weeks; Brazil: 78 weeks; India: 82 weeks; Australia: 44 weeks) (UNESCO, 2021). However, like students all over the world, feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction with their educational experience during this time were not uncommon.

Many students who were abroad at the beginning of the pandemic were required to return home, including several from the authors' university who were studying in Europe. Oshita (2022) reports of international students in Japan being told to return home but in some

cases, international travel restrictions made this impossible (Yamada, 2022). Due to the newness of the pandemic, no one had concrete answers on how to handle the situation and many students felt confused (Oshita, 2022). In addition to those studying abroad when the pandemic began, numerous students planning to study abroad in 2020 had to cancel their plans, and this continued into 2021.

While virtual exchange offers many advantages (O'Dowd, 2020), especially to those with financial limitations, it does not offer the same experience as physically traveling to another country. By 2022, with vaccinations available and medical facilities no longer stressed, many had accepted the new normal and the world had begun to open up to international travel. For example, in March 2022, the UK dropped all COVID-19 related travel restrictions (Gov.UK, 2022). In June 2022, America stopped requiring non-U.S. citizens who were vaccinated to show a negative COVID-19 test to enter the country (U.S. Mission Japan, 2022). Japan, however, continued to have relatively strict travel restrictions for non-Japanese passport holders wanting to enter the country but these were eased in September and October 2022 (MOFA, 2023). For example, travelers were no longer required to be part of a package tour or required to show recent PCR test results if they had three vaccinations. It was during this period of relaxation of restrictions that the authors decided to travel abroad with students from Future University Hakodate.

Future University Hakodate, located in Hokkaido, Japan, has about 1000 undergraduates, with a focus on technology and design related studies. Since 2008, students and instructors from Future University Hakodate have been participating in the International Summer Design Workshop (ISDW). Usually, participants from various countries meet in one location for the workshop but due to COVID-19, the ISDW was held online in 2020 and 2021. However, it was decided to hold the 2022 ISDW in person. This paper reports the experiences and reflections of the authors for both preparing for and participating in this workshop in 2022. Student reflections on the experience are also given.

### **The International Summer Design Workshop**

One of Future University Hakodate's distinguishing features is its focus on project-based learning (PBL). During students' third year, they participate in a year-long group endeavor to solve a real-world problem under the supervision of faculty. At the beginning of the academic year, instructors present the various projects and third-year students select the one that they want to join. One of the projects involves preparing ten to twelve students from Future University Hakodate to participate in the International Summer Design

Workshop. In this workshop, students from various universities in South-East Asia come together to collaborate on a design theme with the aim of developing their design skills, communication skills, and intercultural awareness. The authors are two of four instructors that prepare the students at Future University Hakodate for the workshop.

The ISDW began in 2008. Typically, one of the participating universities hosts the ISDW and other participants travel to that location (see *Table 1*). Each ISDW has a theme and over the course of seven to ten days, working in intercultural groups, students use their diverse cultural backgrounds and skill sets to create a design proposal that fits that theme. To use the 2019 ISDW as an example, 74 students from four universities met at Sangmyung University University in Cheonan, South Korea. Recognizing the aging population in South Korea, the theme that year was “Silver Design”.

**Table 1**

*The location of the ISDW from 2008 to 2022*

2008	South Korea	2016	South Korea
2009	Japan	2017	Singapore
2010	China	2018	Japan
2011	South Korea	2019	South Korea
2013	Japan	2020	Virtual
2014	China	2021	Virtual
2015	Singapore	2022	Thailand

In 2020 and 2021, due to restrictions imposed by the coronavirus, the ISDW was held virtually. While ICT enabled the workshop to be held, students and organizers felt it lacked in various respects and hoped to hold the 2022 ISDW in person (Kang, Sakaida, & Johnson, 2023). Unfortunately, none of the participating universities in previous ISDWs were able to obtain permission to host an in-person workshop in 2022. In the spring of 2022, the government in Thailand was attempting to attract overseas travelers and a professor at

Chiang Mai University who was willing to host the workshop was found. In an attempt to make it easier for students from other universities to attend, negotiations over the dates of the workshop continued until late May. Unfortunately, only participants from Future University Hakodate were able to attend the workshop in Chiang Mai.

When students selected their third-year project in April 2022, they were informed that the intention was to travel to Thailand if conditions permitted and of travel regulations at that time. Students understood this situation when they joined and many explicitly stated that the prospect of traveling overseas was one of the reasons for joining. Again, students were not required to join this project; they did so voluntarily. From May to late July, the ten students who joined typically met twice a week to prepare for the experience.

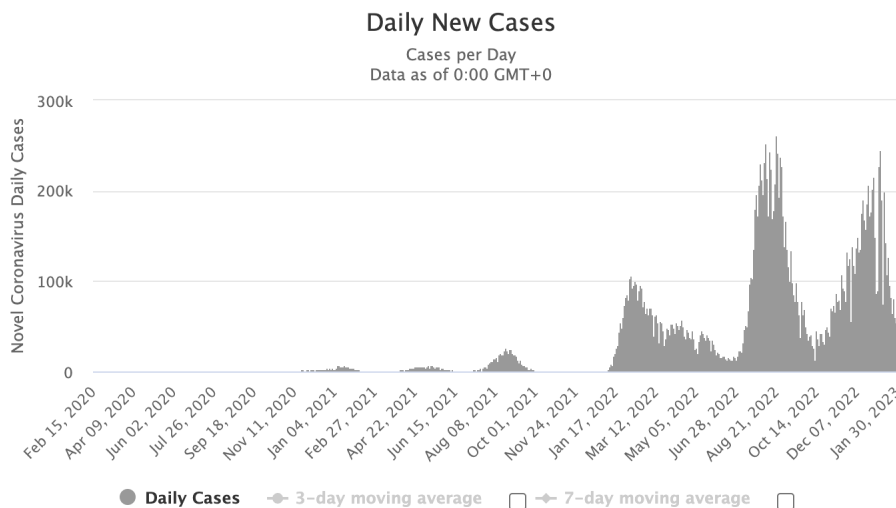
### Travel Preparations to Thailand

There were three main challenges to traveling to the ISDW in Thailand: 1) Thai travel requirements, 2) university approval, and 3) increased air travel costs. This was impacted by a surge of COVID-19 cases in Japan from early summer (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

Case numbers of COVID-19 cases in Japan from 2020-2022.

#### Daily New Cases in Japan



Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/japan/>

#### Thai Travel Restrictions

Like in many countries, rules regarding travel to Thailand were in a state of flux during 2022. When planning for the event first began in March 2022, a system called the “Thailand Pass”



was in place. Under this system, travelers to Thailand needed to submit online information regarding their flight details, accommodation, vaccination status and proof of traveler's insurance (US\$10,000 minimum). If not fully vaccinated for at least 14 days prior to travel, a quarantine period was necessary (Royal Thai Embassy, n.d.). Unvaccinated travelers also needed to submit a negative PCR test within 72 hours of departure. Students were informed of these requirements and agreed to them when they joined the third-year project. However, the Thai government changed the rules stating that the Thailand Pass was no longer required for entry to the country from July 1, 2022. After that date, according to the Thai Embassy website, "travelers, both Thais, and foreigners entering Thailand, will only be required to show Proof of Vaccination or COVID-19 test results" (Royal Thai Consulate-General, Fukuoka, 2022).

### ***Preparations and Travel***

By the spring of 2022, while maintaining a healthy environment for students, Future University Hakodate had begun to push for a return to a resemblance of the pre-pandemic era. This made the process of obtaining university approval easier and consisted of making a formal request to two groups: the third-year project (3YP) committee and the university's COVID-19 committee. While some instructors had traveled overseas since the pandemic began, this was the first time instructors had requested permission to do so with students. With no template to use, a "coronavirus precautions plan" was prepared by one of the authors. In addition to following Japan and Thai government regulations for traveling, the main points were as follows:

- Each morning during the ISDW, students would take and share their results from a COVID-19 ATK (antigen test kit) with the instructors. In August 2022, a pack of ten could be purchased for 265 Baht or approximately 1000 yen (*Figure 2*).
- Unlike previous in-person ISDWs in which two students shared a hotel room, students would have individual rooms. Moreover, several rooms would be reserved for two weeks after the end of the workshop in case anyone became infected and could not depart when planned. It was arranged with the hotel that these rooms would only be charged if used.
- If a student tested positive but felt well enough, they could participate in the workshop virtually from their hotel room.
- If a student tested negative for two consecutive days, they would be allowed to physically return to the workshop.

Figure 2

COVID-19 home antigen test kits sold in a store in Thailand



In late May, the authors informed the 3YP group of our intention to travel and our coronavirus precautions plan. They responded that they did not have the authority to approve an international trip but if the COVID-19 committee approved, the 3YP committee would also approve. Permission from the COVID-19 committee was requested and in mid-June tentative approval, on condition that it was clear to students that their grade for the project was not dependent upon traveling to the workshop, was received.

With tentative permission from the university, students began looking for flights in July. As reported in the Japan Times, the travel industry had been in turmoil since the pandemic began with 2020 and 2021 resulting in huge financial losses due to international travel restrictions and general public fear (Japan Times, 2022b). Fuel costs also soared, partially as a result of the war in Ukraine (Japan Times, 2022a). Combined with a loosening of restrictions in many countries and many people having a pent up desire to travel, the airlines took advantage of 2022 to increase travel costs (Japan Times, 2022a). Participants were also departing during Japan's Obon holiday season when flights are typically more

expensive. If booking all flights together, round trip tickets from Hakodate to Chiang Mai cost over 170,000 yen, considerably more than in previous years.

As a direct result of a wave of increased coronavirus cases in early summer in Japan, on August 3, there was an email from the COVID-19 committee reconsidering our approval to travel. Ultimately, under pressure from the fact that students had already paid for their tickets and the fact that COVID-19 case numbers were lower in Thailand, the COVID-19 committee did not rescind their approval.

All students had two vaccinations; most also had a booster. All students knew they needed to bring proof of their vaccination records to board their flights. Emails from the airlines recommended that passengers add the “Verify” app to their smartphones which was a method of electronically verifying vaccination records and made going through immigration smoother. This information was shared on a group LINE with these students and the majority of students added this application. One of the authors had traveled to Thailand in the previous few months as part of preparation for the workshop and informed everyone of his experience of going through immigration. One student did not use the Verify app, instead only bringing paper copies of his vaccination records for domestic use in Japan. That student, after flying to Tokyo, was refused a boarding pass to Thailand because, according to the airline staff, Thai immigration required that vaccination certificates be written in English for international use.

### **Countermeasures while in Thailand**

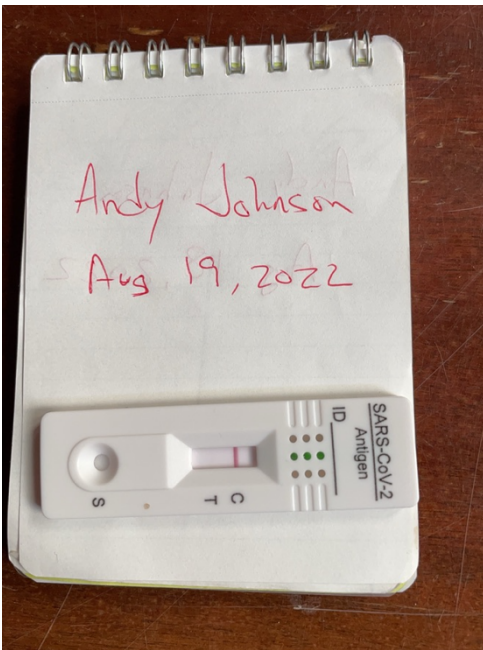
In the 48-hour period prior to the start of the ISDW, students (minus one) and instructors arrived. In the airport and in enclosed spaces, the majority of Thai people wore masks. The city of Chiang Mai had been financially hurt by the decrease in tourism and were sincere in their effort to give the impression that the city was a safe place for travelers as demonstrated by the fair amount of signage promoting measures against the spread of coronavirus including mask wearing and hand washing. The authors observed that workers typically wore masks and temperature checks were conducted when entering local malls. They also observed that masks were often worn outdoors in open spaces but less frequently compared to observations made in Japan.

On the first morning of the workshop, the participating students and instructors from Japan met in the hotel lobby. Rapid SARS Cov-2 Antigen tests were distributed to the group, and from that day, all members from Japan regularly posted their test results on our LINE group

chat (Figure 3). The ISDW participants were reminded to wear masks during the orientation and did so during the workshop (Figure 4). Furthermore, much of our time in Chiang Mai was spent in open air environments where the risk of transmission is reduced and the overall density of crowds was relatively low.

**Figure 3**

*An example of a COVID-19 ATK test result that was uploaded to the LINE group*



**Figure 4**

*Students wore masks during the workshop*



In order to return to Japan, a PCR test was required within 48 hours of departure. In Thailand, this could be conducted at a local hospital for about 8000 yen. Fortunately, no students became infected during the workshop. All students were able to return safely to Japan, although after the workshop was completed, some students decided to travel longer in other parts of Thailand or neighboring countries independently. A few weeks after the ISDW finished, on September 7, 2022, Japan relaxed its laws and no longer required a PCR test 72 hours prior to departure if travelers have evidence of vaccination.

### Post-Travel Reflections

The experience of traveling to the 2022 ISDW in Thailand provides an example of precautions taken to minimize risks when traveling with students during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of their post-workshop activities, students were asked to create a portfolio which included reflections (in Japanese) on their experiences at the workshop. From trying new foods to seeing tropical plants, to riding on Tuk Tuks or on the back of one of their Thai group member's mopeds through the city streets of Chiang Mai, the students' experiences were varied. As the following sample from some of the students' reflections (initial translations using DeepL) illustrates the shared experiences with Thai students resulted in friendships and shifts in thinking styles. It is also worth noting that none of the students' reflections related to fears of COVID-19.

- "Before I went to ISDW, I was worried that I would not be able to communicate well with others, especially those who have different languages, cultures, and other barriers. However, these were not obstacles, but rather opportunities to talk with others."
- "Overall, it was a very positive experience and I am still talking with Thai students online."
- "It was the first time for me to interact with students from overseas. It was certainly very difficult to talk in English, but it was time to learn. It was challenging at first to convey our thoughts and ideas in the design activities we did with Thai students, but I was very happy when they were conveyed. I was also surprised at the differences in the way of thinking about design."
- "My awareness of communication with people from overseas has changed. I used to not speak much because I thought I wouldn't be able to communicate with them anyway, but now I can communicate with them even if I speak just a few words without worrying too much about grammar."
- "I used to be a shy person, and I was worried that I couldn't talk well with new people. At ISDW, I met so many new people that I was confused at first. However, thanks to



the students from other countries who actively talked to me, I was able to experience the joy of talking to new people.”

- “I gained some good memories, such as staying up all night with Thai students to create posters. I never imagined I would have a foreign friend...”
- “Before the ISDW exchange program, I thought that I could learn enough about other countries even in Japan, but I was wrong. I realized that you can only learn about an area by feeling the atmosphere and smells that are unique to that area and by interacting with various local people.”
- “The most impressive part was actually the personalities of the Thai people themselves. In group work, we Japanese carefully plan what to do, when to do it, and who does what, but the Thai students were all doing it at their own pace and enjoying themselves. This is not a negative thing, but rather a positive thing, as they planned and clearly separated time for activities from time for fun, and enjoyed themselves during the activities rather than just working hard during the activities.”

As the reflections indicate, students’ expectations of the workshop were quite different than the reality. Many had fears related to spoken communication but were able to overcome them. Furthermore, many students had shifts in how they perceived communication, their thinking styles, and what it means to know other cultures. After the workshop, some students mentioned the Thai expression “mai pen rai.” While it doesn’t have a direct translation into English, it can be used in a variety of contexts and means something to the effect of ‘everything will be alright.’ The students reflected that they began the workshop with a certain seriousness but the Thai mentality of enjoying the process helped them see the design process in a more lighthearted way. One Japanese student recalled an incident when a problem arose, instead of getting stuck, the Thai students utilized the “mai pen rai” attitude and smiled because everyone was sure they would overcome the challenge. The authors find that this mindset can be appropriate when thinking about traveling in 2022 if one does their due diligence to take precautions for worst case situations. It is much easier to think everything will be ok if, for example, you know where the local hospitals can be found, you know your students’ have insurance, and you know there is a contingency plan for the case that a student does get COVID-19. Even before the pandemic, students traveling abroad as part of academic programs got sick or had accidents. There are things we cannot control; this has not changed but we can be prepared for likely scenarios.

In 2022, traveling internationally became easier. Based on this perceived success, the participating teachers were able to provide an example to the university administration that

travel could be resumed with students and the participating teachers have begun plans to travel abroad with students for the 2023 ISDW. Based on easing travel restrictions, the process will likely be smoother but at the same time it is important not to become complacent in preparation and precautions. Individuals will need to weigh the benefits and risks of international travel for themselves.

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