

# Creating Training Sessions and Lesson Materials from Study Abroad Interviews

Erik Fritz

*Osaka Institute of Technology*

Junko Murao

*Osaka Institute of Technology*

Students will most likely need some kind of support before studying abroad, either culturally or linguistically, in order to help them adjust to their new lives. This research proposes a method, via analyzing interview data, that details how to make materials for lessons and training sessions that prepare students for study abroad. It was found that students appreciated the training session, and felt that the information and strategies offered and generated were valuable.

留学前に学生たちが新しい生活に適応できるよう文化や言語に関する支援が必要である。本研究では、面接データを分析して留学準備用の授業やトレーニングのための教材の作成方法を提案する。実際、学生たちは実施されたトレーニングセッションを高く評価し、提起された情報や方法が役に立つと感じたことが判明した。

**T**he need for training sessions, workshops, and in-class preparations before embarking on a study abroad experience has been suggested by many researchers (Gebhard, 2013; Trice, 2004; Wang, 2009). In Wang's (2009) study of resiliency characteristics and adjustment of international graduate students studying at American universities, she argued that students should begin the process of adjustment "well before even leaving home" (p. 41). Wang also encourages teachers and international centers to offer programs and activities to increase students' resiliency by various means, including learning about possible difficulties because "people can usually function better when they can anticipate what is coming" (p. 41). Similarly, Gebhard (2013) argues for programs to offer advice about social and academic adjustment and "provide strategies that students can use when faced with emotional turmoil..." (p. 176).

This study's purpose is to highlight how teachers and administrators can provide lesson materials and training sessions based on interview data to their study abroad students.

## Background

The setting for this study is at a medium sized (roughly 8,000 students) science and technology university in Japan. The program that the research was based on is called the Overseas Research Experience Program (OREP). The research was conducted in the initial and second years of the OREP. In total, 16 students were selected based on their objectives, preparation, and feasibility with time limitations—stays were limited from one to three months. There were no interviews given as part of the selection process. Also, no training sessions about living abroad, apart from one safety training, were given to students.

Prior to going on the OREP, four of the sixteen students agreed to record their experiences, either through emails, photos, social media updates, blogs, or journals. They also agreed to be interviewed in English and Japanese after they returned from the OREP. Each student signed a consent form written in Japanese and was told that their identities would be protected. Students were also informed that information about their experiences would help the next year's OREP students.

## Methodology

There were three stages of data collection: 1. data collection of student-generated content; 2. post study abroad interviews; and, 3. training session survey results, examples of which are outlined later in "Training Session."

## Student Generated Content

Students kept journals or blogs, updated their social media accounts, took pictures, or sent us messages while they were abroad. All this information was read or seen by both authors, and from this material the authors prepared most of the questions for the interviews. The questions specifically addressed key issues or enjoyable moments that the students experienced.

### Interviews

After all four students returned to Japan, both authors interviewed the students separately in English and Japanese for approximately 30 minutes each. Only one author and one participant were in the interview room at a time. The authors were concerned with talking about feelings, key events, troubles, and successes.

The English language interviews were then transcribed. Due to time limitations and the requirement for translation of the social media posts into English and training session materials into Japanese, only the English language interviews were transcribed for the present study. Both authors, however, listened to the Japanese language interviews and made notes about common themes that were brought up. During transcription of the interviews, the first author made sure to review all recordings and correct any transcription errors. There was an attempt to record all utterances, including most backchannels. During the interviews, the authors also asked the students to draw two graphs: one graph of the amount of English and Japanese used while abroad, and the other graph of how the students felt during their time abroad (see Figures 1 and 2, respectively).

The interview transcripts in English were then examined by the authors. Common themes were identified and coded with different colors. This student interview data was then used as the basis for the training session and lesson materials.

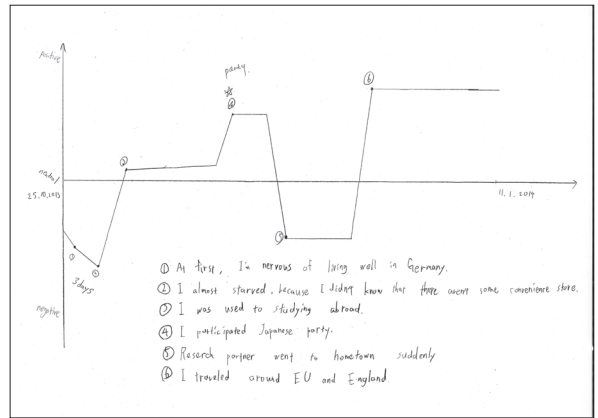


Figure 2. Ken's annotated 'mood versus time' graph (Germany).

### Participants

All participants were graduate students in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. Of the four participants, three were former students of one of the authors, and the fourth student frequently came into the language learning center, where one of the authors works, to prepare for his trip. This may have been a factor in the amount of information that students were willing to share.

### Hiroshi

Hiroshi went to Taiwan for 78 days to conduct research and attend lectures both in English and

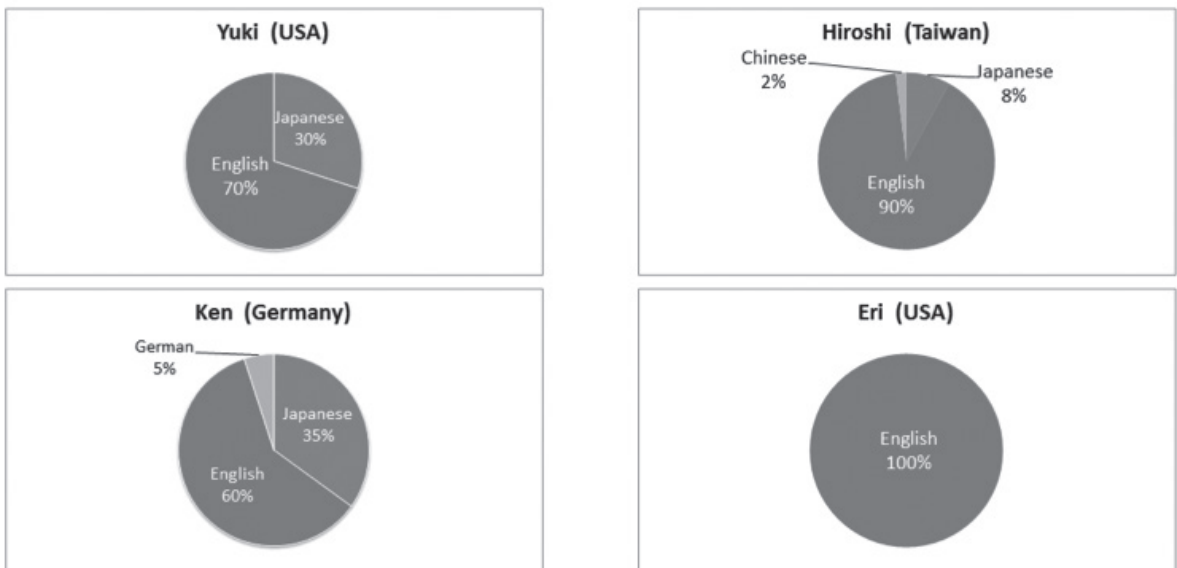


Figure 1. Amount of English, Japanese, and other languages spoken while abroad.

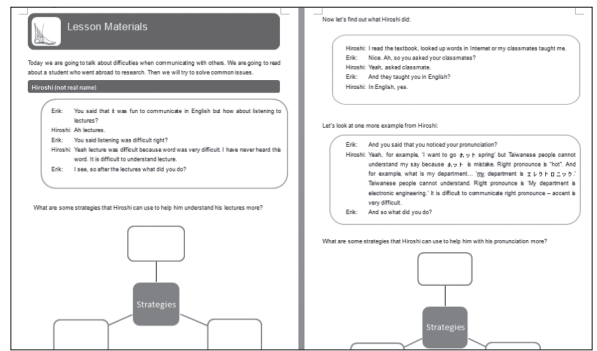
Chinese. Hiroshi did not understand Chinese, but the lesson materials were all in English. During the course of his stay, Hiroshi sent 44 emails to the authors, all in English, updating us about his daily life, thoughts, and activities. We noticed that social interactions and making friends were frequently mentioned in these correspondences. For example, in the first email Hiroshi wrote, “When I am in trouble, Taiwanese help me.” In the last email he wrote, “Power electronic class use Chinese. It is hard to understand it. But lab member often helps me. I deeply appreciate lab members’ gracious support.” We discussed this theme further in the interview after Hiroshi came back.

Hiroshi joined a Japanese club as well, and made friends with his lab members, counting “about 80 friends” that he made in total. Joining organizations or groups that Hiroshi had interest in seemed to be quite beneficial for Hiroshi in terms of meeting new people, making friends, and learning more about Taiwanese culture.

Some issues that came up with Hiroshi were with pronunciation. On day 20 in email number 18, with the subject heading “Pronunciation is difficult” Hiroshi wrote:

There are many loanword in Japan. The loanword often expressed Katakana in Japan. Katakana is Japanese syllabary(sic) mainly used for loanword or onopatomoeia(sic). I get used to pronounce Katakana. For example, world, variable, and hot...But I can't tell Taiwanese these. Because I speak Katakana. I want to pronounce good.

Hiroshi realized that Taiwanese people could not understand his pronunciation sometimes. We asked him what strategies he used to overcome this issue in his interview. The issues he had with listening and pronunciation and the strategies he used were turned into study abroad lesson materials (see Figure 3). Incorporating actual student voices from real encounters can lend validity to lesson and training materials. Students can then try to imagine what they would do in a particular situation, generating several ideas on how to improve their pronunciation, for example, or other issues that a person abroad may be faced with.



**Figure 3. An example of lesson materials based on interview data with Hiroshi.**

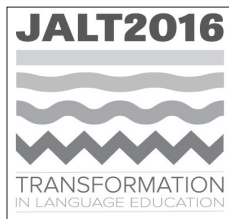
Note: \*This figure illustrates a way to strategize about improving pronunciation.

### Yuki

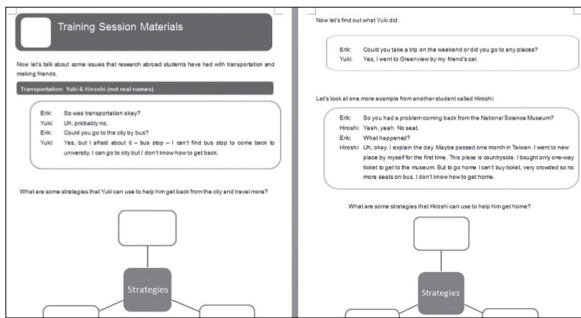
During his stay of just over a month at a university in the US, Yuki posted 17 posts on his blog in Japanese, which he allowed the authors to access. All posts were translated into English by one of the authors. In addition, Yuki kept a daily journal in English, which had 38 entries. Each day’s events, thoughts, and schedule were recorded. In his English journal on his second day, Yuki wrote, “I went to dinner with [X] universitie’s (sic) member. I could understand what they talk. But I couldn’t make sentence for talk. I’m afraid of life in [X] university.” Using quotes like these from students’ actual experiences in the classroom or for study abroad training sessions can help students prepare for what they may also experience when living abroad in a new environment. Asking students to think of strategies to navigate these kinds of likely situations has the potential to aid in the initial adjustment of life overseas.

Another issue the authors noticed from coding the interview data from the participants was that some students had transportation problems. See Figure 4 for Yuki’s transportation problem.

Yuki was afraid of not being able to get back to the university because he was not familiar with the city bus system. By showing prospective study abroad students or students studying a language in a classroom these kinds of situations, students can begin to imagine the kinds of everyday worries and fears that can prevent them from a fuller study abroad or travel experience. Working through common troubles, and by talking about what to do in these everyday situations in class or in training sessions can hopefully prepare students more to find strategies to overcome some of their worries.



42nd Annual International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning & Educational Materials Exhibition  
**November 25–28, 2016**  
 WINC Aichi, Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture, Japan



**Figure 4.** An example of the training session materials created based on interview data.

Note: \*This figure illustrates some issues Yuki and Hiroshi had with transportation that allow students to find possible solutions.

### Eri

During her 43 days conducting research abroad at a university in the US, Eri sent emails and updated her Facebook about her experiences. From her posts and emails, it seemed that Eri had a nice experience with few problems. On her last Facebook update, Eri wrote (translated), “My studying in the U.S. was really fun from beginning to end. I’ll miss everyone. I’m glad to have had such a wonderful time and experiences, and to have met fantastic friends.” When I asked about making friends with her laboratory members in the interview, however, Eri had a difficult time.

Eri: I’m hard to make a friends because lab in the PhD students only. And another lab is PhD students only. I...it is trouble to make friends.

Author: Oh really? Why? How...can you talk more about that?

Eri: The PhD students is very friendly. They are...they think me friends but I respect them. For me it’s different...different for, yeah, friends. [...]

Eri: In Japan we are [including Eri] ...graduate students is top in my lab. But the [PhD students in Indiana] are more three years perform their research. Their skill and brain is very intelligent. When I have a trouble they’re teach me to fix my trouble.

Here Eri talks about her difficulty making friends with her lab members for two reasons: first, they are very busy; and second, Eri sees them as higher in the lab hierarchy, i.e., as mentors, and not as equals, hindering, for her, the ability to become friends. She has still not received her Master’s degree so she

sees her lab members more as people to turn to for expertise and research advice than as people to socialize with outside of university. Cultural attitudes may be a factor here, since in Japan the *senpai* and *kohai* (roughly mentor/senior and mentee/junior) relationship dynamic is common. Eri remarks that the PhD students see her, in fact, as a friend, but she still feels that their seniority is a barrier to becoming friends. Talking about these and other cultural issues (that come directly from the students) in class might also help students understand differences in culture.

### Ken

Ken spent 78 days researching at a university in Germany. He took several photos and shared them with the authors upon his return to Japan. Although finding some difficulty arranging housing, Ken seemed to have a good overall experience. Again, the subject of socializing and making friends came up after one of the first questions.

Author: How was your experience in Germany?

Ken: Uh, at first I feel...I was very nervous. Hmm, at first I, I was alone so I want to... I want to make some friend.

Ken attended an international party at his host university and made some friends who he ended up traveling with to other countries in the region after his research was completed. The authors used this quote to make training session materials about making new friends.

### Training Session

There were 10 attendees at the pre-study abroad training session for the second year OREP students, out of a total of 26 in the program’s second year. The session was not mandatory. The schedule of the training session (see Figure 5) started with the topic of adjusting to a new culture. This was followed by two brainstorming sessions on the topics of transportation and making friends which were chosen based on the analysis of data received from students and from the interviews.

For the first topic, the authors asked students to draw how they thought they would feel during their time abroad (mood versus time) and then showed them the graphs of the four students who had gone the previous year (see Figure 2). One student remarked in the survey, “I’m relieved to know everyone will experience periods of feeling high and low during study abroad.” Students also produced graphs of what percentage of English they

thought they would use while abroad and were then presented with the previous students' language use graphs (see Figure 1).

Students seemed to appreciate how we incorporated real student data and situations. One student remarked, "It was good to know some examples of possible situations we may experience. We could discuss real situations." Another student wrote, "Through referring to previous data, we had a good opportunity to get ready for problems with transportation and making friends." Lastly, students also made comments about wanting more pre-study abroad training sessions. "I hope more of these kinds of sessions will be held," one student wrote. All ten students found the session at least somewhat helpful, with eight students checking "useful" and two "somewhat useful." The other choices were "unsatisfied" or "not sure." All comments were anonymous and translated into English by one of the researchers.

### Researching Abroad Training Session Program

#### I. Adjusting to a new culture (20 minutes)

1. Draw feelings/time graph (projected)
2. Share graph with your group
3. Look at previous research abroad students' graphs
4. Briefly talk about adjusting to a new culture

#### II. Transportation (15 minutes)

5. Give transportation scenarios and groups come up with advice or solutions
6. Reveal what previous research abroad students actually did

#### III. Making friends (15 minutes)

7. Brainstorm ways to meet new people and make friends
8. Reveal what students last year did to make new friends and meet people

#### IV. Q&A (10 minutes)

9. Students make questions together in their groups
10. Go over questions together as a class

**Figure 5. Researching abroad training session program.**

### Implications

In this study, the participants were graduate students in STEM fields studying in labs abroad, but any teacher or international center staff member could adapt this style—interviewing students, transcribing data, and using that data to make activities and training sessions—for any kind of study abroad experience. Even if students do not provide infor-

mation during their experience abroad, the post study abroad interview can still provide a wealth of information that can be mined for possible use in a training session or lesson plan.

Universities that do not offer training sessions or preparation programs for students should take into account that students do need support, and that this support can make a difference in the adjustment of their academic and social lives during their study abroad experiences.

### Suggestions for Further Research

More interviews, both additional interviews with the same students and more interviews with returnees from the OREP, could provide richer data to showcase not only the commonalities of students' experiences studying abroad, but also the variability and uniqueness of each student's experience. In addition, interviewing returnees who have taken part in training sessions could be beneficial to understanding how effective or useful the training sessions indeed were.

### References

- Gebhard, J. G. (2013). EFL Learners studying abroad: Challenges and strategies. *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly*, 15(3), 155–182.
- Trice, A. G. (2004). Mixing it up: International graduate students' social interactions with American students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45(6), 671–687.
- Wang, J. (2009). A study of resiliency characteristics in the adjustment of international graduate students at American universities. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(1), 22–45.

**Erik Fritz** has been teaching English in Japan for the past 10 years. His research areas include assessment, vocabulary, and study abroad programs.



**Junko Murao** has been a university lecturer in Japan for over 15 years. She is interested in researching e-learning programs, study abroad programs, and textbook and material design.

