BOOSTING FOREIGN-LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION CONFIDENCE THROUGH A SHORT-TERM ICT-BASED INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a short-term Information and Communications Technology (ICT)-based international exchange program co-organized by Hokkaido Information University (HIU), Japan, and Rajamangala University of Technology Thanyaburi (RMUTT), Thailand. Participants in this program generally are non-fluent speakers with lower levels of proficiency. The program provides a context and goal that necessitate the use of English as a common language, or *lingua franca*, between Thai and Japanese students and instructors. The main part of the program consists of two workshops: one at HIU and one at RMUTT. Throughout the workshops, students work in teams of four to produce web pages, short films and computer programs, all in English and using English as their common language. At the end of the workshops, students present their work in groups to peers and teachers in all-English presentations. In order to assess how participation in the program affects students' attitudes toward using English and interacting with an international community, a 24-item survey was designed, adapted from previous surveys on communication apprehension (CA) and willingness to communicate (WTC). The survey was given to all participating Japanese students before and after the workshops. For comparison, it was also given to a group of Japanese students not involved in the HIU-RMUTT program. Preliminary statistical treatment of student response data suggests significant differences in CA and WTC among program participants compared to non-participants, with more moderate differences between a pre-program survey and a post-program survey. Considerations for future research are offered at the end.

KEYWORDS

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International collaboration, ICT, communication skills, learning outcomes, design implement experiences, integrated learning experiences, active learning, Standards 2, 5, 7, 8.

SHORT-TERM STUDY-ABROAD PROGRAMS: ARE THEY WORTH IT?

University students who want to go overseas are often limited by time and money. Traditional programs that run for a semester or a year are too expensive for many students. Further, in longer-term programs, students formally enroll in and attend classes at an overseas university. This requires a foreign language proficiency level that many students do not readily possess.

On the other hand, the experience of visiting a foreign country, even for a short period, is valuable. In order to bolster an international-mindedness of Japanese university students, Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), in tandem with the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), a support entity, are working to promote and fund shorter-term overseas programs, which are more accessible to a larger number of students. In Japan, the number of short-term study-abroad programs at universities has been increasing. According to McCrostie (2017), 60 percent of university students who study abroad do so on programs that last less than one month.

There is abundant literature supporting the linguistic benefits of study abroad with respect to gains in oral proficiency and communicative competence (DiSilvio, Diao, & Donovan, 2016). Davidson (2010) points out that along with an increase in students participating on short-term programs, there has been an accompanying uptick in the amount of research devoted to analysing language gains according to a variety of factors. However, the prevailing concern seems to be with how much students gain in terms of foreign language (L2) proficiency or fluency. The assumption is that "more is better," which Dwyer (2004) and Dwyer and Peters (2004) argue is true. From this, however, it is easy to draw the inverse conclusion that "less is not worth it." This assumption helps fuel institutional resistance to provide more funding support for short-term overseas programs (Collins & Davidson, 2002).

Llanes and Muñoz (2009:354) observed that "Studies about language gains in a stay abroad context have frequently analysed subjects who spend three or more months abroad, the assumption being that shorter periods may not produce any significant change in subjects' second language proficiency," but reported significant gains in listening comprehension, oral fluency and accuracy among participants on 3-4 week immersion programs. As the number of students participating in short-term programs increases, so will the literature that evaluates them, and similarly, positive results will likely emerge.

At the same time, it will be helpful to measure not only changes in linguistic proficiency but in cultural proficiency as well. With respect to short-term programs that offer English language experience, there has been a shift from English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) environments, (for example Japanese studying short-term in the United States) toward English-as-a-Lingua-Franca (ELF), environments (for example Japanese studying short-term in Thailand). Because of their cost-effectiveness, the number of these ELF-environment programs is expected to rise. Therefore, research that examines the benefits of these short-term programs to participants and stakeholders, both in terms of linguistic ability as well as intercultural awareness, will be helpful in advocating for their continued financial support by stakeholding institutions.

Further research into the benefits of short-term exchange programs will also contribute to the ability of institutions to grant credit to participating international students. Efforts to coordinate university credits internationally are already underway (see e.g. European Commission website (2019): European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS); ASEAN

University Network website (2019): ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS). If institutions can officially grant credits to international students on short-term exchange programs, their appeal is increased. Such research will, therefore, be instrumental in promoting the adoption of a thirteenth CDIO standard, Internationalization & Mobility (Campbell & Beck, 2010; Malmqvist, Edström, & Hugo, 2017). This proposed Standard 13 is a nod toward programs and organizational commitment that expose students to foreign cultures and promotes the transportability, transferability, and transparent recognition of credits, curricula, qualifications, and joint awards across international borders. The HIU-RMUTT International Collaboration program is, we believe, a step in the direction of fostering global-mindedness, intercultural appreciation and international mobility.

HIU-RMUTT PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Conceived in 2011, the short-term international collaboration program between HIU and RMUTT seeks to foster the development of four things:

1. C-D-I project-based learning using ICT skills;
2. English ability and confidence;
3. Intercultural understanding; and
4. International friendship

The program has four stages (see flow chart in Appendix B, and Anada et al., 2018, for more details):

Stage 1: Selection. At each university, between January and June, hopeful participants—working individually or in teams—create and submit web pages, short films, and computer applications for entry into the international contest. Projects are created in their native language, although some guidance is given to the effect that successful entrants will include work that is easily transferable to another language—for example, work that keeps

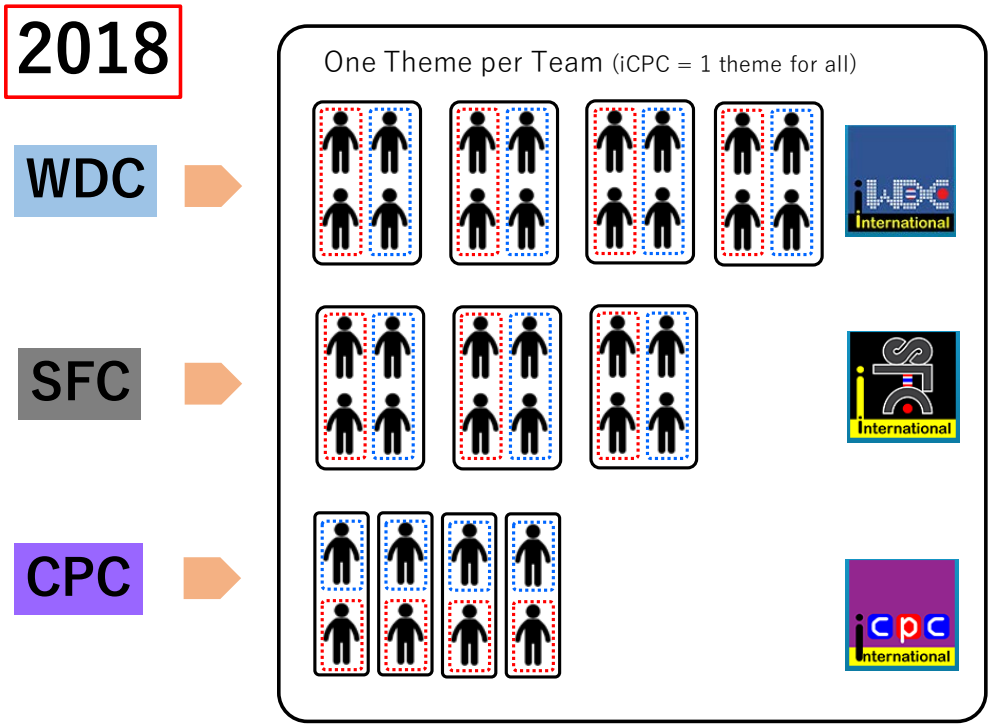


Figure 1. 2018 Team structure (red = Japanese students, blue = Thai students)

difficult language to a minimum, and is internationally themed. The best of these submissions are chosen by participating faculty at each institution. Students who are financially and academically (in principle, applicants must have a GPA of 3.0 or better) able to participate are chosen from the winning entrants. Currently, a total of 18 students from each university is chosen annually: 8 Web Design students; 6 Short Film Students, and 4 Computer Programming students (see Figure 1).

Stage 2: Competition. Students chosen to participate in the program are informed. Through a series of pre-program (workshops 1 & 2) training classes, students convert their work from native Japanese or Thai into English. These projects are later evaluated by participating faculty and awarded prizes at the end of the next Stage 3 (Collaboration). During this phase, students are also prepared for their overseas experience, which includes presenting proposals to their international peers for new collaborative projects that they will construct and implement in Stage 3 (Collaboration).

Stage 3: Collaboration. Students visit each other's countries and institutions over a course of two active-learning workshops. Each workshop lasts about eight days. At the beginning of this stage, they present proposals for new Web pages, short films, and computer applications to be constructed during the two workshops. Groups of four, each with two Japanese and two Thai students, are chosen. At the end of the workshops, groups give short presentations (in English) of the final products of their collaboration to the entire body of students and faculty. In implementing their product, the students develop their skills in Web programming, digital film editing, C language, and so on. It should be noted that these final products are evaluated and given grades for credit purposes; there is not enough time at the end of the program for evaluation and preparation of awards. The evaluation process for projects submitted for the previous Stage 2 (Competition) occurs during Stage three, and the award ceremony for these Stage 2 entries is given at the end of Stage 3 (Collaboration).

Stage 4: Sharing. In their native languages, participants write reports and give short presentations at their local institutions about their projects and about their experience on the program. This sharing is aimed at a broader audience of local faculty and prospective student participants in the following year. This program is a core course for the integrated curriculum of communication in English (CDIO Syllabus 3.3.1) at each institution.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE CDIO INITIATIVE

With regard to the CDIO initiative, we believe this program provides an excellent example of an education-based setting rather than an engineering-based one. Overall the program involves conceiving, designing, and implementing ICT-based projects, primarily in a foreign language. Students present their work and proposals for new projects to an audience of participants [CDIO Syllabus 3.3.1], take part in pre-program lectures and preparation sessions that help students systematically design their projects [CDIO Syllabus 4.3.4], and communicate with each other cooperatively over distance [CDIO Syllabus 3.1, 3.2], employing SNSs, online translation, and other modern technology. At the end of the workshops (Stage 3: Collaboration), groups of students make final presentations in English to a larger audience of peers and faculty, using a variety of multimedia, in order to showcase their projects and the skills they acquired through producing them [CDIO Syllabus 3.2.4, 3.2.5, 3.2.6, 3.3.1].

Furthermore, there is a distinct focus on design-implement experiences (Standard 5) through a collaborative teamwork approach, which is driven through active learning strategies (Standard 8). Learning outcomes (Standard 2) are central to the realization of the model and are aligned with the purpose of the program and set at appropriate levels. The program is constructed around learning outcomes and activities that integrate personal skills with disciplinary knowledge (Standard 7), in this case, actualized by teamwork carried out in a non-native language, and by utilizing and developing acquired knowledge and skills.

Much of the program is based upon the belief that the rights and responsibility to learn should be returned to the students and guided, rather than directed and controlled by, the teachers. While the focus of the program is not purely on engineering education per se, it embraces the vision of CDIO as proposed at Delft in October 2018, and sees the target of CDIO "is a worldwide collaboration to deliver re-engineered education (Leong, 2019)." Teachers need to stimulate students' initiative, which is done by ensuring that teaching, and the curriculum is learner-centered. This is actualized through the project-based learning approach, capitalizing on cognitive learning, interdisciplinary learning and collective ownership. Furthermore, the program incorporates the proposed new Standard 13: Internationalization & Mobility (Malmqvist, Edström & Hugo, 2017), which helps students develop requisite skills in a true global environment.

The learning objectives of the program are the knowledge, skill, and attitude targets that come from making the students' learning cooperative and collaborative. The learning outcomes focus on determining to what extent the student has acquired the knowledge, skills and appropriate mindset.

ROLES OF ENGLISH IN THE HIU-RMUTT PROGRAM

There are three principal roles of English as a lingua franca on the HIU-RMUTT program. English is used for:

(1) general communication among students and faculty;
(2) contents of student projects: (a) Web pages, (b) short films, and (c) computer applications; and
(3) short presentations by students to peers and instructors at the beginning and end of the workshops (Stage 3: Collaboration).

Rian (2016) points out that problems with English arise as a result of low proficiency levels among students from both universities. This tends to result in an over-reliance on machine translation (online translation sites) for project contents, as well as presentation delivery (i.e., the mechanical delivery of presentations in the form of reading scripts that are, in worst cases, a verbatim copy-paste regurgitation of machine-translated output). Some of these problems can be ameliorated through training during the pre-program workshops that students attend before working with each other in person (Stage 1: Selection), as well as during the in-person workshops (Stage 3: Collaboration).

SURVEY: COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION (CA) & WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE (WTC)

Since the beginning of the program, the faculty felt it was essential to monitor outcomes and to identify potential benefits and areas needing improvement. Stage 3 (Collaboration) is the most interactive-intensive part of the program, where students and faculty are interacting with each other daily in workshops under tight deadlines. However, because this stage lasts for a period of less than three weeks, and because there are no formal English language classes as part of the program, it was thought that, as some of the literature suggests (Llanes & Muñoz, 2009), linguistic skills cannot be expected to improve measurably.

As an alternative, faculty wanted to know if, as a result of participating in the program, students' attitudes toward communicating in English and toward interacting with an international community were improved. Most participants are lower-level proficiency and have little experience communicating in English, and are therefore assumed to harbour an apprehension to communicating. In 2014 and 2015 a 7-item ad-hoc in-house questionnaire was constructed

and given to students before and after they participated. Results showed increases for most items. However, because it was not created with reference to any previous research on communication apprehension, it suffered from several design flaws that compromised the validity of the results.

Based on the original 7 items, a new survey was constructed based on surveys on communication apprehension (CA) by McCroskey (1997), and subsequent surveys by Yashima (2009) with respect to willingness to communicate (WTC). A total of 24 Likert-style items were adapted from these surveys. Also adapted were four categories, or constructs, with six items each. These constructs are:

(1) ***Intergroup approach/avoidance tendency***, or the degree to which people seek to approach interacting with an international community;
(2) ***Interest in international vocation or activities***, or the degree of interest in working or volunteering overseas or for overseas-related activities;
(3) ***Communication Apprehension—Interpersonal conversation context***, or the degree of apprehension one has toward conversing with others in a foreign language.
(4) ***Communication Apprehension—Presentation context***, or the degree of apprehension one has toward making a presentation in a foreign language.

The entire 2017-2018 survey appears in Appendix A.

We wanted to know how participation in the program affected each of these constructs, specifically, (1) whether responses for participants and non-participants were different, as well as (2) whether there were differences in responses among participants before the program and after the program. The survey was given to 136 non-participating students in 2017, as well as to all 18 participating Japanese students in 2017 and 2018, once before and once after the program. The questionnaire was given to Thai students once before and once after as well. Rian (2018) provides a broader discussion about the construction of the newer survey as well as raw data. However, a statistical treatment of this data had not been attempted until now. Results of a statistical application are discussed below.

First, we ran Cronbach's Alpha for all responses (n=172) to evaluate whether the six items in each of the four categories are a good fit for each category. Cronbach's Alpha yielded a near-average of 0.8 over the four categories. This suggests all items solicit reliable responses for each category.

Second, we ran two tests to see whether there was statistically significant positive difference in item responses between (1) non-participants and participants, and (2) participants before and after the program.

For non-participant versus participant responses (2017), we assumed the null hypothesis: "The mean of the distribution of responses by program participants is greater than the one of non-participating students," and then carried out the following tests:

(1) one-sided, non-pairwise T-test (reasonable if responses to items follow a normal distribution pattern); and
(2) one-sided, non-pairwise Wilcoxon signed-rank test (reasonable if responses do not follow a normal distribution pattern).

Histograms of responses for each item showed the possibility that it does not necessarily follow a normal distribution. For simplicity, we have shown the number of statistically significant items for each category in Table 1. The numbers indicated by an asterisk in each cell of Table 1 are predominant positive change (three or more of six maximum) in comparison with others.

Table 1. Non-participant group vs 2017 pre-program and 2017 post-program group (Japanese)

Category	Non-participant group (n=136) versus…			
	2017 pre-program (n=18), number of items with significant positive change (max. 6)		2017 post-program (n=18) number of items with significant positive change (max. 6)	
	Non-pairwise T	Non-pairwise Wilcoxon	Non-pairwise T	Non-pairwise Wilcoxon
(WTC) Intergroup approach/avoidance tendency (Q1-6) Cronbach α=0.8	1	2	***5****	***5**±*
(WTC) Interest in international vocation or activities (Q7-12) Cronbach α=0.78	0	0	***3****	***5****
(CA) Communication Apprehension—Interpersonal conversation context (Q13-18) Cronbach α=0.8	1	1	2	***5****
(CA) Communication Apprehension—Presentation context (Q19-24) Cronbach α=0.87	***3****	***4****	***6****	***6****

Compared to the 'control' group of Japanese students who did not participate in the program (n=136), there is an apparent distinction in responses by Japanese students who participated in the program (n=18) across all categories. This suggests that participation in the program improves willingness to communicate (WTC, categories 1 & 2) and reduces communication apprehension (CA, categories 3 & 4). We note, however, that a reduction in CA in the presentation context (category 4) was already apparent before the main part of the program, Stage 3: Collaboration began. During Stage 3, participants are given training for and execution of final presentations. It is possible that these positive responses were influenced by briefer self-introduction presentation training that occurs during Stage 1: Selection. These pre-program lectures and workshops help prepare students for participation in the subsequent stages of the program.

Next, we looked at differences between 2018 pre-program responses and 2018 post-program responses (Table 2). For this case, we assumed the null-hypothesis: "The mean of the distribution of responses by students after the program had finished is greater than the one by students before the program began" and then carried out the same tests as mentioned above:

(1) one-sided, non-pairwise T-test (reasonable if responses to items follow a normal distribution pattern); and
(2) one-sided, non-pairwise Wilcoxon signed-rank test (reasonable if responses do not follow a normal distribution pattern).

As with Table 1, we have shown the number of statistically significant items for each category in Table 2. The numbers indicated by an asterisk in each cell of Table 2 are predominant positive change (three or more of six maximum) in comparison with others.

Table 2. Pre-program groups vs post-program groups, 2017 & 2018 (Japanese)

Category	2017 & 2018 pre-program groups (n=18) versus…			
	2017 post-program (n=18), number of items with significant positive change (max. 6)		2018 post-program (n=18), number of items with significant positive change (max. 6)	
	Pairwise T	Pairwise Wilcoxon	Pairwise T	Pairwise Wilcoxon
(WTC) Intergroup approach/avoidance tendency (Q1-6) Cronbach α=0.8	1	1	2	2
(WTC) Interest in international vocation or activities (Q7-12) Cronbach α=0.78	2	2	1	1
(CA) Communication Apprehension—Interpersonal conversation context (Q13-18) Cronbach α=0.8	***4****	***4****	***5****	***5****
(CA) Communication Apprehension—Presentation context (Q19-24) Cronbach α=0.87	***4****	***3****	***5****	***5****

Comparing responses by pre- and post-program groups (2017 and 2018, each n=18), we see statistically significant positive changes in responses to half or more of the six items in each category (indicated by asterisk). Although this sample is small, the results tentatively suggest that participation in the program yields improvements especially in terms of communication apprehension in a foreign language (English), both in the context of communicating face-to-face with others and in the context of giving presentations in English before a group of teachers and peers.

For contrast, we also ran a provisional T-Test on Thai student data, who completed the questionnaire for the first time in 2018. The result is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Pre-program group vs post-program group, 2018 (Thai)

Category	2018 pre-program Thai students (n=18) versus…
	2018 post-program Thai students (n=18), number of items with significant positive change (max. 6)
	Pairwise T
(WTC) Intergroup approach/avoidance tendency (Q1-6) Cronbach α=0.8	2
(WTC) Interest in international vocation or activities (Q7-12) Cronbach α=0.78	***3****
(CA) Communication Apprehension—Interpersonal conversation context (Q13-18) Cronbach α=0.8	***3****
(CA) Communication Apprehension—Presentation context (Q19-24) Cronbach α=0.87	***4****

Responses by Thai students to an average of half of the six items in each category were positive. Of interest to us is the similarity to responses by Japanese (HIU) students to categories 3 and 4 (CA). The implication is that participation in the program reduces apprehension with regard to conversing and presenting in a foreign language.

Collectively the results offer nominal support that participation in the program increases willingness to communicate (WTC) with, and reduces communication anxiety (CA) toward

interacting with, an international community using a lingua franca that they (a) are generally not very proficient at and (b) do not have much practical experience with, beyond what experience they may have received through compulsory English classes. Broadly, then, we can say that the program is worthy of continued support and research, and by extension, other similarly short-term exchange programs.

LIMITATIONS, IDEAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While a statistical analysis of the survey data for 2017-2018 has yielded incremental but tentatively encouraging results that the HIU-RMUTT program helps to boost confidence among participants with respect to using English to interact with a foreign community, further and broader examination is needed in order to more conclusively assert successful results.

Limitations of this study include:
(1) it involves a small data set (limited number of participants per year). This seems to be the case in other surveys on short-term exchange programs (Rees & Klapper, 2008) This number could be doubled with a better-coordinated incorporation of responses from Thai student participants.
(2) the mandatory nature of the questionnaire. While it is common for studies to involve instructors researching participants from their own institutions (Kinginger, 2009), providing students with a choice to opt in or opt out of offering program feedback would be a polite gesture.
(3) it employs only numbers. A treatment of student comments is beyond the scope here but would be beneficial to include in a future publication.

As the number of short-term overseas programs increases, further research into their effectiveness as promoters of foreign language and foreign culture will be helpful to further their cause. For future research, we offer the following ideas:

- Closer examination of the literature on short-term programs that involve ELF rather than ESL.
- Treatment of student commentary, including open-item comments in surveys as well as testimony in final presentations at the end of Stage 3 (Collaboration) and Stage 4 (Sharing).
- Proficiency pre-program and post-program interviews (see e.g. Kang, 2014).
- Stimulated recall interviews with volunteer students.
- Longitudinal follow-up with past participants.
- Examine gains in speaking (see e.g. D'Amico, 2012; Hernández, 2016).
- If further Likert-style survey data is used, Rasch analysis could improve item/construct quality (Apple, 2013).
- Closer consideration of CDIO guidelines with respect to the curriculum in which short-term exchange programs such as the one between HIU and RMUTT exist.

CONCLUSION

The number of short-term study-abroad programs at universities is increasing, and so is the amount of research into these programs. However, there is as yet a dearth of studies that examine (a) short-term programs in an ELF context, where English is a common foreign language between speakers of two different languages, rather than ESL contexts, where English learners stay in English-speaking countries, as well as (b) in contexts that provide no formal English classes during the training, where speakers just get together and manage with what they have in order to complete some collaborative task.

Our statistics-aided approach offers the following suggestions: (1) Both Thai and Japanese participants in the program reported noticeable reductions in apprehension toward communicating and presenting in English with an international community as a result of participation in the program. This result encourages us to continue supporting this program. Meanwhile (2) while there appear to be improvements in students' WTC, that is, to their tendency to approach and interact with a foreign community, these responses are not as pronounced. Worthy of future research attention is particularly the improvement in communication apprehension.

We believe the continuation of this program will provide valuable opportunities for continued research into short-term study-abroad programs that are financially and academically accessible to a broad number of students—especially those who, under different circumstances, may not have the opportunity to experience what it is like to travel abroad.

APPENDIX A: 2017-2018 Survey

6-point Likert-style response format, 6 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree.
** = reverse-coded item.*
NOTE: Order of items was randomized on survey given to students.

Intergroup approach/avoidance tendency (based on Yashima, 2009)

1. I want to make friends with international students studying in Japan.
2. I would talk to an international student if there were one at school.
3. I want to participate in local volunteer activities that help foreigners living in Japan.
4. I wouldn't mind sharing an apartment or room with an international student
5. *I try to avoid talking with foreigners if I can.**
6. *I would feel somewhat uncomfortable if a foreigner moved in next door.**

Interest in international vocation or activities (based on Yashima, 2009)

7. I want to work where many people from other countries work.
8. *I plan to live in Japan/Thailand my whole life.**
9. I'm interested in doing volunteer work overseas.
10. *I think what's happening overseas is not related to my daily life.**
11. I'd like to try working in a foreign country.
12. *I'd rather not have a job that sends me overseas frequently.**

Communication Apprehension—Interpersonal conversation context (based on McCroskey, 1997)

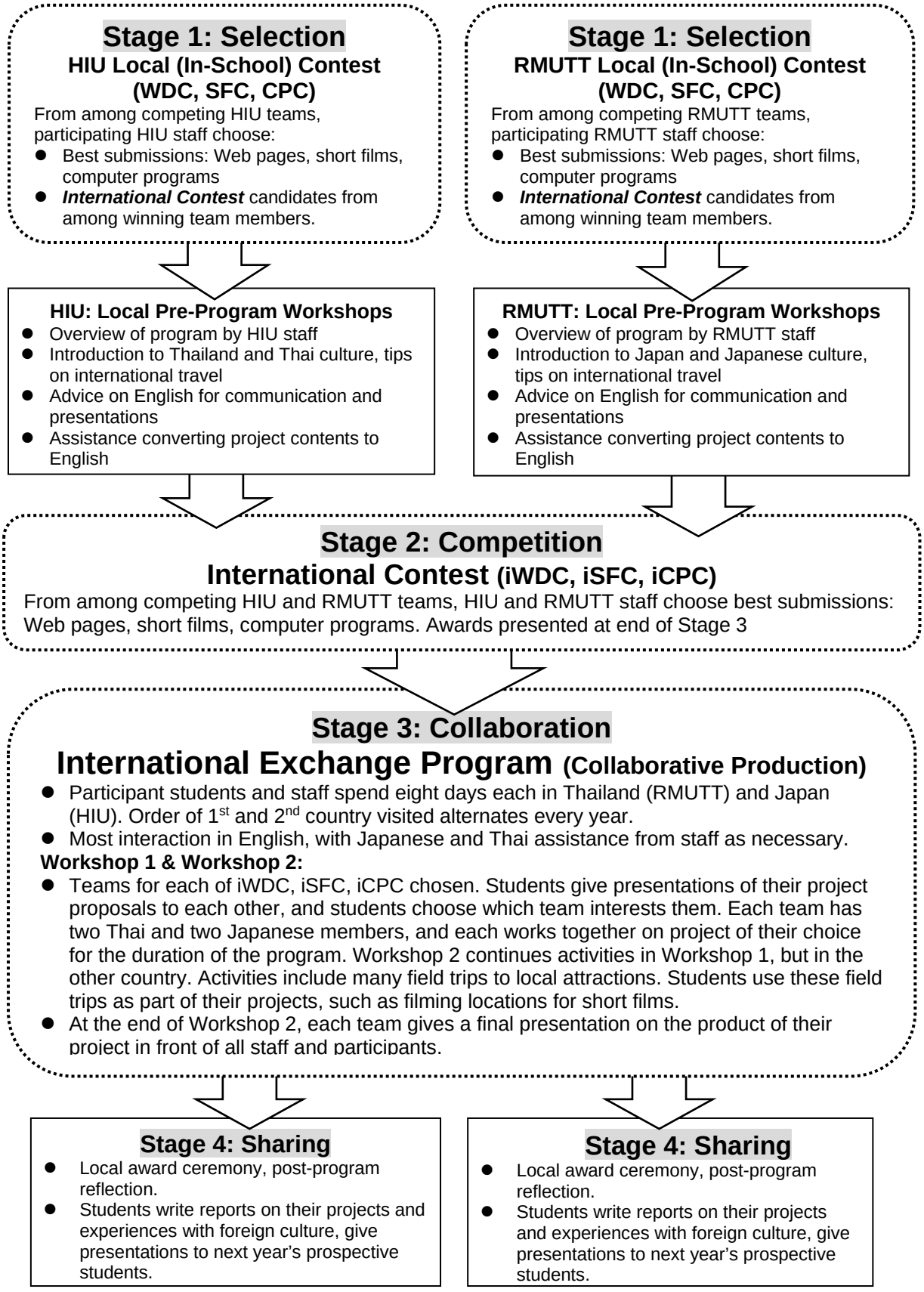
13. *I would feel very nervous participating in a conversation in English with a new acquaintance.**
14. I would enjoy having a conversation in English.
15. *If I tried to have an English conversation, I would be at a loss for words.**
16. I am not afraid of participating in an English conversation.
17. *Even the idea of having a conversation in English makes me nervous.**
18. I would be confident if I had a conversation in English.

Communication Apprehension—Presentation context (based on McCroskey, 1997)

19. *Giving a presentation in English would make me terribly nervous.**
20. *Even the idea of giving a presentation in English makes me afraid.**
21. *If I gave a presentation in English, I would quickly lose my calm.**
22. I would not mind speaking in English before a group.
23. I am not afraid of giving a presentation in English.
24. I would be confident if I gave a presentation in English.

APPENDIX B: HIU-RMUTT International Exchange Program flow chart

WDC = Web Design Contest, SFC = Short Film Contest, CPC = Computer Programming Contest



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