

An Inquiry into Study Abroad: Considerations for Japanese Students Studying Abroad

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Abstract

This article reports a study of a qualitative study of an open-ended interview with 15 participants in a study abroad program for Japanese university students. The interview analysis provided several themes relevant for administrators of study abroad programs. These themes included differences in classroom learning styles, interactions abroad, and level gaps. This article then proposes potential considerations to make when choosing study abroad destinations and when preparing pre and post study abroad education regarding these findings.

Keywords

Study Abroad, English as a Lingua Franca, English as a Second Language, English as an International Language

An Inquiry into Study Abroad: Considerations for Japanese Students Studying Abroad

Study abroad is becoming an increasingly important part of language education in Japan. Compared to other Asian countries such as China, Korea and India, Japanese students are less likely to study abroad, prompting government agencies to create initiatives to facilitate study abroad, like the MEXT “Tobitate! Ryuugaku Japan” campaign (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan [MEXT], 2014). Students themselves may also feel various anxieties and pressures that prevent them from studying abroad, such as the pressures of the Japanese job market, financial constraints, or an apprehension to leave the safety of Japan (Nagahashi, 2007). The movement

for globalization in Japan heading toward the 2020 Tokyo Olympics have also had effects on educational policy, creating a push for greater involvement of students engaging in study abroad programs, not only for language learning purposes, but also for international understanding and for developing talented globally minded individuals. Study abroad programs in Japan have recently experienced a push due to not only the desire to globalize for Tokyo Olympics, but has also become a bigger part of college educational programs, especially those in the Humanities and in Education, with some English teachers being required to not only study the target language, but also have international experience, such as study abroad experience (English teachers to study abroad, 2013). It is also the responsibility of practitioners and study abroad administrators to

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anticipate the specific obstacles faced by students abroad, depending on their local, goals and previous experiences. Therefore, it is important to explore the motivations and goals and experiences of students that do study abroad in order to investigate what students are gaining from their experiences and areas to improve upon in order to enrich future study abroad experiences.

A large amount of study abroad research is focused on the Western practice of study abroad, however in this study we focus on Japanese students from a smaller metropolitan city of Japan studying in foreign countries including New Zealand, Australia, Canada, America, Ireland and the Czech Republic, during the end of their first year in college, making this a unique group to study. Students who go abroad seek not only to make gains in language learning, but also in cultural knowledge, experiences and establish international connections for potential careers in the future. This group was not unlike many study abroad students who wish to of course, improve their language abilities, become global citizens, and grow personally through the experience, as well as making friends with fellow students and natives of their respective destinations. This study will show potential measures that may be taken by study abroad coordinators and directors to better prepare their students of realistic expectations of their study abroad experiences. This study consisted of interviews with 15 study abroad participants, who were all freshmen in the same study abroad program in Japan.

This research is directed at administrators of study abroad programs administering a program to similar populations, and to consider the implications of this research program and future preparatory measures to be taken with similar groups.

Background of Study

Study abroad students have several expectations and obstacles that they must face and overcome during their sojourn abroad. The discrepancies between the expectations of students and the realities of their study abroad can be significant to the overall study abroad experience.

Native Speaker Contact

For many students and study abroad participants, one of the most attractive elements of studying abroad is the potential to interact with native speakers and immerse oneself into the culture. Home stay can be one path to native speaker interactions, potentially turning a “study” abroad into a “living” abroad experience (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004, p. 261). However, this depends greatly upon the experience of each student, as students may be disappointed by the lack of interaction in the household, treating them as tenants instead of family members, or indifferent treatment (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004, Wilkinson, 1998, Kinginger, 2009). Students who are expecting a traditional, stereotypical family may be shocked by the shifts occurring in family units all over the world, and may be disappointed by the lack of language interaction in some households, caused by factors such as the prevalence of convenience foods and the difficulties surrounding preparing a “home-cooked” dinner (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2013, p. 56). These shifts in international family dynamics may be shocking to students, as the amount of time dedicated to activities such as meal preparation have remained fairly stable over the past decade (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2017).

Level Gaps

As western institutions continue to welcome and encourage international students to not only study

abroad, but also pursue degrees overseas, there will be gaps and discrepancies between degree-seeking students and short-term study abroad students. Japanese students who typically pursue short term language studies (3-5 months) may have different expectations of their study abroad than students who are enrolled to not only improve their English, but also to complete an academic degree abroad. Concerning language level, Japan still remains one of the lowest in regards to English ability and the number of students that study abroad is the lowest compared to other Asian countries (Test and Score Data. (2018). Due to this, it is not surprising that there may be a gap in communicating through English as a lingua franca in ESL programs internationally, when many Japanese students interact with other international students through English. Despite the tendency to group study abroad students in language programs by relative language level or on-site language assessments, the gaps in motivations and goals may still pose to be challenging for students. Combined with other factors such as the increase in the number of international students and English programs for international students over the past decade (Open Doors Executive Summary, 2017), study abroad students will face challenges such as differences in motivations, communication skills and opportunities to communicate between other international students studying abroad, as many students studying abroad do so for a variety of purposes, many of which study internationally in Intensive English Institutes in order to qualify for admission to colleges, or to fulfill program requirements.

Communication Styles

Although each individual acquires and communicates differently in their L1 and L2, the cultures that foreign speakers of English originate

with affect their use of the target language (Yano, 2011). Despite the fact that there are claims that 80 percent of ENGLISH usage is done so by non-native speakers (Jenkins, 2007), the pervasive belief in Japan is that English belongs to namely Inner Circle speakers of English, mainly British or American users of English (Kachru, 1992), so called “native speakers”, and the teaching of English in Japan is often synonymous with blue-eyed blond haired male speakers of English as the ideal English speaker, which ensures that learner acquisition of perfect English is not only linguistically impossible, but impossible by birthright. That said, students will encounter in their study abroad speakers of English that do not come from the Inner circle, but the Outer circle and Expanding circle, similar to themselves. According to Coleman’s (2013) model of study abroad social networks, study abroad students communicate with co-nationals most easily, followed by other outsiders, typically other foreigners, and finally with local people, in the case of study abroad, native speakers or long time residents of the country. Students studying in Japan who idealize the native speaker may encounter a type of culture shock to see other foreigners with a strong ownership of English. Students studying abroad for the first time in their lives may be unaware of these differences or unprepared to deal with these discrepancies.

Method

This research investigated the general experiences of study abroad students using open-ended interviews, investigating the most rewarding and most difficult experiences during their study abroad sojourns. Study abroad students studied in a number of different universities in the following locations: Canada, the United States, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and Hungary. Except for

one participant, all students were enrolled in mainly language learning classes, with that one student enrolling in academic classes taken by undergraduate students (not courses designed for international students or English as a Second Language). The interviews asked 14 students to talk about a number of areas of their experiences, particularly anxieties that they encountered pre-and post-study abroad, obstacles they encountered before and during their study abroad, their most memorable experiences, their motivations pre-and post, how their interests have changed, who they spent the most time with, and how their academic skills have improved, both their English communication skills and their general academic skills. These questions were conducted in English and Japanese, with questions being asked in English and Japanese, depending on the preference of the students, and responses were given in English or Japanese, depending on the preference of the interviewee. These were open-ended interviews, with a set of initial questions and follow up questions posed depending on the content of the responses. This was conducted as a case study (Citation), focusing on a single study abroad program from a private, English intensive program, which focused on EMI courses for students studying abroad during their freshmen/sophomore year (2nd year) after taking 3 quarters of English intensive courses, departing in December or January, and returning in 4-5 months, with one respondent returning after 8 months.

A survey was conducted both pre and post, administered within one month of their departure to their study abroad destination, and one month after their return. The qualitative portion of the data interviewed 14 participants for both pre and post study abroad, with open-ended interviews taking place in English and Japanese. Participants were volunteers who responded to a follow up question

in a related study abroad survey. Participants were given the option to respond in either English or Japanese, and often code-switched throughout interviews. The majority of the pre-study abroad interviews were conducted in Japanese (80%), and half (50%) of the post-study abroad interviewees answered in English. Each interview took 20-30 minutes, was recorded and transcribed in English and Japanese, coded using open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) through the use of the qualitative software NVivo.

Findings

There were a number of findings from this research, but the scope of this paper will focus on what administrators and practitioners of study abroad programs should consider what will be the biggest gaps for students studying abroad. Regarding the 3 major areas that study abroad administrators should take into account when considering the gaps that students will encounter while studying overseas in Western institutions, according to the interviews conducted with students these were: Communication skills in the classroom, lack of interaction with native speakers, and the level gap between students studying abroad. Excerpts from interviews will be included as transcribed with corrections provided only to clarify statements written in brackets, with English translations provided for Japanese usage.

Classroom Communication

Communication in the classroom for study abroad students was a big challenge for students. Students not only had to overcome their traditional approach to Japanese classrooms, but also compete with students with backgrounds in international English, who were more active in classroom discussions, prompting students to adapt their discussion style to a more proactive approach. Language learners

often experience anxiety in foreign language classrooms (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986), and are reluctant to speak for fear of making mistakes or are not confident about their communication skills. However in the ESL classroom, these students compete with students who are less concerned with mistakes, and more motivated to communicate their message despite small mistakes in grammar, and want to communicate more actively. According to one student studying in Australia, the experience made her much more proactive, in response to the different classroom styles overseas.

これはトランスクリプションですので、出来れば、カジュアルな話し方と非文法的な会話を出来るかで保管したいですが・・・

In my class, there were many talkative classmates, so I couldn't speak first, but they speak everything, so if I speak last, I don't have any idea because they already said that, so I thought that if I speak first, it's my first opinion ideas...

Not only many Japanese students, maybe not good at speaking, because I studied a lot about writing or reading or listening...

so we are good at grammar, or something more, academic skills we are good but we can't communicate each other, so we can understand the other person, we can listen, but we can't explain ourselves

だから、凄く大変だった (that's why it was so hard) 皆ぼって喋ってくる... (Everyone just starts talking...)

なんか、結構気にして、発音とか文法とか気にして言えんこと分かったけど喋るということは大体あまり意識していないから、別にいいかみたいな感じ (I realized that I worried about my pronunciation and grammar, I couldn't say anything, and when I'm speaking I can't always get it right, so I thought it's not a big deal after all)

気にしない (don't worry about it)

感じになった (I started to think like that)

普通に喋れたら楽しい (If you just talk normally it's more fun)

文法とかよりも (Instead of just grammar and other stuff)

喋りたい方が (by wanting to talk)

しゃべるようになった (I was able to start talking)

Another student cited the more active participation as a change that they were not ready for, and many struggled to share their opinions in the classroom.

Columbian boy's language level is so high, and the pronunciation is quite good, and Chinese girl is also quite good, so good, so they always interrupt the class and said their opinion...

Besides the challenge of meeting the needs of greater participation in classroom settings, students also cited a general lack of knowledge about common discussion topics as a challenge in the language classroom. In these instances, it was not only the lack of language ability, vocabulary and grammar, but knowledge of current events and common topics of discussion for ESL and local students that was cited as a major struggle.

(Ireland Student #1)

...the class is focused on presentation or speaking in front of public, so every class every time I gave a presentation about 10 to 15 minutes.

5 minutes with my group members, of course I had to talk with my group members in English of course and I gave a presentation in front of the classmates ...they had their opinions about the topic and they said their opinions but I didn't do like them because I didn't have my opinion and or ideas and I didn't explain my opinion well, so it was so difficult

(Ireland Student #2)

In class, I often have a discussion with pair, and then the teacher gave us a general topic about, 例えば、法律のこととか、なんかすごくジェネラルなことについて、で (For example, something about a law or some general topic)

I have to talk about the general thing, giving an example in your country...でもなんか、もっと知識が必要だなと思いました (and I thought that I need more knowledge)

The difference in communication styles in the classroom and the discussion of political topics in an active, debate style in an L2 may be, at first, intimidating to these study abroad students. This may also have a connection to the tendency of European countries to talk more actively about politics, something that also Western students studying in Europe cite as a culture shock (Kingingier...French students). These students' experiences show us that there are many adjustments that students are making in the language classroom, but program administrators can help to facilitate this change pre-sojourn.

Level Gaps

Many students cited a level gap and differences in goals as being an obstacle or anxiety during their studies abroad, particularly in their English language classes. For some students studying abroad, they cited that they were often times the youngest member of the class, with one student studying in Ireland mentioning the big difference in the age, goals and status of the other students in the classroom:

(Ireland Student #1)

My class, the preparation for University course, there are students who are over 24, or older than me,

and then they are going to get into the University to get Master's degrees, so at first, 場違い (felt like I didn't belong here), because, I didn't get into the SCHOOL NAME, and then the classmate asked me why are you studying here?

Many of the students that enroll in preparation for University courses in Intensive English institutes are often doing so in conjunction with the requirements of the administering institution: passing those courses may, not always, be a prerequisite for entrance to the university, becoming a Teaching Assistance or Research Assistant as a graduate student, and this may be intimidating for some students.

According to this student, whose major was English, was a bit apprehensive about the difference in her level and other international students, especially during pair and group work:

I felt awkward a little bit, and I didn't say my major was English...so I said Economics....

Other students mentioned a number of different gaps in level, such as the difference between vocabulary and being unable to express their opinions:

(Ireland Student #2)

...in my University there are so many Spanish students, and Spanish students can speak English fluently and of course [they are] the same age and I like talking with them, and of course they know lots of ...knowledge and vocabulary... more than me, then again I thought I have to practice learn more to be more like them...

Another student mentioned the perceived difference between goals in overseas classrooms, versus those in Japanese classrooms, and how those expectations are reflected in classrooms:

(Australia Student #1)

I think in the classes I took it was like different from the Japanese ones so free, we can speak freely and like the atmosphere,

日本は、課題とか、テストを重視しがち (In Japan, they have a tendency to focus on homework and tests,)、でもオーストラリアで私は経験したのは (but what I experienced in Australia was)、普段どれだけ授業に参加しているか質問するかというのは先生はよく見てて (the teacher looks closely at how much you participate in class and ask questions) ...モチベーションになります (it was a big motivation for me)

The emphasis on active participation in the classroom was a big difference in this students' experience, and the expectations of the Japanese classroom and the difference in assessments was a positive change, according to this student, as this became a great motivator in her studies, to get meaningful feedback based on in-class and test performance.

Interactions during study abroad

Many students had difficulties in finding ways to interact with so-called native speaker students, despite the fact that they are studying in the native country, the tendency to spend time with other non-native speakers was undeniable, when asked who they spend the most time with in everyday interactions: when asked about who they interacted with the most, most students replied that they either spent the most time with their host family (4), students from their home institution whom they shared their native language (4), or other international students, using English as a lingua franca (5). Only one mentioned that they interacted significantly with other college-aged native speakers

during their sojourn. This phenomenon is consistent with Coleman's (2013) model of concentric circles representation of study abroad social network of study abroad social networks, which claims that interactions with locals of the country require more time and effort to build.

Students mentioned a number of obstacles to interacting with native speaker students, such as difficulties in finding common conversation topics, differences in lifestyle, due to their current living conditions. One student studying in Ireland discussed her interactions trying to join an extracurricular activity.

(Ireland Student #2)

... I could join tea Society one time, ... but only once because the member are from Ireland, of course they speak English so fast... and I didn't understand what they are talking...so then I just had tea and that's it so for me it was so hard and boring

PI

...so no one came over and talk to you or anything?

(Ireland Student #2)

...I have an Irish girl so she belongs to the activity so she invited me, so sometimes she talked with me but of course ... they were enjoying talking with themselves so it was boring and hard to understand what they were talking about, and the topic was difficult, so when I joined it they talked about politics. I don't know European politics

However, participating in other club activities where content was not such an obstacle was useful for some students:

(Ireland Student #2)

... I have joined Japanese Society a few times, so the members are interested in Japanese culture or anything I don't know but yes so and they learn

Japanese, I could talk with them in Japanese sometimes ... I also joined many events like setsubun... it was very fun

(Ireland Student #2)

I belonged to photography club and the international society club, and then the photography club allowed me to have a camera ...A professional camera, and then everyone went to somewhere to take pictures... there were many Irish students and also many international students whose English are great compared to -- better than mine, Yeah, and I made some friends there...

Although many students mentioned that they interacted with homestay families the most (about 30%), one student mentioned a trade-off of the homestay experience.

This student was living in a homestay, but by doing this, this made it impossible to hang out with other students due to conflicting schedules and lifestyles.

(Australia Student #2)

I want to hang out other students, but they had a job - work, so they usually hang out at night, but in my homestay, I have to go home by 9PM in the weekday, so I can go, but I have to go home soon...

In this study, one student that said that they had a interacted most with a local student was the only participant that opted for dormitory stay. This suggests that doing homestay may be a tradeoff between interactions with host families and with classmates, or living a student lifestyle.

Discussion

The implications for this research are many, as there are many considerations to be made from

this data. Differences in classroom management and teaching styles are one of the most challenging instances for many students coming from typically teacher-led classrooms in Japan. Previews of college classrooms can be created through video, creating mock-international classrooms with volunteer teachers, study abroad students (studying in Japan), or showing multimedia materials may be illustrative for students, but if the class expectations are not made clear, this may not be effective. Forcing students to participate in the classroom through mandatory participation may be artificial, and at times, discouraged by educational institutions.

Level gaps are not a bug, but a feature of study abroad programs in general, but students can be better prepared for encountering this in the future. Many of the level gaps were linguistic, however these gaps also included age, goals and culture. Pre-sojourn classes for students should include details about the nature of many IEI classes, such as the target demographic of students studying in these institutions, and common discussion topics in the country and area. Seminar topics should include viewing current news topics and newspapers in order to become knowledgeable about the current events in question for each area.

The lack of native speaker interaction is a phenomenon that students experience, and students seem to have limited chances to talk with local students due to differing classroom schedules and large numbers of international students taking similar classes. The lack of opportunities to interact with local students could be resolved by encouraging language partner participation, making participation in extracurricular activities a mandatory element of study abroad, or coordination with international offices at the study abroad locations. By taking these measures, students may have more chances

to interact with local students to facilitate deeper connections with the study abroad location, as well as with the greater international community.

Limitations

As many students returning from study abroad were excited to continue to use English in the interviews, the PI encouraged the use of the L2, but this may have inhibited the honesty or robustness of the responses. The small group (14) participants are not big enough to make sweeping generalizations about the nature of study abroad outside of this target institution, but are still important considerations for future administrators.

Despite the fact that students studied in a number of different locations, including Ireland, Australia, Canada, The United States and New Zealand, they have shared similar experiences across various levels of ESL classes, and have many differences, but many similarities in their studies abroad. This research does not claim that these experiences can be generalized to the study abroad population at large, but are considerations for administrators of students from similar groups,

Conclusion

This research highlights a number of issues that administrators of study abroad programs may be able to address through coordination with study abroad coordinating institutions, in order to deepen connections between the home institutions. The implications for administrators can be summarized as follows:

1. Despite the designated levels of language classes in study abroad institutions, students will often experience significant gaps in language levels and fluency between Japanese study abroad students and students of other nationalities. Students who are planning to study abroad should be encouraged

to participate in classes with study abroad students from their home institutions or club activities to prepare students for overseas classrooms, which will prompt students to participate in classes and discussions with students from different backgrounds and communicative abilities.

2. Classrooms in the study abroad destination will feature communication styles that are difficult to adjust to for Japanese students. Therefore, participation in English as a medium of instruction (EMI) classrooms with active learning must be created for students in order to prepare them. Classroom assessment must not be limited to written examinations, but also discussions, group work, presentations and participation in the classroom.

3. Many, and in some cases, most of the English used during students' study abroad experiences will not be local people, outside of homestay, but will be with other international students using English as a lingua franca. Before students' sojourn abroad, more emphasis must be put on listening activities that do not just prioritize inner circle Englishes, but Englishes used by other regions, in order to highlight differences, create opportunities to interact, improve and give helpful advice to other students, and to strengthen the sense of ownership of English, especially in a country like Japan that accentuates native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006).

In light of these results, we can see what areas students were surprised by, how their expectations shifted during their time abroad, and what areas can be improved in the future to facilitate a more prepared student population for study abroad. Administrators of study abroad programs can take a number of precautions before and after students' sojourns to ensure that they gain the most from their experiences abroad, and improve learner outcomes.

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