

Near Peers Impacting Local Thai Tutors' Intercultural Communication Competence Development

Brad Deacon

Nanzan University

Reference Data

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Most study-abroad research has focused on visitors' development overseas; however, fewer studies have investigated hosts' development through intergroup contact experience in home environments. This study, which is situated within a larger project, builds on earlier research (see Deacon & Pholboon, 2020) that examined the intercultural communication competence (ICC) development of 8 local Thai tutor hosts ($N = 8$) who were buddy partnered with 8 Japanese university student visitors during a short-term study-abroad program. In the present study, a qualitative semi-structured interview approach helped to determine the effect and influence that one significant factor, near-peer role models (NPRMs), had on tutor hosts' cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions in their "Internationalization-at-Home" context. Findings revealed the perceived impact that previous *senpai* tutor NPRMs had had on present tutors' L2 self-efficacy, imagined and actual cross-cultural friendships, and ICC ability. Implications for effectively supporting hosts' ICC development in local environments are offered.

従来の留学研究は、訪問者側の成長に焦点を合わせることが多かったが、自国環境における異種集団との接触を通じた受入側の成長を調査する研究は少なかった。本論は、短期留学中の8人の日本人大学生とパディを組んだ受入側8人のタイ人チューター($N=8$)を対象とした異文化コミュニケーション能力に関する先行研究(Deacon & Pholboon, 2020)に基づいている。本論は質的な半構造化面接により、身近なロールモデルの存在が重要な要素として受入側チューターの「内なる国際化」における認知的、情緒的、行動的な側面に影響を及ぼすことを明らかにした。結果として、過去の先輩チューターのロールモデルが、現チューターの第二言語における自己効力感や、想像上または実際の異文化を超えた友情、そして異文化コミュニケーション能力に影響をもたらすことがわかった。本論は、受入側の異文化コミュニケーション能力の向上を効果的に支援するための示唆を与えるものである。

Chen and Starosta (2000) have called intercultural communication competence (ICC) an “umbrella concept” for three dimensions recognized as follows: intercultural awareness (cognition), intercultural sensitivity (affect), and intercultural adroitness (behavior). Given this complexity, interactants would do well to note Bennett's (2008) point that “cultural contact does not necessarily lead to competence. The mere intermingling of individuals in intercultural contexts is not likely to produce, in itself, intercultural learning” (p. 17). Illustrating this point are several studies on the lack of social interaction between culturally diverse students in longer-term and largely western study-abroad environments (e.g., Arthur, 2017; Summers & Volet, 2008; Wu et al., 2015). In contrast to this outward mobility focus, Teekens (2007) has called for greater attention on Internationalization-at-Home initiatives in ICC research.

Study-abroad literature reveals an overwhelming focus on the experiences of visitors with far fewer studies examining the hosts' side. However, researching hosts' perspectives can reveal valuable insights, such as their motivation for hosting visitors in study-abroad programs. In addition, uncovering hosts' prior ICC development experiences can help local and overseas study-abroad program organizers to promote symbiotic educational goals. There is currently a lack of research in Asian study-abroad contexts investigating intergroup contact through local hosts' perspectives, in particular. A previous mixed-methods study on the impact that Thai tutor-buddies experienced through interactions with visiting Japanese university students in a short-term study-abroad environment uncovered the influence of *senpai*, defined here as influential senior students, on current tutors' participatory motivation (Deacon & Pholboon, 2020). In the present paper, the researcher builds on this previous study by examining the impact of *senpai* near-peer role models (NPRMs) (Murphey, 1996) through a qualitative lens. Salient findings from semi-structured interviews that followed Deacon and Pholboon's (2020) study revealed the effect and influence of Thai *senpai* NPRMs on current tutors' cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, and the interconnected factors (L2 self-efficacy, imagined cross-cultural friendships, and ICC) that were attributed to their locally situated development.

This study concludes with recommendations for supporting tutor hosts' ICC in Internationalization-at-Home environments.

Background

Research on Internationalization-at-Home, defined by Nilsson (2003) as “any internationally related activity with the exception of outbound student mobility” (p. 31), has gained increased attention in response to the need to investigate conditions impacting local hosts' intercultural development. Studies by Jon (2009, 2012, 2013) on “buddy systems” at a Korean university, in which local students were paired with visiting international students, demonstrated that equitable international education leading to gains in ICC was possible through intergroup contact. Agnew and Kahn (2014) later concluded that buddy programs can facilitate zones of comfort around intercultural differences that break down barriers to intergroup contact. Results from a recent mixed-methods study on ICC (Deacon & Pholboon, 2020) showed that Thai tutor buddies had a reduction in intercultural communication apprehension after interactions with visiting Japanese students. Moreover, tutors' interaction confidence increased the most followed by marginal gains in engagement, attentiveness, and respect for cultural differences due largely to intergroup contact conditions (as defined by Allport, 1954) including the following: 1) equal status, 2) intergroup cooperation, 3) common goals between groups, and 4) sanctioned support by program authorities that facilitated cross-cultural interactions. With relevance to the current study, these gains in Deacon and Pholboon's (2020) study were partly explained by the prior influence of *senpai* NPRMs.

In earlier work on the impact of peers in education, Murphey (1996) coined the term near-peer role models (NPRMs) as those “who are close to our social, professional and/or age level who for some reason we may respect and admire” (p. 21). This definition was later expanded to “people who might be ‘near’ to us in several ways: age, ethnicity, gender, interests, past or present experiences, and also in proximity and in frequency or social contact” (Murphey & Arao, 2001, p. 1). The NPRM concept draws upon Bandura's (1997) social learning theory which suggests that efficacy beliefs can be raised through directly observing, or imagining, situations where others (who bear similarity to oneself) perform successfully, thus inspiring belief in one's ability to succeed likewise. Although vicarious observations of stimulating models can potentially offer self-efficacy development opportunities (Bandura, 1989), people must also be able to recognize their own ability to successfully imitate such models (Usher, 2009).

In a recent large-scale exploratory SLA study on the importance of L2 role models, Muir et al. (2019) examined 8,472 English learners from various global settings and

found that 68% reported having an English role model with characteristics that were valued according to four dimensions defined as follows: 1) overall command of English, 2) paralinguistic features, 3) personal attributes, and 4) accent/variety of English. Several other studies (see Murphey, 1999; Murphey & Arao, 2001; Murphey & Murakami, 1998; Walters, 2020) that used NPRM videos in classrooms, in particular, aimed to increase viewer awareness of various SLA beliefs, values, attitudes, and capabilities that self-reported findings then revealed can often lead to changed behaviors. Classroom-based research by Murphey (1998) highlighted other NPRM-infused activities for intentionally inspiring students through written peer comments, language learning histories, and visits by previous students.

Unfortunately, research on NPRMs outside of English classroom settings is scant. One exploratory study by Wang (2020) found that 17 Chinese university students studying French had developed stronger ideal L2 selves and multilingual selves following PowerPoint presentations of Chinese *senpai* graduates who had actively applied L2 learning experience in their lives. Wang's study revealed an attitudinal shift in students' ideal French selves from “vague imaginations” to “more concrete ambitions,” and an enhanced interest in French culture was also reported. Besides classrooms, what can be said about the effect and influence of NPRMs in outside environments such as study-abroad where ICC abilities are more pronounced? Also, what NPRM examples can students identify themselves, other than those intentionally presented by classroom educators? To better understand the impact of previous *senpai* NPRMs in non-English study-abroad contexts on current hosts' perspectives, the following research questions were determined:

- RQ1. To what extent did Thai tutor participants recognize an impact of *senpai* NPRMs on their development?
- RQ2. In what ways did *senpai* NPRMs impact the development of these Thai tutor participants?

Methodology

Research Context

This study was conducted at a public university in northern Thailand where 3rd-year Thai tutor hosts, who majored in Japanese studies, were buddy-paired with visiting 2nd-year Japanese university students during an annual 3 week “Thai Language and Cultural Study Program.” After consulting pre-study abroad demographic profiles, a local Thai coordinator then determined suitable buddy pairings based on common interests

and other factors. Although this buddy system involved one-to-one pairings, all parties freely interacted throughout the program duration. Formally, tutors provided support for fieldwork projects, Thai language development, and as cultural ambassadors. Informally, tutors formed close relationships with visitors that facilitated mutual friendship, second language acquisition, and ICC development.

Participants and Sampling

All 3rd-year Thai students in this department (approximately 50 students) desired greater Japanese fluency and cross-cultural friendships; however, several students lacked the motivation to become tutors for various self-perceived and logistical reasons that reportedly included: affective factors related to shyness, low confidence, and fear of communicating due to weak Japanese ability; cognitive demands required to interact primarily in Japanese; and time constraints to juggle schoolwork, part-time jobs, and other commitments.

The current study, which is part of a larger project, focused on the impact of previous tutors, who were recognized as *senpai* NPRMs, on current Thai tutor participants ($n = 8$). Demographically, five tutors were female and three were male; four tutors reported having some foreign friends, and six tutors mentioned having been abroad for a week on one or two occasions to neighboring Asian regions. Tutors' English and Japanese language ability could be described as intermediate, or approximately B1~B2 on the CEFR. Convenience sampling was used to solicit participation. All participants gave informed consent, and ethical approval (No. 19-091) for this research was given.

Research Design

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A for an abridged interview questionnaire) 6 months after the study-abroad program concluded. Interviews were conducted mostly in English and with some Japanese, and aimed to uncover tutor perspectives on the influence of *senpai* NPRMs. To facilitate smoother communication, the interviewer outlined the purpose of the interviews beforehand, built rapport before starting the actual interviews, and encouraged participants to freely share responses in their L2. The interviewer, who was a chaperone in the study-abroad program, had also spent considerable time during the program building trust which facilitated participants' comfort to use their L2. Verbatim transcriptions were later made and coded using an open coding interpretive approach (Charmaz, 2014) in the MAXQDA software program (version 20.0.8). All participants later confirmed the accuracy of their

interview transcripts by email. Greater intra-rater reliability was insured by coding the data twice over a 2 month interval using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998). Thematic analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) on the patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was then done to identify and analyze the salient themes within the data set. Finally, an outside peer debriefer provided critical analysis of data interpretations that were found to be both accurate and trustworthy.

Results

Three main interrelated themes were conceptualized from the data as follows: 1) constructing fluent Japanese L2 selves, 2) imagining close intercultural friendships, and 3) scratching the intercultural surface. Each theme is discussed narratively in this section. Several tutor quotes were purposefully selected to better illustrate each theme, respectively. The terms "tutor" and T1~T8 are used here to refer to the 8 study participants.

Theme 1: Constructing Fluent Japanese L2 Selves

All tutors reported that their strongest motivation to participate was to emulate their *senpai*'s Japanese speaking skills. T6 expressed his motivation, saying, "I saw like my seniors being a tutor and they talked with Japanese students fluently and I thought, oh it's really cool, and I want to be like that." Observing *senpai* also provided clues for overcoming self-perceived linguistic barriers towards greater fluency development:

When I saw the *senpai* I thought they are so cool like they can speak Japanese with Japanese people. For me, like my opinion, they are fluently for me. Like they don't need to think that much they just speak. When I was a 2nd-year student I can't speak like anything in Japanese. I could just speak the words but not the sentences. The *senpai* they could speak like long sentences and I was like wow that's so cool I need to be like that so how can I be like that? I needed to like put myself in that stuff so I needed to be like a tutor in the future (T7).

T5 mentioned a behavioral shift after being inspired in this way, "I thought the *senpai* were really cool! I wanted to be able to speak Japanese like my *senpai*. So I started to practice and study hard to do that." This led T5 to initiate several concrete actions to develop her fluency:

When I saw the Japanese students coming to Thailand in my 1st year I really wanted to talk with them. I really like talking and if I could talk with the Japanese students

like that (as the *senpai* did) then I thought that my skill could grow. So I started watching Japanese dramas and Japanese YouTuber videos and I talked more with the Japanese teachers at university.

In addition, some tutors, like T4, were affected by feelings of jealousy when first seeing the more fluent *senpai* interacting with Japanese visitors:

When I was in 1st year and 2nd year I was jealous that they can talk with visiting Japanese students really, uh, smoothly. I want to be like them that can speak fluently and I wanted to be a tutor because in Thailand it is very difficult to find Japanese students to come to university, so when I saw the *senpai* I thought I don't have enough to go to go to say hello to Japanese students in that time.

Observing their more fluent *senpai* engaging in intergroup contact stimulated tutors to take the necessary steps to later assume their predecessor's role.

Theme 2: Imagining Close Intercultural Friendships

Tutors were also inspired to pursue friendly intergroup contact when observing their *senpai*. In this excerpt, T6 recalled his first experience of becoming aware of the possibility of becoming a tutor and making Japanese friends:

I saw them (the *senpai*) on my 1st year at university. One day they all disappeared and I asked them, 'Where are you going?' They said, 'Because we are a tutor we have to take care and like hang out with the Japanese students.' So, I asked them what is a tutor and they explained to me it's like a friend to like Japanese students, to hang out, talk, yeah like for a short time. And I was like, oh that would be cool, and I asked them how can I be a tutor.

On describing the closeness of these intergroup relationships, T4 said, "*Senpai* and Japanese are very close and I wanted to have that. I wish I had like that. They can say everything, they can talk, and go out." T8's desire to emulate her *senpai* grew specifically from noticing their friendly interactions with Japanese visitors:

I felt like I want to talk to the Japanese people like the *senpai* did because they talk in a friendly way. So I think I want to be like *senpai*. I appreciate the *senpai* that they can talk with the Japanese students like friendly. I wanted to be like them.

Moreover, feelings of jealousy provided a catalyst for development as seen in T8's recollections on desiring close cross-cultural social interactions:

When I saw the 3rd-year senior students who were interacting or talking with the Japanese students, at the time when I was like in 2nd year I feel like a little bit of jealousy because I cannot talk with the Japanese students like friends like that close as a tutor. When you are a tutor you have to give them information, you have to take care of them, you see them every day so you have more chances to talk with them like friends, and Japanese students will see you as friends, too. If you are not a tutor maybe they think you are just someone, not like friends.

Interestingly, T6 mentioned a kind of wish fulfillment that the possibility of sharing his imagined future intercultural friendships could provide here, saying, "I thought it would be really cool when I could tell everyone that like I have Japanese friends, too. And this was like my first motivation to be a tutor." In sum, as with the linguistic impact seen earlier, observing these friendly intergroup interactions triggered a strong urge in these tutors to follow in their *senpai*'s footsteps.

Theme 3: Scratching the Intercultural Surface

Tutors acknowledged the limited opportunities to locally engage in, and observe, intercultural communication. T3 emphasized this lack of local intergroup contact opportunities for developing his Japanese fluency:

I suppose I could not communicate in Japanese with native speakers or I could not state my opinion in Japanese clearly, fluently, and effectively. Since there is not enough Japanese people in Khon Kaen to talk with, the chance to practice speaking Japanese is too little.

In addition, tutors noted the lack of formal training at university for developing ICC skills. Regarding advice for interacting with the Japanese visitors, T6 mentioned that the local program coordinator had offered the following guidance, "Just be a tutor and you will know it." Given their lack of guidance, directly observing firsthand interactions between the *senpai* and Japanese visitors, and gaining insights into how ICC could be fostered, had increased value for these tutors. To illustrate, T7 commented on her personal struggles to find common topics of interest, which *senpai* were perceived to do with greater ease in their cross-cultural interactions:

When I need to speak with stranger and people that I never know from before I feel like I can't think about the topic that I want to talk, but that *senpai* they can like can talk with Japanese people about any topic like they don't have to think about the topic....they can say about the culture, about like Thai culture and Japanese culture

like compared together. Or like about the Japanese friend's life back in Japan, so except about the speaking skill I wondered why I can't think about the topic that I want to talk about with them like *senpai*? I think the problem is not my speaking skill but about the topic about what to like talk with them. I needed to just talk and not be afraid to talk.

T4 stressed the value gained in appreciating cultural differences for becoming an effective tutor from witnessing successful *senpai* interactions and stated, "Understanding Japanese culture is very important. I learned about that, too. If you know the cultural differences, it will be a good point." Tutors recognized other intercultural differences pertaining to punctuality, ambiguity in communication, and perceptions of relationship harmony. *Senpai* also served as valuable peer consultants later on, as T8 recalled, "The teacher didn't tell us everything that we have to do like thoroughly. But we asked the *senpai* what should we do. Some things we can know by our sense what to do to help them." Interestingly, T3 commented on one *senpai* who was perceived as a linguistic role model, but not as an intercultural role model:

He is so smart at Japanese but he don't like to take care of others. For example, there was a Japanese student who lost his way to go to the building and he said that the Japanese student can ask other people and not only me. He don't like to support others, but his strong point is he can speak Japanese perfectly. They (the Japanese students) have a character. We must understand who they are.

This comment suggested that some *senpai* were perceived as holistic NPRMs while others were valued more for specific qualities. Despite their limited domestic support structures, tutors still found inspiration and clues to develop through observing their *senpai* peers. Overall, these themes collectively revealed the perceived influence and effect of *senpai* NPRMs on current tutors' ICC.

Discussion

In general, this study showed that *senpai* NPRMs had a strong impact on tutors' motivation to develop and actively participate in the study-abroad program. The results indicated that understanding tutors' ICC development was intertwined with their Japanese L2 selves and imagined intergroup friendships. These findings also illustrated the complex interplay of affective, cognitive, and behavioral components involved in imagined and real intergroup contact experiences.

Tutors initially expressed feelings of intercultural communication apprehension (as defined by Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997) manifesting in fear and anxiety around imagined

intergroup contact with the Japanese visitors as 1st and 2nd-year students. However, observing *senpai* NPRMs interacting smoothly, fluently, and in a friendly manner with visitors reduced tutors' affective concerns and increased their self-efficacy to become successful Japanese users capable of actualizing their imagined intercultural friendships. This finding is in line with research on the strengthening of students' ideal language selves through NPRMs (see Wang, 2020; Yashima, 2009). Additionally, the role of *senpai* NPRMs as successful communication models may be even more pronounced in domestic environments due to intergroup contact limitations. For 1st and 2nd-year Thai students, this exposure to authentic intergroup contact can provide a motivational catalyst for self-directed action steps towards actualizing their constructed L2 identities and imagined communities (e.g. Murphey et al., 2005). Besides motivation, having a clear vision, as defined by Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) through the dimensions of: 1) future, 2) ideal self, and 3) desire for deliberate change, has been shown to help learners to exercise greater autonomy in their learning endeavors. Of note, some observations were filtered negatively as some tutors expressed jealous feelings around *senpai* NPRMs' stronger L2 abilities and opportunities to cultivate cross-cultural friendships. Still, recognizing such feelings provided a catalyst for tutors to positively channel their jealousy to then cultivate their L2 skills for future imagined interactions.

Tutors also gained greater ICC understandings, which the "zones of comfort" around cultural differences in this domestic buddy program context (Agnew & Kahn, 2014) helped facilitate. *Senpai* NPRM observations provided valuable clues for ways to successfully negotiate intergroup contact through increased knowledge, strengthened attitudes of openness and curiosity, and skills to negotiate cross-cultural differences. In other research, desire and openness to learn foreign languages has been linked to increased acceptance of cultural differences and the ability to adjust to different cultural contexts (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Grasping some of the deeper and more nuanced aspects of ICC for tutors was challenging, however. The absence of a supportive formal mentor, which research shows can contribute significantly to students' cultural learning experience in programs involving intergroup contact (Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009), was one limiting factor. Curriculum gaps in Thai intercultural education, which according to tutors had predominantly focused on objective cultural learning, offered few opportunities for cultivating more complex ethnorelative mindsets. In addition, as already noted, intergroup contact experiences were largely limited to surface-level observations between *senpai* and Japanese visitor interactions during the limited program timeframe. One unexpected finding was that while tutors admired the linguistic ability of their *senpai*, emulating their interpersonal and ICC skills was not always

equally regarded. This echoed findings by Murphey and Arao (2001) who concluded that students can value NPRMs for selective characteristics while choosing not to emulate the entire person. Considering these limiting factors, perhaps the greatest impact of *senpai* NPRMs was their influence on tutors' self-efficacy to exercise autonomy to hone their skills and engage in intergroup contact themselves.

A number of implications for more effectively developing Thai students' ICC in this local environment are clear. In general, students could benefit from more intentional pedagogical integration of ICC activities in their curriculum. For instance, critical incidents taken directly from episodes in previous study-abroad programs (see Appendix B) could provide meaningful development akin to real intergroup contact situations. Several impactful NPRM activities, as suggested in earlier research, could be offered such as videos of inspiring *senpai* tutor role models, and volumes of "Senpai Tutor Histories." Local coordinators could also invite previous *senpai* tutor-buddies to talk about their program experiences to better orient would-be tutors. Other developmental opportunities should aim to meet the call by Beelen and Jones (2015) in Internationalization-at-Home for more "purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" (p. 69). Such efforts could also help future tutors to become more effective hosts in later study-abroad programs.

Several limitations are clear here. First, the small sample size prevents generalizability to other populations. At the same time, Merriam (1998) has shown that more in-depth analysis of qualitative results is often better served and informed by smaller cohorts. Second, interviews were conducted mainly in English, which limited the participants' ability to more deeply share their reflections. The sole reliance on interview data collection also means that caution must be exercised when interpreting these results.

Conclusion

This research sought to better understand the impact of *senpai* NPRMs on a group of Thai tutors who then became buddy hosts to a group of visiting Japanese students during a short-term study-abroad program. Observing *senpai* NPRMs in cross-cultural interactions provided a barometer check of present tutors' L2 and intercultural abilities. These observations also offered insightful clues for bridging the gap between tutors' imagined and actual intergroup contact experiences. With relevance to Internationalization-at-Home, reflecting on these *senpai* NPRM and Japanese visitor interactions provided an impetus for local hosts' affective, cognitive, and behavioral

ICC development that partially counterbalanced their lack of local intergroup contact opportunities. This study also addressed the dominant focus on visitors in study-abroad research by investigating hosts' perspectives instead.

Future research in this Thai local context could investigate the impact of the *senpai* NPRM-infused activities, as suggested in the implications. Examining other NPRM groups, including co-tutors and Japanese visitors could be another promising research avenue. Finally, studies on the effect and influence of NPRMs in other study-abroad contexts of varying lengths merit strong consideration.

Bio Data

Brad Deacon is an Associate Professor at Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan. His research interests include active learning, intercultural competence, and study abroad. <braddeacon@mac.com>

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Appendix A

Abridged Thai Tutor Interview Questionnaire

1. Why did you decide to be a tutor? (Who or what influenced your decision to be a tutor? When did you first want to be a tutor?)
2. When you were a freshman and a sophomore what do you remember from your observations of your *senpai* interacting with visiting Japanese students? (What did you notice? How did you feel about that? What did you think about that?)
3. What impressed you the most when observing your *senpai* interacting with visiting Japanese students? (Why?)
4. Do you think that observing these interactions between *senpai* and visiting Japanese students is helpful for freshman and sophomore students? (Why do you think so?)
5. What can freshman and sophomore students learn from observing interactions between *senpai* and visiting Japanese students that they can't learn in regular university classes?

Appendix B

Critical Incident Exercises Between Thai Tutors and Japanese Students

1. Maipei arrived at the "Tasty Thai" restaurant at 18:05 where her Japanese buddy partner, Yumi, was waiting. They had agreed to meet at 18:00 earlier to have dinner. Maipei asked Yumi what time she had arrived and was surprised to hear that Yumi had been there since 17:50. Maipei had also noticed that other Japanese students often arrived early for appointed times and wondered if this was common for Japanese.
2. Mo observed several Japanese buddy partners chatting together after school and grew curious about what they were talking about. The students said that they were talking about how incredibly kind the Thai tutors were to help them settle in, meet them for lunch each day, and hang out with them so often. Mo thought that it was normal to take care of visitors in these ways. She wondered why exactly the students felt Thais were "so kind".
3. Bright noticed that the Japanese buddy partners would often tell the tutors beforehand when they would go to buy drinks, go to the bathroom, or go other places. For example, they would say "I am going to the bathroom now" before they went. Bright wondered why they would do this because Thais don't often announce where they are going.

4. Annie noticed that Japanese buddy partners would sometimes go back to their hotel after school where they would remain. She tried to encourage them to come out, but they stayed close to the hotel. She started to feel a bit depressed because she didn't know how to make the Japanese students come out more. Annie felt that Thai students had more energy and were more active. She wondered what she could do to encourage the Japanese students to be more active.