



# Study Abroad SIG: A focus point for concerned researchers

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## Reference data:

Atkins, A. M. J. (2008). Study Abroad SIG: A focus point for study abroad related research.

In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

The proposed forming of the Study Abroad Special Interest Group within the JALT organization was presented to interested parties at the 33<sup>rd</sup> conference in Tokyo. The reasons why the presenters felt there was a need for such a group were discussed and advice was duly taken from the knowledgeable participants who attended the presentation.

全国語学教育学会(JALT)内に『海外留学研究部会(Study Abroad Special Interest Group)』を発足させようという提案は、東京で開催された第33回年次大会において、この新部会に関心をお持ちの方々の前で行われた。発表の場では、なぜそのような部会が必要かということに関して発表者の考えが述べられ、ご出席いただいた識者の方々から貴重なご意見を頂戴した。

## The need for a focus

In recent years, the number of Japanese university and college students studying abroad may be increasing. The UNESCO Global Education Digest (GED) 2006 (p. 133) gives a figure of slightly more than 60,000 Japanese tertiary students who studied abroad in 2004. The figure for 2005, as listed in GED 2007 (p. 139) is more than 65,000 students. The number of foreign tertiary students studying in Japan in 2005 was more than 100,000 (ibid, p. 139). High schools and junior high schools are also sending large numbers of students abroad, albeit mostly for shorter periods of study. As a result, numerous foreign and Japanese teachers in Japan as part of their jobs, are involved in preparing and sending Japanese students to foreign countries to study, as well as receiving foreign students to study in Japan.

As professional educators, we are undoubtedly trying to provide our students, both Japanese and non-Japanese, with the most beneficial and worthwhile study abroad (SA) experience possible. At this time, there

appears to be a “gap” in the literature related to Japanese study abroad programs which has been noted by a number of writers over the last fifteen years (Blanche, 2002; Kitao, 1993; Bodycott & Crew, 2000), yet there has been little done that attempts to close this “gap” and provide a focus point for this research.

There is Japan specific research being undertaken in the field of study abroad, and research to date has provided us with some valuable insights. However, this research is fragmented, as there is nothing that connects the efforts of these researchers. This lack of cohesion means that there is also a lack of momentum. The SA Special Interest Group (SIG) will hopefully provide a focus for researchers and lead to an increase in both quantity and quality of research being undertaken in the field of study abroad.

### **Areas of possible research**

The main areas of research, which the group intends to be involved with at this stage of our development are: pre-departure related issues, issues whilst abroad, receiving students in Japan, and the future of study abroad. These areas are all covered in more detail below.

#### ***Pre-departure related issues***

From comments received from interested parties at the 33<sup>rd</sup> JALT annual conference in Tokyo, the preparation of students for long-term academic study abroad programs are of the greatest concern. The demands placed on Japanese students who attend foreign colleges or universities are very high, and as a result, the depth of preparation needed

is much greater than for students who usually embark on less academic short-term programs. In order, to find better ways to prepare our students for long-term programs some discourse between educators in this area will be beneficial to everyone concerned.

Preparing students to study abroad on short-term language and/or culture programs are also of concern to educators, especially at the secondary level. Although students in this area may need less preparation than those who are continuing long-term programs, teachers who prepare these students are still very serious about providing their students with the best experience possible in the time available to them. In my own experience, preparing junior high school students for a short-term cultural study abroad program, alleviating some of the students’ major concerns is of great importance. The more confident students are before they leave Japan the more they appear to enjoy the experience.

There is also confusion about what should be taught. Teaching students about the culture of the country they are going to is a common idea, however, many educators still find it difficult to include it in their teaching. With culture being such a multifaceted topic, many theorists and practitioners from different disciplines have propounded a multitude of viewpoints on culture, culture teaching and culture learning. These multiple views can be baffling and as a result, some educators may neglect to include culture in their teaching. With an increasingly international world, teaching students about culture to prepare them for a study abroad experience becomes a more difficult process, yet still seems to be an essential part of the preparation. Having a place where educators could share their culture teaching

strategies with each other would make the preparation process less confusing.

Choosing where to send students is a difficult task for teachers. Starting an exchange program with a new school is fraught with risks. If the school or host family provides a bad experience, the negative effects can have a great impact on students' lives. I, myself have had students who swear they will never go abroad again after spending time with a host family that did not make them feel welcome. Whereas students who were made to feel like special guests by their host families say that they want to go and live in the country when they are older. Junior high school students are often dramatic for effect, but these sentiments, albeit they may weaken, will probably remain with the students for a long time. An independent body which teachers can turn to find out about different foreign institutions would be most useful. In the future, the SA SIG plans to collect feedback from returning students and teachers and provide this information in a database accessible to other teachers and possibly students. This will also aid in providing the host institutions with feedback so they can concentrate on improving areas that need attention.

Even with the rising costs of studying abroad, there is sustained interest in providing opportunities for students to spend a period of time studying language and experiencing culture in foreign lands. The cost efficiency of studying in different countries and at different institutions is of serious concern to everyone involved with study abroad. The rising cost of international flights, fuel surcharges, and the weakened yen are making studying abroad inaccessible to some less fortunate students. This may already be the case

for Japanese students visiting some countries as Gilmour (2007) comments,

Costs vary depending on the country, exchange rate, institution, and in-country cost of living. However, SA is increasingly expensive and these days there is no possibility to participate in an exchange program on a shoestring budget. (p. 31)

Subsidies and grants are available to some lucky students, but budgets are still limited and must be used efficiently. Attributable to these financial constraints, many Japanese institutions, including the school where I work, have been forced to cut back on the length of their SA programs or eliminate extra activities in order to make it more affordable for their students. However, the shorter the program, in all probability the less beneficial the experience will become.

As an Asian country, Japan is third after China and Korea in the number of tertiary students it sends to study abroad. As educators involved in preparing students for study abroad programs, we are obliged to provide the most efficient preparation programs that we can. There is, of course, no *de facto* standard method to ensure students maximize their learning opportunities, especially as the needs of each student and institution vary greatly. The SA SIG will expedite research in to the most appropriate pedagogic practices and if all goes well will lead to standards of best practice.

### *Issues whilst abroad*

What are the factors that make the study abroad experience truly worthwhile? The balance of study between, for

instance, classroom education, and cultural activities are surely important. The choice between sending students to a university or a specialized language school or a combination of the two must also be contemplated. In my own experience sending high school students on a yearlong program to England, the students were enrolled in an international school for the first six months. There they studied mainly English, but also attended other lessons including culture and sports. This gave them the necessary English ability to move to the second homestay stage. This approach was popular with most students, although a few students preferred either the first or the second stage. It seems prudent to try to find a balance that suits the majority of students, but it may not be possible to please all without making customized programs for each student.

As mentioned above, the balance between the amount of language that students study and the amount of nonlanguage studies they take is a very important factor for each student. It appears best to offer students some flexibility in the form of elective subjects where this is possible. However, students studying a more narrowly defined program requiring credits for their home university will be more restricted. A trip abroad will seldom be all study and no play, but with very short trips abroad the amount of free time can be limited. The school where I am employed sends junior high school students to Australia for less than a week. During this time, the students stay with an Australian family for a weekend. The remaining time is carefully planned with only about two hours of free time left for the students. This may be necessary for such young students, but may be inappropriate for older students.

### *Receiving students in Japan*

With the number of foreign students studying in Japan exceeding the number of Japanese students studying abroad, how we look after our foreign guests are another large area of concern. For teachers involved with dispatch only programs, receiving foreign students in Japan are of no concern. In exchange programs; however, the same teachers who prepare Japanese students to study abroad, will in most cases be involved in taking care of visiting students. Although at the JALT conference we did not receive any questions related to this area, it has been brought to our attention since then, and we feel it naturally fits under the group's umbrella of concern.

### *The future of study abroad programs*

Some of the most important issues facing educators coordinating study abroad programs in the future are: international education standards; cost efficiency; internships; and sending students to countries, where English is not the first language. Of these issues, international education standards seem to be of particular interest to universities. There is little point of spending an extended period of time studying abroad, if a student's home university does not recognize this study in the form of academic course credits. The European higher education standards offer credits for courses studied that are recognized by students' home universities on their return. There appears to be a nonstandardized approach to this in Japan. Gilmour (2007, p. 31-32) found when attempting to start an exchange program with a U.K. university, that her university's liberal arts courses were not covered by European standards as no

Europeans were studying the same subjects. Choosing and finding a country/university that offers similar courses to the home institution is of high priority, but difficult to find out about without contacting numerous schools.

Providing an experience for our students that compares with the commendatory experience outlined below by Dwyer and Peters (2004) with regard to American students' experiences, would be fulfilling to everyone concerned:

Few other experiences in life have proven to net such a positive and sustainable impact. With study abroad offering so many life-changing and enduring academic, career, intercultural, personal, and social benefits, students should carefully consider studying abroad when searching for a college and during their collegiate career. Students should question potential colleges about the study abroad programs they offer and find out how competitive the application process is and if grades and financial aid transfer. In addition, colleges, parents, and employers should encourage and enable students to study abroad. (p. 1)

It appears however, that the same may not be true for students in Japan, at least not to the same degree. We can only strive to make it so.

### Immediate goals for the SIG

The groups' objectives for the forthcoming months are to continue to publicize the group and recruit new members. We are in the process of getting the website online, and have taken the first steps to producing our first newsletter. We must

take every opportunity to promote the group and its activities, and being part of a conference will enable us to do this. This will require the efforts of our members and supporters, though judging by the support that we have received to date, we have a strong chance of achieving our aims.

We have a significant number of people interested in joining the group, but still require more support in order to reach the 50 members necessary to become a full SIG. As a foreign educator in Japan, I was encouraged by the number of Japanese educators who expressed an interest in joining the group. I feel that the group will greatly benefit from the collaboration of all involved in the study abroad field, irrespective of nationality, or culture.

We have received an offer to host the website from a generous supporter and were given advice on what to include on the website. At this stage we intend to include: a bulletin board; a secure area for sharing files between officers; databases for teachers wishing to find out about foreign institutions; links to relevant publications, publishers, and organizations; as well as contact information for officers. There is much that we have to learn, but it is very exciting to be embarking on a project so interesting to all of our members. We hope to make the SIG a valuable place for information and discussion for everyone involved in the study abroad experience.

**Andrew M. J. Atkins** is currently employed by Heian Junior and Senior High School in Kyoto. He has been involved with study abroad programs for more than ten years. He gained his M.A. TEFL/TESL from the University of Birmingham in 2003. He is currently interested in study abroad, spoken discourse analysis and culture in language teaching.

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