Intercultural Mediation in Study Abroad

Theoretical foundations and the roles of **external mediators** in learners' **intercultural development**

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Mediation is also interpretation: making sense of another culture

United Nations (2012)

A third party helps two or more sides reach an agreement.

Byram (1997)

The intercultural speaker explains each side and finds common ground.

UN (2012), cited in Zannoni (2020, p. 246); Byram (1997, p. 61)

Mediation by others can trigger mediation for self. Development rests on the learner's own agency.

Mediation for others

Teachers, hosts and buddies inform, scaffold and build relationships.

Mediation for self

The learner notices, interprets, appraises, decentres and reflects.

Sociocultural theory: Vygotsky (1978); mediation for self and for others: Liddicoat (2014)

Two research questions

1 What intercultural development did learners show on two short-term **study abroad** programmes, in Seoul and in Chiang Mai?

2 How did **external mediators** support this development?

The framework comes from learner data

93 language learners, on ten immersion programmes in six countries

28 of them wrote journals and gave interviews

1,500+ instances of mediation

32 forms of mediation, in 9 categories

Earlier project on foreign language study abroad and intercultural development (2015 to 2023)

Study participants and method

Participants	Journals 5 reports each	Interviews semi-structured	Observations lessons, materials
12 learners 6 in Seoul · 6 in Chiang Mai	●	●	·
Student buddies	·	●	·
Instructors and managers	·	●	●

Taxonomy of intercultural mediations

Mediation for others

Informing about culture

- Informing about one's culture
- Informing about one's language
- Informing members of one's own culture about a new culture
- Persuading others to adopt the practice of another culture

Scaffolding for adaptation to new culture

- Giving consideration to others' cultural practices
- Helping others to adapt to sociocultural practices in one's culture
- Helping others to feel at ease in a new culture

Facilitating communication and culture learning

- Facilitating the discovery of the new culture
- Facilitating the connection of new cultural knowledge with existing knowledge
- Facilitating sociopragmatic development
- Translating to facilitate communication

Establishing and managing relationships

- Managing tensions and intervening in conflicts between cultures
- Preventing stereotyping/ negative impressions of other cultures
- Learning to establish relationships with members of a new culture
- Seeking understanding and support for one's cultural practices
- Showing sensitivity to others' cultural practices

Mediation for self

Knowledge uptake/acquisition

- Observing/noticing practices of a new culture
- Informing oneself about a new culture

Meaning-making

- Interpreting and making sense of new cultural knowledge
- Connecting new cultural knowledge with existing knowledge
- Reconstructing/ reaffirming one's knowledge of the new culture

Critical appraisal

- Critically appraising the new culture
- Critically appraising one's own culture

Decentering

- Accepting cultural differences and the different perspectives of other cultures
- Maintaining open attitudes towards other cultures
- Avoiding stereotyping/ negative impressions of other cultures
- Recognizing the influence of one's cultural perspectives and knowledge
- Distancing oneself from one's own perspectives, values and beliefs
- Understanding new cultural practices from the other culture's perspective

Reflexivity

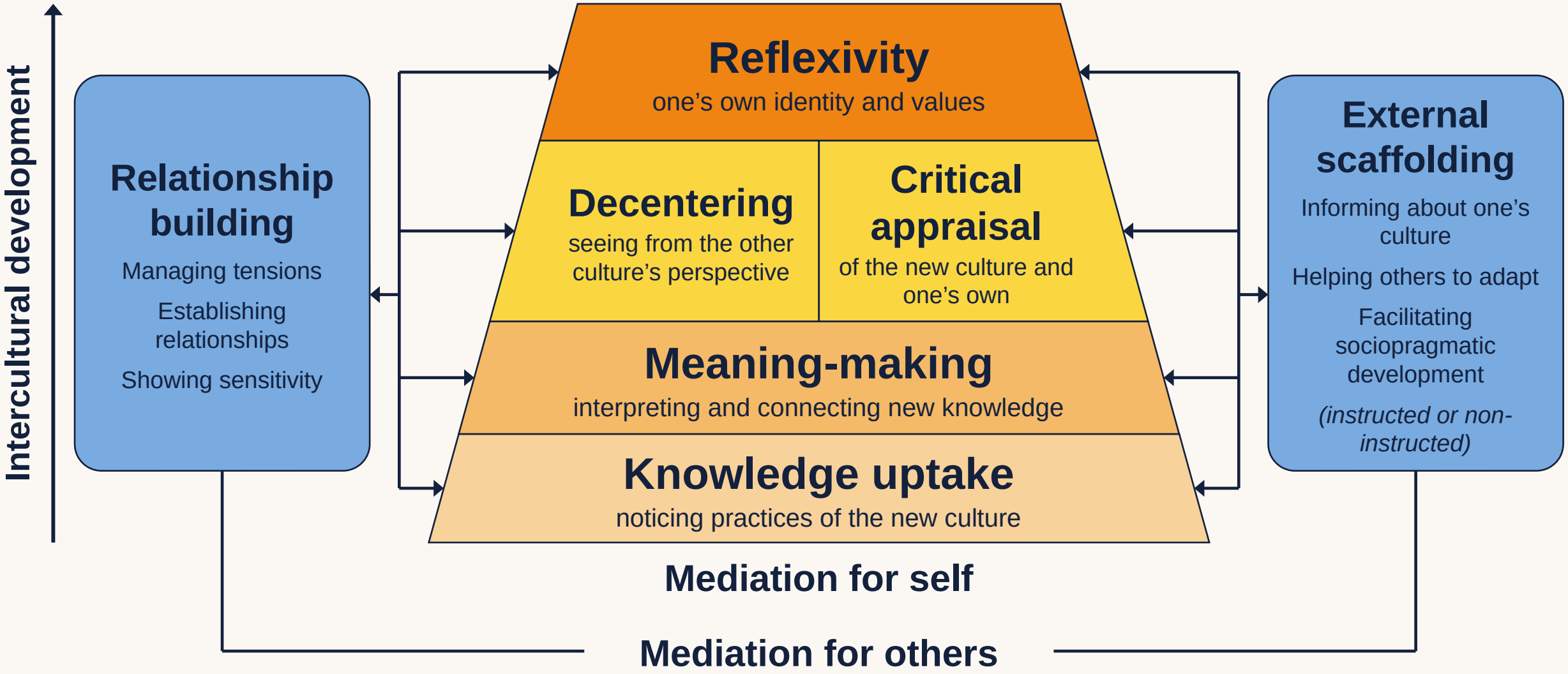
- Reflecting on and understanding one's own culture
- Reflecting on and discovering one's own identity
- Re-constructing/ re-affirming one's own values, beliefs and identity

Adapted from Chan, W. M. (2025). A data-informed taxonomy of intercultural mediations. Narr Francke Attempto.

The model of intercultural development



The model of intercultural development



Adapted from Chan, W. M. (2025). Interkulturelle Mediation. Kyoyo-Ronso, 146, 251-278.

Three groups, three levels of mediation



Instructor	Knows intercultural competence. Finds it hard to apply in class.
Administrator	Has a clear vision. It is not yet built into the programme.
Student buddies	The most active mediators. They act on their own initiative.

Learners stayed mostly at the foundation levels.

Catherine: a confusing subway encounter



Catherine: a confusing subway encounter

“An elderly woman came to me, stood right in front of me and just stared.”

Catherine, journal report 1

Notices

The woman wants her seat.

Tries to interpret

“It still made me feel confused.”

Week 1 ends

Negative feelings towards Korea.



“I got inspired by my Korean buddy.”

Back in Singapore, Catherine is now a buddy for an exchange student from the United States.

Her buddy explains. Catherine decentres.



Her buddy explains. Catherine decentres.



Jungkook, student buddy

- Explains: free subway rides from age 65
- Apologises for rude behaviour
- Asks for her understanding

Catherine

- “It’s definitely not representative of every elderly person there.”
- Sees the practice from the Korean perspective

Mediation for others triggers **mediation for self**.

Interviews with Jungkook and Catherine after the programme. Names are pseudonyms.

Case of Ming Jie: reconstructing values, beliefs and identity



Case of Ming Jie: reconstructing values, beliefs and identity



Pharmacy graduate, completed Thai 1, 36

1. Encounters and interactions with the local Thai community (e.g. local family in restaurant, chocolate seller and other vendors at markets, pharmacy attendants)

2. Triggered observations and reflections about Thai hospitality, friendliness and value of meaningful social interactions (even with strangers of another culture)

3. Triggered comparison with and critical appraisal of his own Singaporean culture

Ming Jie: value of meaningful social interactions

Knowledge acquisition
Observing and noticing practices of the new culture

Meaning-making
Interpreting and making sense of new cultural knowledge

Meaning-making
Connecting new cultural knowledge with existing knowledge

"[…] They [the locals] are also polite and accommodating even towards strangers. I like that the conversations are more oriented towards their way of life, their relationships with people and not so much about the 'have' or 'have nots'. […]

Additionally, my understanding of Thai hospitality has deepened significantly. Thai people's warm, patient, and easy going nature stands out. For example, sellers here go beyond merely conducting transactions; they are willing to teach, converse, and engage in meaningful interactions. This contrasts with my experiences in Singapore, where interactions with sellers often feel more transactional and hurried."

Journal report 2

Ming Jie: value of meaningful social interactions



Critical appraisal

Critically appraising one's own culture

Critically appraising the new culture

Reflexivity

Reflecting on and discovering one's own identity

Re-constructing one's own values, beliefs and identity

"This immersion has also led me to reflect on myself and my own culture. In Singapore, the fast-paced, results-oriented mindset often leaves little room for the kind of relaxed, interpersonal connections I've experienced here in Thailand. Thai people's ability to balance work with meaningful social interactions and their patient, welcoming demeanor have shown me the value of slowing down and being more present in daily interactions. I've realized that I often approach situations with a sense of urgency, which can unintentionally limit opportunities to connect with others on a deeper level. Witnessing the Thai way of life has inspired me to be more open, patient, and engaging in my interactions, both personally and professionally."

Journal report 2

Ming Jie: classes and sequence of mediation

Foundation mediations

Observing practices of a new culture
Noticing the Thai's warmth and willingness to engage strangers

Interpreting and making sense of new cultural knowledge
The Thai interact in a less transactional and more meaningful manner

Connecting new cultural knowledge with existing knowledge
Comparing with the situation in Singapore

Higher-order mediations

Critically appraising one's own culture
Criticising the results-oriented and less personal nature of interactions in SGP

Critically appraising the new culture
Appreciating the more meaningful social interactions of the Thai

Reflecting on and discovering own identity
Realising that his interactions have been mostly transactional

Re-constructing own values, beliefs and identity
Deciding to be more patient and more engaging in his interactions

Case of Farah: some re-construction of values, beliefs and identity

Life Sciences major, Year 3, completed Thai 1, 23

Interactional behaviours

- Like Ming Jie, Farah observed the warmth, respectfulness and friendliness in the interactions of the Thai.
- Made her want to change her more direct and blunt Singaporean way of interacting and to become more personable and friendlier

Slowing down and appreciating the “joy of life”

- Observed “more laid-back and relationship-oriented culture” in Thailand
- Wanted to slow down and incorporate Thai value of sanuk (finding the joy of life) into her own life

Farah: re-affirmation of Singaporean identity

Knowledge acquisition
Observing and noticing practices of the new culture

Meaning-making
Connecting new cultural knowledge with existing knowledge

Critical appraisal, reflexivity
Critically appraising one's own culture
Reflecting on and understanding one's own culture
Re-affirming one's own values, beliefs and identity

"[…] this experience has highlighted how much diversity shapes life in Singapore. The variety of races, languages, and cultures in Singapore is something I now appreciate more deeply after observing the relatively homogeneous nature of Chiang Mai's local population. At the same time, I was inspired by the strong cultural identity that Thai people uphold, which made me reflect on how Singaporeans can continue to preserve and celebrate our multicultural heritage while embracing modernity."

Journal report 1

Farah: re-affirmation of Singaporean identity

Reflexivity
Reflecting on and understanding one's own culture

Reflexivity
Re-affirming one's own values, beliefs and identity

"[…] I realized how much I take Singapore's multiculturalism for granted. While Thailand has a rich and distinct culture, Singapore's diversity allows us to experience a blend of traditions and festivals all year round. This makes me appreciate the unique privilege of living in a multicultural society where different cultures coexist and influence one another."

Journal report 3

"I've also gained a renewed appreciation for Singapore's multiculturalism. While Thailand's culture is rich and deeply rooted in its traditions, Singapore's diversity offers a unique blend of traditions and customs from various ethnicities. This mix fosters a dynamic cultural landscape that I now value even more after observing a relatively more homogeneous cultural setting in Thailand."

Post-programme report

Concluding remarks



1. Evidence points to significant benefits of short-term **study abroad** programmes for foreign language learners' intercultural growth.

2. **External mediators** (e.g. local study buddies) can have a positive and telling impact on learners' intercultural development.

3. Analysis of learners' **intercultural mediations** can help us identify and chart their intercultural development.

4. Taxonomy of **intercultural mediations** and mediation-based model of intercultural development provide vital **theoretical foundation** and important tools for research design and analysis.

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