

Learning to become a nationalist? Intercultural experiences of Japanese visiting students at an Australian university

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This paper presents a critical examination of the perceptions of intercultural learning among a group of Japanese undergraduate students who participated in a one-month English as a Second Language (ESL) programme at an Australian university. In contrast to the previous studies that mainly focus on an individual student's development of language and intercultural competency, the present study looks at intercultural learning as a discursive practice, and aims to propose a power-minded perspective of intercultural learning that may help to eradicate chauvinistic otherisation and promote further intercultural dialogues and harmony. Toward this objective, the author conducted a series of ethnographic interviews with twenty-two students over the duration of the programme and analysed the collected data, using grounded theory and critical discourse analysis as research methodologies. The findings revealed the participant students could be conceived as: (1) subjects who expressed static and essentialist notions of culture while struggling hard to overcome interpersonal difficulties arising from language barriers and (2) subjects who strengthened their own national identity by constantly comparing Japan/Japanese with the foreign Other. It was also revealed that the presence of essentialist discourses of culture in Australian ESL classrooms had a significant impact on students' interpretive frames of intercultural learning, particularly with reference to emphasis on national boundaries. The author argues that, in order for this kind of study programme to be run free from the traps of essentialism and nationalism, educational interventions that teach both students and educators the danger of stereotypes, changeability and heterogeneity of a culture, dynamics of power relations between cultures and community of cultural differences, are critically important throughout the implementation of the programme.