

The Problems of Thai AFS Exchange Students in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The Purpose of this research is to study the problems of Thai AFS exchange students that took part in a program for a year in Japan, the cause of the problems, and the role of the host family, host school and AFS staffs in helping students when they had a problem. This research is conducted by a qualitative method, an in- depth interviews. The samples consist of 46 respondents: 40 Thai participants in the AFS program, 3 AFS staff member and 3 host families that hosted the Thai AFS exchange students in the past. This research divided the results into 3 groups: problems with the host family, problems with the host school and problems with the AFS local chapter and staff. The results of the in-depth interviews show that the Thai AFS exchange students experienced the following problems;

1. Problems with the host family: it was found that Japanese people expected the students to behaving in the same manner as them, and the students did not know the host culture.
2. Problems with the host school: students had a problem because they came from a different culture and had difference viewpoints, and the Japanese schools are stricter than those in other countries.
3. Problems with the AFS local chapter and staff: some local chapters had difficulties in finding a permanent host family.

Keywords: *Thai AFS exchange students, Host family, Host school, Host culture*

I. INTRODUCTION

Currently, many students prefer to study in a foreign country, both in high school and university, and in the short term and long term. The AFS Intercultural Programs, one of many programs that high school students are interested participating in, with members country from around the world, offer students the chance to gain language and cultural knowledge, and also to broaden their viewpoints by living in environments that are different in terms of language, tradition, culture, and life style. These differences, however, may cause problems between the two nations for example regarding thought, values, and culture. If these problems occur and continue, they can create misunderstanding; this is perhaps especially true for a country such as Japan, where the lifestyle is very different and social practice are carried out rigorously. Additionally, Japan is a homogenous culture where group identity is very important. Thailand's society, although homogenous, is more flexible than that in Japan and this can make it difficult for the Thai students studying in Japan to adapt.

II. OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

1. To explore the problems that occur among Thai AFS exchange students while living in Japan.

2. To determine the causes of the problems among Thai AFS exchange students in Japan.

3. To study the role of the host family, host school, and AFS local chapter.

III. QUESTION OF THE STUDY

Why do problems occur with Thai AFS exchange students in Japan?

IV. HYPOTHESES

1. Cultural differences are the cause of the problems among Thai AFS exchange students.
2. The host family, host school, and AFS local chapter help the students solve their problems.

V. METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this study is to study problems among Thai AFS exchange students while living in Japan for a year. The methodology of this research was a documentary review and interviews with key persons. First, the researcher conducted documentary review and

analysis the secondary data, including books and journal articles related to this study. Second, interviews were conducted with related persons including;

- (1) The director of AFS Tokyo regional office
- (2) The president of AFS Bisan Chapter (Hiroshima)
- (3) The staff of AFS Bisan Chapter (Hiroshima)
- (4) 3 host families that hosted Thai AFS exchange students
- (5) 40 returnees of this program

VI. LITERATURE REVIEW

6.1 Culture shock

When it comes to visiting a new society, many students experience culture shock due to differences in the society and the culture. These visitors have to learn how the people in that society behave. This culture shock occurs to students, scholars and business persons that have to go abroad, and culture shock can be considered to include, anxiety about how to behave in the new social environment. (Kalvero Oberg, 1960) Basic manners of life such as table manners, manners of transactions with others, including correct communication such as the type of language used in different situations and person's position, all of this can be included in the phenomenon of culture shock. Culture shock has psychological repercussions those experiencing it, for example in feeling lonely, anxious, angry, and critical of the host culture. Some of these individuals can adapt to the host culture within 3-4 months, while others cannot. If they cannot, then they are likely to leave the country their planned term is ended.

Micheal Winkelman (2010) has proposed four phases regarding culture shock as follows:

- (1) The Honeymoon Phase: This step is the exciting phase, where the visitor is amused and optimistic about the new culture. The new culture is considered new and exciting.
- (2) The Crisis Phase: This step may occur immediately when the students arrive or later within 2-3 weeks or after one month, when problems may begin to be seen and the person has "bad" experiences with the host culture. These cultural differences can disturb the mentality of the visitor, causing feelings of loss and stress, leading to the person becoming angry and feeling that the host country is an "opponent."
- (3) The Adjustment and Reorientation Phase: In this phase, the person is perceived to adjust himself/herself to the new environment of the culture and develop his/her skill to solve problems of a different culture and adapt to it.
- (4) The Adaptation, Resolution or Acculturation Phase: In this last phase each person can develop

solutions to the problems and can manage the new culture. This adaptation is a result of learning about the new culture and being able to identify without the host and home culture.

Culture shock can be seen from the point of view of the stress that one experiences from the effort to adapt, feeling of loss when being separated from family and friends, and being generally confused about the new culture. The experience of culture shock occurs differently with different people, according to their prior experience with the culture, for example, their relative level in both the home and host culture, and the amount of help that they receive while in the country they are visiting.

6.2 The problems of the high school exchange students in Japan

The exchange students that study in Japan face relationship problems with others; that is, at the beginning the exchange students cannot speak Japanese and are more concerned about trying to speak English with the teacher or other exchange students. (Tada, 1995) Besides, language problems, the exchange students sometimes feel that Japanese students are difficult to access and when they speak in English, the Japanese students will go away from them. (Japan Association of International Educational Exchange Organizations for High School Students, 2004) This leads to discouragement regarding their ability to make friends in the class. In addition, Japanese students always seem to be busy, learning in school and being tutored outside the classroom, and this adds to the difficulty of making friends for the exchange students.

Moreover, many problems can occur with the host family, such as the frequency of using the telephone or internet. Another element that can cause a delay in the exchange students' adaptation to the new culture is the frequency with which their family back home contacts them in the host country. Problems can also stem from the fact that the exchange students find themselves living in an environment without the family life they are accustomed to and problems with the host family's children. (Tada, 1995)

VII. OVERVIEW OF AFS INTERCULTURAL PROGRAMS

AFS was founded in 1914 during World War I (The AFS Story, 1997, p. 17) by a person transporting wounded soldiers, and it became known as the American Field Service (AFS). Now AFS Intercultural Programs have become an organization that sends students on exchanges to other cultures with more than 50 partner countries around the world. It is a non-profit organization and is supported by volunteers.

AFS Japan consists of 3 regional offices and 70 local chapters around the country. The volunteers and staff

lend support to exchange students for intercultural learning and living in another culture as a new-comer.

7.1 AFS exchange students' life

During their stay in Japan, the exchange students live with the *host family*, attending the *host school* and communicate within local community to experience the new culture directly in an effort to understand the people in the new environment.

(1) *Host family*: the exchange students are considered new members of their Japanese family and they do many activities together for cultural understanding.

(2) *Host school*: the exchange students study in a Japanese high school. It is a chance to share ideas, viewpoints, and knowledge with fellow students.

(3) *Local chapter*: the local chapter consist of group of volunteers in the area where the exchange students are staying. The staff of the local chapter support the exchange students, the host family, and host school provide the exchange students with information and guidance. Also activities for the exchange students are managed all year long, such as orientation camps, summer camps, or trips to nearby prefectures.

Every exchange student will have an *LP* (Liaison Person), a person that helps the exchange students, the host family, and host school in resolving any problems that arises.

7.2 AFS support system

(1) *24-hour emergency preparedness*: when emergencies happen, the exchange students or host family can contact AFS staff or volunteers at anytime. There are volunteers on call 24 hours a day.

(2) *Arrangement of the staff*: as mentioned above, the exchange students will have an LP to help them in solving problems.

(3) *Support for cultural learning*: to support the exchange students in leaning about the new culture, AFS provides various orientations (AFS Intercultural Programs, Japan, 2011) that focus on basic information about living in Japan as follows:

- Arrival orientation
- Local orientation: organized by the local chapter one month after the student's arrival.
- Pre-return orientation

(4) *Support for the host family*: the host family must attend the orientation before the exchange students arrive in Japan. AFS also makes periodical calls 「AFS 通信」 to the host family to inform them about how to take care of the exchange students. (<http://www.afs.or.jp/about-afs/support/>)

VIII. PROBLEMS OF THAI AFS EXCHANGE STUDENTS IN JAPAN

The following are the results of the interviews, divided into 3 groups:

8.1 Problems with the host family

Some host families always keeps an eye on the exchange students. This can make the exchange students feel uncomfortable. However, some families are always busy or do not have much time to spend with the students, and this in turn can make the students fell lonely and not a part of the family.

Using the telephone call or internet can cause problems between the host family and the exchange students. It may seem like a small matter but for Japanese people, who have a reputation for watching time closely, it can be a source of bad felling if the exchange student spends too much time on phone or on the internet with his or her family.

Case Study:

"One day I called my mother in Thailand for about a half an hour, and my host mother got angry and talked about the expense even though I asked for permission before calling."

In addition, Japanese people are very polite and expect the exchange students to behave in the same manner as them.

From the interviews with related persons, it was found that some of the problems that arise between the exchange students and host family may come from matching the host family and students on paper; the written application of both the exchange students and host family may not represent the fact and may cause problems later.

8.2 Problems with the host school

Japanese high schools are very strict and tend to have more rules than in other countries. This can be surprise for the exchange students. Moreover, some students indicated that they could not make friends in their host school. Because the Japanese students are very busy with their study both in school and tutorial. Some of the exchange students have expressed their opinion that the Japanese students are very shy and are difficult to get close to.

Case study:

"I always tried to talk to my classmates but they did not respond. I do not know why they do not talk to me."

Regarding the curriculum, some host schools do not prepare courses that are suitable for the exchange students. For example, in Thailand the students take English courses, but when they study in the host school they have to take science-mathematics courses and they are very difficult to follow.

8.3 Problems with the AFS local chapter and staff

Normally the exchange students live with a host family but in some cases the exchange students may have more than one host family. From the interviews, the researcher found that some students have had 7 host families in a year. Because the staff had trouble finding a permanent host family.

IX. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Thai AFS exchange students face many problems while they are living in Japan. Experiencing another culture as a new comer, the differences between one's own culture and the host culture sometimes make it difficult for the exchange students to adapt to the new culture. The cause of these problems may be from misunderstanding the host culture, being unprepared, and lack of language ability and cultural knowledge.

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