Critical Cultural Awareness and Identity Development: Insights from a Short-Term Thai Language Immersion

Wai Meng Chan
(clscwm@nus.edu.sg)
National University of Singapore, Singapore

Sasiwimol Klayklueng
(clssk@nus.edu.sg)
National University of Singapore, Singapore

Abstract

Promoting and cultivating intercultural competence is an important goal of foreign language education today. In-country language immersion, an out-of-class component of the foreign language curriculum, has the potential to contribute in this respect, as it gives learners first-hand experience in the target language country and allows them to discover and partake in the local community’s sociocultural practices. This article focuses on a study of the impact of a short-term in-country language immersion in Chiangrai, Thailand, on the development of critical cultural awareness and identity in Singapore university students of Thai as a foreign language. The study adopted a case study approach and collected qualitative data on two subjects through journals, interviews, activity observation and document inspection. The data were analysed based on Byram’s (1997, 2008) model of intercultural competence, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) Situated Learning Theory and their notion of legitimate peripheral participation, and Weinreich’s (2003) Identity Structure Analysis. The findings suggest that the immersion programme in Chiangrai provided the learners with access to legitimate peripheral participation, which helped them gain insights into the target language culture, negotiate and (co-)construct new cultural meanings and knowledge, and critically appraise both the target language and the native cultures. These experiences and a growing identification with the Thai culture prompted them to re-examine and question their own culture and identity, but led eventually to the re-affirmation and re-construction of their own identity, as they sought to extend their value systems by adopting and aspiring towards Thai traits and practices that they found desirable.

1 Introduction

In a highly globalised world with increased cross-cultural communication, a pivotal goal of foreign language (FL) education is to cultivate intercultural competence (IC) in FL learners to ensure that they become intercultural speakers who are able to “communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts” (Bennett, Bennett, & Landis, 2004). In-country language immersion (ICLI), an out-of-class component of the FL curriculum, has the potential to contribute in this respect, as it gives learners first-hand experience in the target language (TL) country and allows them to discover and partake in the TL community’s sociocultural practices. Sociocultural theories of learning suggest that learning is situated in social interactions between novices and expert others. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) Situated Learning Theory (SLT) em-
phasis that participation in a community of practice enables learning and the development of competence. While participating in ICLI and interacting with the TL community, FL learners are afforded opportunities to negotiate and construct new cultural knowledge and meanings with members of the TL community, impacting their intercultural and identity development (Chan & Chi, 2017; Chan, Klayklueng, & Saito, 2017).

Short-term study abroad programmes, lasting less than eight weeks, have been widely organised by many university language departments (Institute of International Education, 2010, cited in Schwieter & Kunert, 2012). However, there have been relatively few studies on the effect of such short-term programmes on learners’ critical cultural awareness (CCA) and identity development. This study investigates the impact of a short-term ICLI in Chiangrai, Thailand, on the development of CCA and identity in Singapore university students of Thai as a foreign language. As its theoretical framework, it draws upon Byram’s (1997, 2008) model of intercultural competence, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) SLT, and Weinreich’s (2003) Identity Structure Analysis (IDS).

2 Literature review

2.1 Intercultural communicative competence and intercultural competence

A comprehensive and influential model of intercultural language education was proposed by Byram (1997), who reasons that communicative competence in the target language alone does not suffice for successful communication with members of the TL cultures. To enable learners to interact successfully across languages and cultures, foreign language teachers need to teach intercultural communicative competence. Byram (2015) argues that, besides communicative competence, learners will need a good measure of IC in order to achieve intercultural communicative competence. Byram (1997) identifies five sub-areas of IC:

1) *Savoir être* or attitudes of curiosity and openness in interacting with interactants from the TL and other cultures, and the willingness to decentre from one’s own cultural perspectives;
2) *Savoirs* or knowledge of one’s own and the foreign culture, including knowledge of the sociocultural norms of interaction in both cultures;
3) *Savoir comprendre* or skills of interpreting other cultures and relating them to one’s own culture;
4) *Savoir apprendre/faire* or skills of discovering knowledge about other cultures and applying them in interactions with interactants from those cultures; and
5) *Savoir s’engager* or CCA which enables one to critically reflect on and appraise one’s own and other cultures.

Of these five components of IC, Byram (1997) considers CCA to be the most significant and the ultimate goal of intercultural language education, for it allows intercultural speakers to bring “to the experiences of their own and other cultures a rational and explicit standpoint from which to evaluate” (p. 54). It represents a key goal in the political education of an individual and his socialisation towards intercultural citizenship. Byram (1997, 2008) describes it as one’s ability to identify, analyse, interpret and evaluate one’s own and other cultures based on explicit and critical criteria. The native culture will usually provide the reference base and initial criteria for the interpretation and evaluation of the other culture. At the same time, such critical analysis and reflection will invariably result in the re-examination and re-alignment of one’s own cultural norms, beliefs, and values – and, thus, one’s own identity as well.

With the growing mobility of foreign language learners, Byram (1997) suggests that IC can be acquired through visits, exchanges and other forms of contact with the TL and other cultures, including short-term ICLI programmes in the TL environment. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) SLT and their notion of legitimate peripheral participation provide a theoretical framework to explain the learning of the TL culture and the development of IC through ICLI.
2.2 Situated learning theory

In their conceptualisation of learning within the framework of SLT, Lave and Wenger (1991) move the focus away from the traditional notion of learning, which sees learning as an act of internalisation. Instead, they view learning as active social participation within a community of practice (COP) and thus as situated in the professional and sociocultural practices of this community. Learning takes place through learners’ interactions with expert members of this community, who act as mediators helping learners to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in its practices and activities. SLT postulates that novices will be engaged initially at the periphery of a COP, moving from what Lave and Wenger calls legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) to full participation in the centre of the community. The novice status of newcomers is acknowledged by the community and they are given support and scaffolding to aid their LPP. Through their interactions, new and expert members jointly negotiate and construct meanings and knowledge relevant to the community. Learning thus involves the establishment and maintenance of relationships between new and expert members, as well as transformations in the identity of new members, as they assimilate into the COP. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the process of LPP in a COP.

Fig. 1. Situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation

SLT provides an appropriate theoretical basis to comprehend and explain the learning of a foreign culture and the development of IC through ICLI. In ICLI, FL learners visit and enter the TL community, typically for the purpose of learning the TL and its culture. A typical ICLI programme would include language instruction, cultural instruction and experience, homestay, contact with members of the local community (such as local students), and excursions and field trips. In analogy to SLT, ICLI participants are thus accorded LPP status and provided with opportunities to interact with and participate in the TL community – as novices to its culture and practices. Full members of the local community (such as instructors, host families, local student buddies, and even casual interactants from incidental encounters), who are proficient and knowledgeable in its sociocultural practices, support and mediate the learners’ interpretation of their cultural experiences and the construction of new cultural meanings. By relating these new meanings to their existing cultural
learners develop and acquire the skills and knowledge (Byram’s different forms of *savoirs*) necessary for the cultivation of IC. Figure 2 summarises this process and shows how LPP and the interaction and participation it affords play a key role in the development of IC.

![Fig. 2. In-country language immersion and legitimate peripheral participation](image.png)

### 2.3 Identity and intercultural development

Weinreich (2003) proposes the following definition of identity, which forms the core of his IDS model:

A person’s identity is defined as the totality of one’s self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future. (p. 26)

He emphasises the inclusiveness of this definition, which encompasses other, more specific forms of identity, such as one’s ethnic, gender, familial or occupational identity, which he views not as separate identities, but as component aspects of one’s total identity. It also represents a continuum in terms of one’s biographical development, as it includes the construal of one’s past biographical self as well as one’s imagined, aspirational self of the future.

Other researchers (e.g. Bourdieu, 2000; Hall, 2002; Ochs, 1996) point to the social nature of one’s identity, which they see as defined through the interactions and discourse with one’s social context, that is, the social groups that one belongs or relates to. Weinreich (2003) similarly argues that identity is situated in one’s social context. The appraisal of the social world and the various situations one experiences in it also consists of the appraisal of oneself. Indeed, through such reflexive appraisal, a person will evaluate his/her construals of the self and the role self plays in a particular situation in reference to one’s identity aspirations. Weinreich also sees identity development as being influenced by interactions within one’s social world and the identifications that one develops with others, which can lead to the re-appraisal of self and others, as well as the development of new values and beliefs.

In a similar vein, Byram (1997) contends that the intercultural speaker, in interacting with other cultures and in relating these cultures with one’s own, will also compare and contrast the social identities defined within these cultures to one another. Indeed, the re-appraisal of one’s own culture
that is part of CCA development may lead to a greater awareness and the re-construction of one’s identity (Chan, Kumar Bhatt, Nagami, & Walker, 2015). This is also consistent with SLT (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which sees the “growth and transformation of identities” as a natural consequence of interactions and participation within a COP (p. 122).

2.4 Studies on foreign language study abroad programmes and intercultural development

A number of studies (e.g. Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Goldoni, 2013; Harrison & Malone, 2004; Pedersen, 2010; Savicki, Adams, & Binder, 2008) have investigated the effects of longer periods of overseas study (e.g. a study abroad semester or year) on learners’ intercultural development. These studies have produced mixed results suggesting that, while overseas study can help learners in developing various sub-areas of IC, this does not automatically result from just being overseas and requires the mediation of various factors, including instructional methods, preparations, study programme design, and personal experience and encounters. Most of these studies have, however, focused on longer-term study abroad experiences, and there have been comparatively few studies on the impact of short-term study abroad on FL learners, perhaps because doubts have been cast on the effectiveness of short-term programmes – for instance by Davidson (2007), who believes that “development of linguistic and cultural proficiency for second language learners is extremely unlikely to occur” (p. 279) within the short time-frame of one to six weeks.

One of the earliest studies on short-term study abroad and the intercultural development of FL learners was reported by Jackson (2006). Her study focused on the experiences of 15 Cantonese-speaking English majors from a Hong Kong university on a short-term study abroad programme in England. The five-week programme included literary, language and current affairs courses, homestay with local families, interactions with other international students, attendance at cultural events, and excursions. Jackson employed an ethnographic approach and a wide array of quantitative and qualitative instruments of data collection (including pre- and post-sojourn surveys, participant observation, reflective diaries, individual and group interviews, informal discussions and field notes). Despite initial difficulties encountered by the students in adapting to the English lifestyle and social discourse, they made some gains in their IC. This was particularly evident in the area of savoir être. The data seemed to suggest that the students displayed a more positive attitude towards cultural differences, and a greater degree of curiosity and openness towards the TL and other cultures after the programme. In a follow-up study involving a largely identical five-week programme in the same country and 13 participants of a similar profile, Jackson (2009) used the Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer & Bennett, 2002) to measure gains in students’ intercultural sensitivity following the study abroad experience. The results were mixed, with nine of the 13 students registering a gain in intercultural sensitivity, but only five advanced to a higher level of development on the Intercultural Development Inventory scale. Jackson found that those who reached a higher level of development reported observations that went beyond superficial aspects of the TL culture, as evidenced by more substantive, comparative and analytic diary and survey reports. These students became more aware of cultural differences between the TL and their own culture and refrained from making hasty, negative judgements about new and unfamiliar cultural experiences in the TL culture. Jackson recommends that study abroad programmes should seek to foster cultural awareness and critical reflection in the participants.

Bloom and Miranda (2015) investigated the effect of a four-week study abroad programme on the intercultural development of ten undergraduate and two graduate FL students of Spanish from different academic disciplines. The programme in Salamanca, Spain, consisted of two intensive courses focusing on the Spanish language and culture, respectively, as well as homestay with local host families. By administering the Intercultural Sensitivity Index designed by Olsen and Kroeger (2001; cited in Bloom & Miranda, 2015) before and after the programme, Bloom and Miranda sought to measure changes in the participants’ intercultural sensitivity arising from their immersion experience. In addition, reflective journal entries written by students on their impressions of the TL culture and culture in general were collected and analysed to triangulate and interpret the ISI data.
The researchers concluded that the short-term programme in Salamanca did not produce any dramatic shifts in the intercultural sensitivity of the participants, and recommended that further research be conducted to study the reasons for this result (e.g. if it could be attributed to the duration or the design of the programme).

In a larger-scale study involving 405 upper secondary German and French-speaking students (with an average age of 16 years) from Switzerland who went on short-term language exchanges ranging to one to six weeks in TL-speaking areas, Heinzmann, Künzle, Schallhart and Müller (2015) found that such short-term exchanges can have a positive effect on students’ IC. However, they concluded that the length of the programmes does matter and that very short programmes of only one- to two-week durations will limit the opportunities for interactions with the host communities and the development of intercultural skills. They further pointed to the importance of interactions and the opportunities to use the TL with local people (including host families and local tandem partners), which affords students a true and beneficial experience of the TL culture. The willingness of students to engage with local people depends however largely on their predisposition to do so and their level of IC before the start of the exchange.

Another study that also indicated that short-term study abroad can have a positive impact on the development of IC was reported by Schwieter and Kunert (2012). The participants of this study were 28 Canadian learners of Spanish on a three-week programme in Spain consisting of an intensive language course, guided tours and homestay. During open-ended interviews, most of the participants reported being more sensitive and open to other cultures. In addition, they developed a stronger identification with the TL culture and a greater willingness to engage in future interactions with members of the TL culture. The researchers concluded that key factors in the participants’ positive development were pre-departure cultural sessions to prepare them and to pique their interest in the TL culture, as well as the interactions with the host families.

While the review above shows that there is increasing interest in the relationship between short-term ICLI and FL learners’ intercultural development, the currently available literature is still comparatively sparse, and none of the previous studies have focused on the development of CCA, as defined by Byram (1997), and its impact on the participants’ identity development. None of the studies had also sought to illuminate the effect of ICLI from a sociocultural perspective or, specifically, on the basis of SLT and LPP. The research questions for this study were thus:

1. Does short-term ICLI provide FL learners with opportunities for LPP?
2. Does short-term ICLI impact FL learners’ CCA and identity development?
3. How does the ICLI experience contribute to CCA and identity development?

3 Background, objectives and method of study

3.1 Background and context

The study was part of a larger research project conducted at the language centre of a university in Singapore. The centre offers 13 foreign languages – namely, Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Malay, Spanish, Tamil, Thai and Vietnamese – to foreign language learners. Enrolled learners include area studies major students from the Arts Faculty as well as non-major students from all faculties at the university.

The centre has been organising non-compulsory short-term ICLI programmes of two to four weeks’ duration and on an annual basis for the following two main objectives: 1) to support students in the development of their communicative competence in the respective TLs by exposing them to language instruction and authentic communicative situations in a native-speaking environment; and 2) to provide students the opportunity to experience and participate in the TL cultures, and to support the development of their intercultural competence.

This study focused on a three-week ICLI programme that took place at a public university in Chiangrai, Thailand, in July 2015. The programme offered the participants a 45-hour language course as the main component. The course syllabus was customised for the Singapore participants.
and designed based on a communicative, task-based approach and on principles of the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach. In addition to the intensive language course, the programme included 45 hours of culture-focused content classes on the history and society of Thailand (e.g. the role of the monarchy and Buddhism in Thailand), as well as cultural sessions that provided students with hands-on experience in Thai cultural practices (e.g. Thai boxing, cooking, fruit carving, umbrella painting and lantern making). On weekends, excursions to places of scenic, historical and culture interest were conducted. The programme also assigned local buddies to the participants to help acquaint them with the local culture and to act as interactional partners.

The participants stayed at a university guesthouse which was located within walking distance from the classroom. Although homestay could not be arranged, the participants were still afforded ample opportunities for incidental interactions and observations of the local culture, for example, when the participants engaged in independent activities on their own or with their student buddies after class or on weekends.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study were two female undergraduate students who had completed four semesters of Thai as a foreign language at the language centre of a public university in Singapore. The two participants were informed about the study and agreed to their participation on a voluntary basis. Both students were of Singaporean nationality. One was aged 20 and was a second-year English Language major, while the other was 23 years of age and had just completed her fourth year in Civil Engineering.

3.3 Method

The current study employed a qualitative case study approach, collecting data through weekly journals, interviews, and a site visit with activity observations and document inspection.

3.3.1 Journal and interviews

The journals provided the main body of data for this study. The participants consented to writing and submitting weekly journal reports by e-mail to the researchers. They were asked to submit a journal report at least three days before their departure about their previous overseas experience, their knowledge of the target language culture, their motivation and expectations with regard to the ICLI programme, and any problems they might anticipate for the stay in the TL community. Subsequently, for each of the three weeks of their ICLI programme, they were required to submit a report, in which they recorded their immersion experience, including classroom and other activities, incidents and problems, contact with local people, insights into the target language culture and community, and feelings and perceptions in relation to the above. They were instructed, in particular, to report any new knowledge and perspectives they had gained about the target language and their own native cultures. In the post-immersion journal report, submitted not later than seven days after the ICLI, the participants were asked to write about their feelings and perceptions with regard to the ICLI and its various components, including the instructional and cultural activities, accommodations, and visits and excursions. They were also asked to comment on the new knowledge and perspectives they had gained about the target language culture, their own native culture, and themselves. Thus, each participant had to submit a total of five journal reports.

After an initial analysis of the journal reports, the participants were invited to attend individual semi-structured interviews. The interview sessions were aimed at verifying the results of the analysis of the journal data and at seeking further relevant information, where necessary. The interviews, each lasting 40–45 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.
3.3.2 Activity observation and document inspection

One of the researchers visited the host university for three days. During the visit, the researcher observed selected activities both in and outside the classroom, including the classroom instruction, cultural activities and interactional sessions with members of the local community, including the local buddies and teachers. Furthermore, the researcher met and had informal discussion sessions with the teachers and administrators of the host university. Field notes were taken to document insights from the activity observations and discussions. Relevant documents, including the programme schedule, course syllabus and samples of instructional materials were collected and inspected.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Participant profile and motivation for ICLI participation

The two participants of this study, who are identified by their pseudonyms, Donna and Jin, had taken the same fourth semester Thai language module as an elective in the semester directly preceding the ICLI trip, although both were from different faculties and major departments. Donna was 23 at the time of the trip and a fourth year Civil Engineering major, while Jun was aged 20 and in her second year of study in English Language. However, both had similar overseas experiences prior to the ICLI trip. They had vacationed in other countries, including Thailand, but the trips were seldom longer than several days, and they had never previously undertaken any trips without their families or friends, as evidenced by the following excerpts from their pre-immersion reports:

Excerpt 1
Throughout the 20 years of my life, I have never parted from home for a long period of time. The longest stay overseas was probably 9 days, and they were mostly spent with family. This immersion programme would be the first and possibly most independent trip I have ever made and is something that I have been looking forward to. (Jin, pre-immersion report)

Excerpt 2
I have not had any previous lengthy periods of residence overseas, this immersion program would be the longest period of time I would be overseas. The types of overseas experience I usually have are holidays with friends and family. (Donna, pre-immersion report)

Not surprisingly, Donna saw this as an opportunity for her to overcome her dependence on her family and to learn to stand on her own two feet:

Excerpt 3
My motivation to enrol in this program is to step out of my own comfort zone, to push myself to be away from my family for an extended period of time, to learn to be independent. (Donna, pre-immersion report)

In Excerpt 1, Jin had similarly related how she had been looking forward to the ICLI as her “most independent trip” ever.

Besides the wish to develop greater independence, both looked forward to the ICLI programme mainly as an opportunity to achieve a higher level of proficiency in the Thai language by learning and using the language in the TL environment. Donna hoped that, after the programme, she “would be more fluent with the language, at a level that is more natural and closer to a native speaker” (pre-immersion report), while Jin reported that she was “excited about being able to practice the usage of the target language in an environment that would provide more authentic use of the language” and was aiming to acquire “a native-like use of the language” (pre-immersion report).

Both students had gone on trips to Thailand previously, but these were restricted to “the more popular tourist areas in Thailand” such as Bangkok and Phuket, which “felt more faceless” (Donna, post-immersion report). Jin was fully aware that the ICLI would take place in a much different environment from the tourist centres, as Chiang Rai “is situated in the countryside and would present
a different side of Thailand” (pre-immersion report), and was in fact very much looking forward to this. Another reason for both participants’ keen anticipation of the ICLI trip lies in their previous Thailand experiences as tourists, which had left them with very positive impressions of its culture and people. Donna referred explicitly to how she “had personally enjoyed her holidays in Thailand” (pre-immersion report) and cited this as a reason for her decision to enrol in the Chiangrai programme, while Jin described the Thais as welcoming and helpful in encouraging her to use the Thai language during a Bangkok trip shortly before the ICLI trip:

Excerpt 4
As I had just travelled to Bangkok for 6 days […] the Thais have been very receptive to me using their language and are welcoming in that aspect. They encourage the usage of my Thai and are extremely nice to me for being able to do so. I feel that this is very comforting and I am thankful that their culture is open and accepting […]. (Jin, pre-immersion report)

While the participants in Jackson’s (2005) and Schwieter and Kunert’s (2012) studies only developed more open and positive attitudes towards the TL culture in the course of their study abroad programme, the two participants of this study were, in contrast, already positively pre-disposed towards the Thai culture and language even before the programme.

4.2 Development of CCA during the ICLI experience

Jin’s and Donna’s positive pre-departure attitudes towards the Thai culture were apparently further reinforced during their stay in Chiangrai, as they reported finding the local people and their hosts – both the university instructors and student buddies – to be very hospitable, friendly and helpful. Both Jin and Donna found their instructors to be patient and enthusiastic, displaying much passion in teaching them the Thai language and culture, and in taking them on the planned excursions and field trips. Jin described her instructors in the following words:

Excerpt 5
[…] I felt really at home with the teachers who were passionate, kind and attentive to all our questions. Every teacher did their best to make us feel comfortable and were very nice, and I think I would miss the personal touch and dedication that each of them brought to every instructional activity that I believe would be rare to find in Singapore. (Jin, post-immersion report)

They were also very appreciative of the student buddies for taking time to interact with them and showing them the city and local life. To Jin, they were simply “incredibly welcoming” and took them “around on their motorbikes” (weekly report 2), while Donna characterised them as follows:

Excerpt 6
They were very friendly and welcoming, they insisted on giving us lifts to places of interest with their motorbikes and contacted us frequently asking how we were and what we wanted to do. I feel very lucky to have such forthcoming and friendly people as buddies who willingly took time out of their busy schedules to eat with us and take us sightseeing around Chiang Rai. (weekly report 3)

While the two participants were aware that Chiangrai was likely to provide them with a very different experience of Thailand from their earlier visits to Bangkok and other main tourist areas, they were nevertheless a little taken aback by their first impressions of life in Chiangrai and the socio-economic situation, as the following excerpts show:

Excerpt 7
I am aware that there is more than meets the eye here in Thailand. The students here of all ages help out at shops or I would often see kids helping their parents out. They would be dressed in their uniforms and working hard. I think the youth here definitely do not have it as easy as in Singapore. (Jin, weekly report 1)

Excerpt 8
One of the most memorable experiences was from one of the buddies who did not have a touchscreen phone nor data to go with it. This was surprising to me because most students our age are privileged
enough to own a phone and use the Internet at the touch of a finger. However, he was neither emba-
rassed nor seemed affected by this and was one of the friendliest buddies. It was interesting to see that
not all students are dependent on technology and that life here is different from that of Singapore. (Jin,
weekly report 2)

Excerpt 9
One experience that left a lasting impression in me was at the Chiangrai walking street [market] last
night. There were many students, selling things like clothes and accessories in stalls along the road. I
am reminded of how fortunate I am. In Singapore, students mostly are fortunate enough to focus on
studying, and not on financial issues. Students here have to study as well as to bear the added respon-
sibility of helping to bear the financial burdens of the family. (Donna, weekly report 1)

Byram (1997) contends that, in interpreting experiences of a new culture and constructing new
cultural meanings, one tends to relate the new culture to one’s own native culture. Indeed, the
knowledge one has about cultures – including especially one’s own culture – serves as a “resource
for learning new cultures” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). This is evident in Excerpts 7 to 9, as both
Jin and Donna immediately related their observations to their native culture and contrasted the un-
derprivileged socio-economic situation of the Thai students in Chiangrai to that of students in Sin-
gapore. This process of connecting new and existing cultural knowledge, or savoir comprendre in
Byram’s (1997) model, is an important and necessary step in the cultivation of CCA, which he
describes as one’s ability to identify, analyse, interpret and evaluate other cultures based on explicit
and critical criteria. At the same time, such analyses and comparisons will also be reflexive in nature
and result in the critical re-appraisal of one’s own culture. To speak with Phipps and Gonzalez
(2004), “to enter other cultures is to re-enter one’s own” (p. 3). The extent of this ability to decentre
from and to re-construct one’s own cultural norms and practices, and beliefs and values provide an
indication of one’s level of CCA.

Besides the excerpts above, there is much evidence of how the ICLI experiences and interactions
had provided the basis for critical reflection on and a deeper understanding of not only the Thai
culture, but the participants’ native culture as well:

Excerpt 10
I think we can draw many parallels between the attitude of Thai people to the royal family and Singa-
poreans to the current government. In the past when Singapore was still a developing nation, the PAP
[ruling political party in Singapore] garnered much support from the people by walking the ground and
listening to the people, much like King Bhumibol making trips to the villages to see the problems the
people faced for himself. This way of connecting with the people resulted in people having confidence
and faith in the government. However, in recent times, both Singapore and Thailand face problems that
the current government has yet to solve effectively. But the attitude of a large majority of Singaporeans
harbour negative feelings towards the PAP. I find this very interesting as Thai people still hold the King
in very high esteem even though the country is still facing problems. (Donna, weekly report 2)

Excerpt 11
Interacting with them [the buddies] also allowed me to appreciate the differences between being a stu-
dent in a Singapore University and a student in a Thai University. Through interactions with our Thai
friends, I was very impressed that they knew their own culture well and also had a lot of pride for it. I
felt that this is lacking in Singaporean students, as the culture in university here [Singapore] is more
cosmopolitan and western, and people are not as interested in nationalism and culture, myself included.
Interacting with them made me reflect on my own attitudes towards my own culture. (Donna, post-
immersion report)

Excerpt 12
I discovered that Singaporeans are very fortunate to have the ability to rely on our parents for most of
the things we want. The students here don’t dream about studying overseas like most Singaporeans do.
Worse, some of us expect it as mandatory to have an overseas experience. Most of the Thais don’t have
the expenditure to do so and rarely dream about doing so. This has made me reflect on the wealth of
Singaporeans and the things that we tend to take for granted. (Jin, weekly report 1)

It is perhaps not surprising that the Singapore students’ comparisons of both cultures, especially
in the first half of the programme, almost invariably resulted in a more positive appraisal of the Thai
culture than their own culture, given the highly positive attitudes they had towards the Thai culture before the programme and the welcoming reception of their hosts. Indeed, the strong empathy towards their hosts seemed to have led to a growing identification with the Thai culture and people – something which Jin confirmed in the interview:

Excerpt 13
So, at first I used to think that the Thai people were much better than us. [...] they are very friendly and it’s very different from here [Singapore]. And so, I first thought that I didn’t really like Singaporeans and I would want to hang out with Thais more. (Jin, interview)

However, by the end of the second week in Chiangrai, we could observe that Jin’s reports had become more differentiated and displayed more critical perspectives of the Thai culture, resulting from her continued observations of and interactions with the local community:

Excerpt 14
Another memorable experience involves the driving system of the Thais here. As mentioned in my earlier journal report, the majority uses motorcycles for transport. As it is the rainy season here, I have spotted many driving around with an umbrella in one hand and steering their motorbikes with the other! I realised that the driving regulations here are very relaxed, and feel a sense of appreciation for the strict regulations in Singapore which help to ensure the safety of the majority. (Jin, weekly report 3)

Excerpt 15
I have noticed that the culture of Singaporeans is one that respects efficiency and punctuality. This was especially prominent during our last day, when we were rushing to get to the bus terminal. Our buddy, who was sending us off was not worried about reaching late. On the other hand, me and my companions were extremely tensed and worried about missing the bus. Ultimately, the bus departed late and we made it in time as well. In fact, we made it way before the actual departure. This was an eye-opening experience for me since most buses in Singapore would have left on the dot or they would have possibly faced some form of complaint or be disrespected for a lack in efficiency. The notion of meeting deadlines, strict rules and regulations, and being efficient is a part and parcel of being Singaporean in my opinion. I personally felt that I wanted everything to be fast and efficient, while most locals and the culture locally was more relaxed and laidback. Hence, the immersion programme taught me a lot about the culture of efficiency here in Singapore. (Jin, post-immersion report)

In both these excerpts, Jin expressed a greater appreciation for her own native culture for the stricter traffic rules as well as its stronger commitment to efficiency and dependability. The trigger for these comparisons and appraisals were the dangerous behaviours of Thai motorcycle riders and delays in the departure of Thai buses that she had observed. In explaining her views, she made explicit reference to and was being indirectly critical of lapses in the Thai traffic and public transportation systems. Later, in her interview, she was more explicit in her criticism of the Thai public transportation system, as she related another incident when the delayed departure of a bus from an excursion destination threw the students’ schedule into disarray. It would appear that she had detached herself not just from the cultural bias of her own culture, but also from the strong empathy she had for the Thai culture, which had led her to perceive and interpret her ICLI experiences in a mostly positive light. In doing so, she displayed the kind of critical reflection and evaluation based on explicit and conscious reasoning that is indicative of a developing CCA (Byram, 1997, 2008). Her accounts above are lengthy and substantive, and would appear to be examples of the sort of insightful, comparative and analytic reports which Jackson (2009) sees as signs of more profound intercultural development.

4.3 Development of identity during the ICLI experience

How one views and construes oneself is not a fixed and static state; instead it is constantly changing and is influenced by one’s experiences of one’s social contexts as well as the people and situations within this context. As Weinreich (2003) explains, one’s sense of self “is an experiential location in continually changing successive social contexts of arrays of others” (p. 35). One is constantly reflecting on and appraising the situations one finds oneself to be in. This appraisal process
involves three steps: cueing, construal and evaluation (Weinreich, 2003). A new or salient event will cue a person into focusing on the event and its specific context (cueing), leading further to the attribution of particular characteristics to other people acting in this context as well as to the person’s own self and behaviour in relation to these people and the context (construal). The person also evaluates the attributions made to and the construals of others and his/her own self (evaluation), which may then result in changes to his/her identity, that is, how he/she construes himself/herself. As Weinreich (2003) summarises,

A person’s appraisal of a situation, as just described, consists of self-appraisal as well as appraisal of the other agents and agencies. As conceptualised here, one’s appraisal consists of a focused cueing into the context of the prevailing activities, construing the characteristics of the agents and of oneself, and evaluating these attributes by reference to one’s identity aspirations. Self-appraisals may vary rapidly from one situation to another. (p. 43)

The many new and salient experiences in Chiangrai— which the participants described as being “memorable” (Jin, weekly report 2; see Excerpt 8) and as having “left a lasting impression” (Donna, weekly report 1; see Excerpt 9) —had provided the cues for both Donna and Jin for the (re-)construal and (re-)evaluation of the Thais and themselves. As discussed in the previous section, these appraisals resulted initially in an even more positive view of the Thai culture and people, and a more critical view of their own culture and themselves. They were positively surprised and impressed by the contentment the young Thais had found in life as well as their hospitality and generosity despite their far less privileged socio-economic status, as we had seen earlier in Excerpts 8 and 9. At the same time, it would seem that the two Singapore students developed a sense of guilt towards their Thai buddies because of their own affluent background and their lack of appreciation for the socio-economic advantages they enjoy in Singapore. We have seen an example of this in Excerpt 12, in which Jin questioned the entitlement mentality of young Singaporeans, including herself, in expecting their parents to pay for their “overseas experience” and taking their relative wealth for granted. The same sentiment and criticism were also shared expressed by Donna:

Excerpt 16
I found that most of them [Thai students] live alone in apartments or hostels near to school, and not with their family. Also, after school they sometimes go to work to earn money to support themselves. This is different from my original impression of Thai students, one of which is that they lived with their families. It also made me reflect on myself as a student in Singapore; how I’ve been fortunate to able to stay with my family while studying, and how I never had to work and help support the family. In Singapore’s culture, it is easy to take these things for granted. (Donna, weekly report 3)

Another characteristic that Donna and Jin ascribed to their Thai buddies through their appraisal of their ICLI experience was the pride these had in their own country and culture. In their perceptions, this had manifested itself in their interactions with the buddies and in the buddies’ extensive knowledge about the Thai culture. This led them to ask some serious questions about the extent of their own knowledge about and their identification with Singapore and its culture. In Excerpt 11, Donna had described how the interactions with her Thai buddies had made her realise how she and other students in Singapore lack the same degree of national pride (which she calls “nationalism”) and a strong interest in their own culture. Jin felt likewise embarrassed by her realisation of how little she knew about her own culture:

Excerpt 17
One of the biggest benefits for me was the realisation of how much I lacked in the knowledge of Singapore. During one of the instructional activities, we were to share myths/legacies/tales of Singapore. However, I had none to share. I am not even sure about the story of the Merlion, needless to say any other stories about Singapore and her history. […] I definitely learned from this immersion that I need to study more about Singapore as I felt that I lacked a lot as being a representative of Singapore in Chiang Rai. I would definitely like to acquire more “Singaporean Knowledge” before heading out to another country again. (Jin, post-immersion report)
The experience of the Thai culture and the local community in Chiangrai had triggered in both Singapore students a re-appraisal that changed the way they construed themselves and cast doubts on their sense of identity. This was evident especially in Jin’s initial desire to identify with her Thai hosts (see Excerpt 13) and in her confession that she had momentarily wished “to be a citizen of another country [Thailand]” (post-immersion report) in her first two weeks in Chiangrai. Positive identification with the TL culture was also reported by Schwieter and Kunert (2012), although the extent of Jin’s identification with the Thai culture seemed to exceed the mere desire to interact with the TL community observed in Schwieter and Kunert’s study.

By the end of the second week, however, when Jin started to develop a keener sense of CCA, she also gained a more differentiated perspective to the differences that exist between cultures and came to the important realisation that, in appraising and comparing cultures, one must take into account the different contexts and their specific situations:

Excerpt 18
Things are different here and I realised that each and every society has their own problems and their culture changes according to the needs of the people. I no longer think that the Thai culture is more superior to the culture of Singapore, but rather the culture serves the differing needs of the people. (Jin, weekly report 2)

It was at this point of time that Jin apparently reaffirmed her Singaporean identity and no longer wished “to be a citizen of another country”. In fact, she seemed to gain a better appreciation of her ‘Singaporeanness’, which manifested itself in her resolution to deepen her knowledge of her own culture in order to be able to better represent it in future cross-cultural contact, as Excerpt 17 and the following excerpt suggest:

Excerpt 19
I have learnt that Singapore is special in its own way as well. Our mixture of religions has allowed for a different culture to grow, albeit rather messy and mixed up, it makes Singapore Singapore. I cannot confidently say that I am proud to be a Singaporean, I realised that many Singaporeans feel similarly and are not patriotic. I can’t help but ask myself why we aren’t as patriotic, and it saddens me a little to feel that I too wished to be a citizen of another country. I’m not sure what the ingredients are to make one nationalistic, but I do hope that I acquire them as I feel more interested than before to learn more about my home country. (Jin, post-immersion report)

In her post-immersion report, Donna echoed Jin’s desire to be more knowledgeable about the Singapore culture and the need for Singaporeans and herself to develop a greater sense of national pride:

Excerpt 20
A new perspective I gained about my own culture through this immersion experience is maybe how I could be more knowledgeable about Singapore’s culture and heritage as well as the importance of nationalism. Despite differences in different regions, I felt Thai people were all united in their respect and love for the country and the monarchy. It made me reflect on the current situation in Singapore, where fault lines of race, religion, and even financial status are becoming more divisive in today’s society. Many of my friends also feel that nationalistic sentiments are not important in today’s context. However I now feel that it plays an important role to ensure that the country is united and cohesive. (Jin, post-immersion report)

Her words seem to indicate that her experience and perceptions of the Thai people’s unity and national pride had led her to a more critical re-examination of the situation in Singapore, but ultimately also helped reaffirm her identity and the need for her to identify more strongly with her native culture.

Weinreich (2003) postulates that when one forms “new identifications with newly encountered individuals, one broadens one’s value system” (p. 62) by generating and aspiring towards new values, beliefs and orientations to the world. The positive attitudes that Donna and Jin had held towards the Thai culture had predisposed them to a positive and idealistic identification with the TL community in Chiangrai, and had led them to the wish to adopt many of the values they had perceived
desire to have the same measure of national pride and patriotism that they had perceived in the Thais. The following excerpts from Jin’s journal provide further examples of the values she had perceived in the Thai culture and was keen to emulate:

Excerpt 21
I have definitely learned the value of respecting other people and being thankful for everything around me. The local culture here is friendly, welcoming, full of respect and consideration for one another, and one that displays gratitude through gestures and body language. I found myself very attracted to this aspect of the Thai culture, and would like to adapt this as much as possible into my own culture. [...] I am glad to be able to learn a lot from the Thai culture and am really happy to be able to be exposed to their perspective of things and to learn and adapt to them. The buddies here in Thailand are selfless, they put in time, effort and money into ensuring that we are comfortable here. I’ve reflected on myself, and can honestly admit that I could not possibly have been so kind to a buddy in Singapore. The Thai buddies here have definitely shown me the epitome of hospitality, which I have learned from and would like to showcase to others in future. (Jin, weekly report 3)

Jin’s comments in this excerpt express a clear admiration for the respect and kindness the Thais show to both their own community and guests, as well as her aspirations towards adopting and practicing the same values in the future. In fact, during her interview several weeks later, she reiterated the impact of her ICLI experience on her behaviour back in Singapore. She narrated how she was attempting to show more kindness and friendliness, and to smile more, even to cashiers in the supermarkets, although these did not always respond or even acknowledge her smiles and words of thanks. The Singapore students’ ICLI experience and their interactions with the TL community in Chiangrai had thus, particularly in the case of Jin, not just led to the reaffirmation of their identity, but, significantly, also to its reconstruction through the assimilation of new values and thus modifications to their aspirational self. This finding seems to confirm the literature’s view of the dynamic nature of identity and how it is constantly constructed and re-constructed in interaction with one’s social context, including the TL community during an ICLI programme (Bourdieu, 2000; Chan, Kumar Bhatt, Nagami, & Walker, 2015; Hall, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ochs, 1996; Weinreich, 2003)

4.4 LPP and intercultural development

In Sections 4.2 and 4.3, we described how the opportunities afforded by the ICLI programme impacted both participants’ CCA and identity development. In this section, we will discuss how the participants engaged in LPP and how such learning through social interactions and participation contributed to their intercultural development.

There was ample evidence of how the students were afforded opportunities for LPP and learned to participate in the sociocultural practices and activities of local community. Perhaps the most obvious benefits from the ICLI experience were, in the perceptions of the students, the gains they had made in their ability to communicate with Thai native speakers. They felt they had acquired authentic sociolinguistic features and practices that they could not have learned through their classroom instruction back in Singapore, as the following excerpts reveal:

Excerpt 22
The immersion programme has benefited me greatly in helping me become more fluent in spoken Thai. Having the opportunity to be in an environment that forced me to only use Thai made me more aware and attuned to how the language is used in daily life, something that is hard to learn from just studying from textbooks. I picked up things like local slang, or the way locals converse, the way they order food or buy things, things that I found very helpful in understanding the culture of Thailand. (Donna, post-immersion report)

Excerpt 23
One noteworthy change in the knowledge of the day-to-day life of the locals is that language use is incredibly contextual based. The immersion changed the way I interact with locals. One cannot simply apply all theories used in the classroom for language, there were many other strategies used when
which can affect understanding. I realised that learning languages in a classroom was limited and did not expand to the native speaker way of day-to-day life and my knowledge on day-to-day interactions have definitely gained from this immersion programme. (Jin, post-immersion report)

Language use and sociolinguistic norms constitute an integral part of the sociocultural practices of a community. As both Donna and Jin recognised, these are important not only in enabling them to carry out everyday interactions and activities in the TL community, but also to help them understand and learn the culture. The following excerpt provides a more specific example of this. In it, Jin narrates how she observed the use of kinship terms in Thai through her interactions with the locals and then started to emulate this practice:

Excerpt 24
I liked to use it [kinship terms]. I thought that ... because at first, when they talked to me using the kinship terms, I didn’t use it, but I understand what they were saying, but over time they keep using it, right? Then I started using them as well. I felt that it made us a bit closer and I liked to use it more, because it sounds more natural and it also sounds nicer when you use it. Yeah, so yeah, I felt okay using it, I liked it. (Jin, interview)

Both Jin and Donna also gathered experiences of Thai sociocultural practices beyond its sociolinguistic norms, as the following two excerpts suggest:

Excerpt 25
What other Thai etiquette that I picked up? [...] But, yeah, I think I definitely tried to be more Thai here, I mean there are certain aspects of their lives that I really like. They made sure that they always thank people for something. There was one time when we were ... there was a senior who sent us somewhere ... and my Thai buddies ... and because that guy was more senior than them, because we forgot to say thanks, so they quickly nudged us to ask us to show our gratitude. So, I think I definitely am more aware when to thank people more and to show ... express my gratitude more, ’cause I think they take it quite seriously there! (Jin, interview)

Excerpt 26
[...] no one really walks [in Chiangrai]. They ride their motorbikes there. Then ... even though it is a very short distance ... like a five to ten minute walk anywhere, they will use their motorbikes. [...] for example, they wanted to bring us to the night market ... then the night market, for example, is just [...] technically ten, fifteen minute slow walk, but then when we said we wanted to walk, they were ... like ... “huh, why?” [...] They said, “No, no, we’ll come and fetch you [with our motorbikes]. You wait here.” Then they really took turns to fetch us to the place. (Donna, interview)

In Excerpt 25, Jin learned the importance of showing respect and gratitude while interacting in the Thai community, especially when talking to someone more senior, while in Excerpt 26, Donna related how they experienced at first hand, at the insistence of their buddies, the significance of the motorcycle as a means of transport in the Chiangrai community. At the same time, both excerpts also point towards the key role of the buddy interactions in providing not just out-of-class language practice, but also valuable insights into and first-hand experiences of the Thai culture and community life. Indeed, it would seem that the buddies served as expert mediators that scaffolded the ICLI participants’ LPP and culture learning. Perhaps this is best summarised by Donna who described the buddy interactions as “enriching”: “Having peers around was very enriching as they could explain things such as the significance of certain landmarks or cultural practices to us.” (post-immersion report) The buddy contact was apparently an important element of the ICLI programme that supported and enabled their LPP in the TL community, and thus provided the impetus for the critical reflections that promoted their CCA development.

While previous studies did not apply SLT and its notion of LPP in the TL community to explain and ground the intercultural development that takes place during short-term study abroad, some had similarly pointed to the importance of interactions with local communities in fostering participants’ intercultural skills and competence, such as the studies by Heinzmann et al. (2016), Jackson (2006), and Schwieter and Kunert (2012). In addition, another study generated from the same overall project as the current study, focusing on short-term ICLI in South Korea, had also produced evidence that
underline the key contributions of LPP to the culture learning and intercultural development of ICLI participants (see Chan & Chi, 2017).

The formal classroom instruction also contributed to the participants’ understanding of the TL community and its practices, and prepared them for interactions with the TL community. As mentioned in Section 3.1, the language instruction adopted a mainly communicative and task-based approach, and was aimed at building the pragmatic competence necessary for the participants’ interactions with and thus LPP in the TL community. The inspection of the course curriculum shows most of the topics to be pragmatically oriented. For example, one lesson unit introduces various common modes of transportation in Chiangrai and its surroundings (i.e. buses, taxis and motorcycle taxis). This was taught prior to and in conjunction with the students’ excursions to places of interest in and around the city. They were given tasks in class to acquire and practise linguistic means to discuss and plan trips, read bus schedules, and communicate with service personnel and taxi drivers (e.g. to ask for information and fares, and buy tickets), and so forth. Another lesson unit focused on grocery shopping and helped students learn how to talk and ask about food items, their quality and freshness, as well as to negotiate prices and make payment. This unit was complemented by an actual visit to a local market where they shopped for ingredients for a cooking session at the university.

In addition, the culture-focused classes and culture experience sessions apparently also had a considerable impact on the participants’ culture learning, as evidenced by the journal and interview data. In the following excerpt, Jin describes how these activities had helped her appreciate the Thai culture beyond its more overt features and practices:

Excerpt 27
Additionally, we learnt about the types of games that Thai children make from nature and play with, another aspect of the Thai lifestyle I had not learnt. All the information learnt in the instructional activities definitely changed the way I looked at many things that are commonly found in Thailand. Things as simple as the designs on lanterns, the Buddha amulets, and food, all seem more detailed to me and I am better able to appreciate and understand it. (Jin, post-immersion report)

In the next excerpt, Jin narrates a more specific example of how the classes benefited her in understanding and learning the Thai practice of Wai, that is, putting one’s hands together when greeting seniors and acquaintances:

Excerpt 28
[…] last time in class, we learnt how to do the greetings and everything right, but then it’s not as easy as putting your hands together and that’s it. There’s like different levels […] for example, if it’s just your friend, you have to put here; if it’s your teacher, then you have to come down like this; and if it’s the monk or the king, you have to come all the way down and your head has to be lower than theirs, when you greet them. So, we didn’t take it very seriously [in class in Singapore] … like … even when the teacher was explaining, we didn’t know why it was so important. But it was very serious over there [in Chiangrai], like when the students see the teacher, they will immediately [do the] Wai […] (Jin, interview)

In this manner, the culture-focused class had also initiated the participants into the finer nuances of interactions in the TL community, where the Wai is an important and necessary daily practice.

Furthermore, the insights they gained through the culture-focused classes provided the trigger for some of the critical reflections and appraisals we had seen in Sections 4.2 and 4.3. For instance, Donna’s comparison of the Thai and Singapore people’s attitudes towards the Thai monarchy and Singapore’s ruling party, respectively, was cued in part by the lesson they had attended on the role of the monarchy in Thailand. Through their instruction on aspects of the Thai culture and as members of the local community, the ICLI teachers had acted as pedagogical mediators of the participants’ culture learning and intercultural development.
4.5 Summary

The findings of this study suggest that short-term ICLI can have a positive impact on FL learners’ intercultural development. When learners are provided with appropriate and sufficient opportunities for LPP, they can experience and gain deeper insights into the TL culture and its sociocultural practices. The critical reflection on these insights leads, in turn, to the negotiation and (co-)construction of new cultural meanings in and with the TL community, as well as the critical re-appraisal of their own native culture and identities.

In response to Research Question 1, the data from the journals, interviews, activity observations and document inspection reveal that the ICLI programme in Chiangrai provided the Thai language learners from Singapore with opportunities for LPP. First, the language instruction sought to develop the learners’ pragmalinguistic ability and scaffolded their interactions with the local community. Second, the culture-focused instruction informed them about the Thai culture beyond the superficial (e.g. about the significance of Buddhism and the Thai monarchy for the Thai society). It also allowed them to gain first-hand experience of Thai cultural practices (e.g. making Thai lanterns and performing the *Wai*). Third and perhaps most importantly, the social interactions with the TL community, especially with the student buddies, afforded them opportunities for scaffolded participation in many of its sociocultural practices and activities, as detailed above.

With regard to Research Question 2, the ICLI experience had a positive impact on the CCA and identity development of the Thai language learners. There is ample evidence from the students’ journals and interviews that, prompted by their experiences and observations, they engaged in critical reflection and displayed the ability to identify, analyse, interpret and evaluate one’s own and the TL culture, which is indicative of a developing CCA. The re-appraisal of their own culture vis-à-vis the TL culture triggered initially new and more critical perspectives to their own selves and their fellow Singaporean youth. Although the learners eventually came to better appreciate and to reaffirm their own identities, their strong and positive identification with the Thai culture also prompted the reconstruction of their value systems with the adoption of certain Thai traits and practices which they found admirable and desirable.

As regards Research Question 3, the findings confirm the important role of the LPP access afforded by the ICLI programme in Chiangrai. In their journals and interviews, the students had related many “lasting” impressions and “memorable” experiences that had allowed them to observe and comprehend the Thai culture beyond the superficial perspectives of a tourist. There is also much evidence that the reflective and appraisal processes that helped foster their CCA and identity development were frequently precipitated by their observations of the TL cultural practices and their social interactions with the TL community, especially the student buddies.

5 Conclusion

This study investigated the effect of a short-term ICLI programme in Chiangrai on the CCA and identity development of Singapore university learners of Thai as a foreign language. It was found that the Chiangrai programme offered the learners opportunities to explore the TL culture and to participate meaningfully in LPP in the TL community. The two subjects of this study, Donna and Jin, were both positively pre-disposed towards and highly motivated for the ICLI programme because of their previous travelling experiences in Thailand. These attitudes were further reinforced by the positive reception and hospitality that awaited them in Chiangrai, causing them to develop strong, positive identification with the local culture and to reflect critically on their own culture and identity. One of the two students, Jin, even harboured the wish, albeit only momentarily, to be a Thai rather than a Singapore citizen. With deeper insights into the TL culture from the language and culture-focused instruction, their observations and interactions with the local community, they eventually learned to appraise both the TL and their own culture in a more objective and reasoned manner, gaining more balanced and differentiated perspectives to both, which is indicative of a developing CCA. While both came to appreciate their own culture better and to reaffirm their own identity
in the course of the ICLI, they had discovered desirable traits and practices in the Thai culture that they aspired to and would like to adopt as extensions to their own value systems and identities. The findings seem to suggest that SLT and the notion of LPP, as proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991), can explain the culture learning and intercultural development that takes place during ICLI. In the two cases reported in this article, the students’ ICLI experiences and especially the opportunities to interact with and to partake in the TL community as legitimate peripheral participants had contributed significantly to their CCA and identity development.

Arising from these findings, we recommend that ICLI programmes be designed to maximise access to LPP and to prepare participants both before and during ICLI for LPP. Such preparations should include measures to prepare participants pragmalinguistically and to enhance their motivation to interact with and participate in the TL community. To this end, language instruction preceding and during ICLI should be communicatively and pragmatically oriented. In addition, it should also be aimed at cultivating positive and open attitudes towards the TL culture (savoir être), and the skills and strategies for discovering and interpreting new cultural experiences (savoir apprendre/faire and savoir comprendre). While there may be restrictions to the provision of homestay in a socio-economically less privileged site such as Chiangrai, there are nonetheless other means to enhance students’ opportunities for social interactions and LPP. Further to the buddy programme, which was of key importance to the ICLI programme reported in this article, future programmes can include project tasks that promote students’ interactions with the local community, or guide them to gather and critically reflect on new cultural information. Post-immersion sessions to discuss, share and evaluate participants’ experiences and insights into the TL culture can further enhance their intercultural development.

Future research can seek to further investigate the contributions of ICLI and LPP in the TL community to FL learners’ CCA and identity development. Perhaps, further theories of sociocultural learning and models of identity development, beyond Weinreich’s (2003) IDS model, may be drawn upon to ground and explain intercultural and identity development during study abroad and in-country immersions. More participants from a variety of FL programmes can be invited to participate in larger-scale studies. Given the key role of interactions with members of the TL community who mediate learners’ culture learning and intercultural development, it would be opportune to pay more attention to the perspectives of these mediators, including instructors, student buddies and homestay hosts. The design of future studies can, for instance, make provisions to collect data through interviews with the mediators, or observations and recordings of interactions between learners and mediators not just in the classroom, but also in more casual settings outside of the classroom.

References


