

# Narrative frames to assess overseas experiences

Tamara Swenson  
Osaka Jogakuin College  
Brad Visgatis  
Osaka International  
University

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One issue for study abroad program administrators is understanding the students' experiences. This paper discusses the use of the narrative frame structure, a tool from qualitative research, to provide a fuller picture of the overseas study experiences of a small group. Narratives frames collect data in the form of a "small story." This paper discusses the use of narrative frames to assess the overseas experiences of a small group of students' (N = 4). When combined with other small stories, the data provide more detail about the successes and problems of the study abroad experiences than can be obtained from surveys. This in turn can facilitate improvements in the pre-departure preparation students receive. Use of the narrative frames and suggestions for future use of narrative frames with similar programs are also discussed.

海外学習プログラムの担当者の懸念事項のひとつに、学生の海外での経験を理解するということがある。この論文は、質的な研究の手法の1つであるナレーティブ・フレーム（物語枠組み）を用いて、学生4名の経験を紹介する。この手法を使用し、「小さい物語」の形式で集めたデータを組み合わせると、海外学習プログラムの長所と短所をアンケートで得られるものより詳細に知ることができる。それによって、担当者が学生の出発前の準備の改善に役立てることができる。最後に、今後の他の同様のプログラムへのナレーティブ・フレームの使用に関する提案についても考察する。

**O**NE OF the issues for any study abroad program is understanding the students' experiences. Surveys are commonly used to provide post-program assessments, but these often fail to capture a full picture of the events that shaped students' experiences, including their preparation, their time abroad, and their post-program feelings regarding the time abroad. The use of the narrative frame structure, a tool from qualitative research (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008), can provide a fuller picture of the overseas study experiences. Narratives frames collect data in the form of a "small story" (Barkhuizen, 2010). When combined with other small stories, the data provide more detail about the successes and problems of the study abroad experiences than can be obtained from surveys. This in turn can facilitate improvements in the pre-departure preparation the next group of students receive.

## Narrative frames

Quantitative research traditions generally seek an understanding of student experiences by employing surveys to assess these events and provide a broad understanding of the group's



experiences. However, the difficulty of gathering data from small groups has led to the use of other research techniques. Qualitative research methods, including narrative frames, generally seek to collect rich data by making interconnections between points, often assigning meaning to the data after collection has occurred and often, though not always, eschewing the quantification of this data. Within this tradition, narrative inquiry focuses on lived experiences, employing one of the first ways people used to convey information: stories or narratives.

More importantly, narratives are perhaps the most common way people convey information. A listing of the facts of any event is generally of little interest to others. But when we tell a story of an event, as in, “Yesterday, we got into town late, but we were still a little hungry so we decided to get something to eat after we got to the hotel . . .” both piques the interest of listeners and allows the storyteller to create an understanding of the events. Jerome Bruner (2004) suggests that the telling of lived experiences, the narratives, “and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future” (p. 708). Research into the ways in which people in different cultures recall events in the form of stories suggests that the narrative form is universal across cultures (e.g., Ebbeck, 1996; Mandler, Scribner, Cole & DeForest, 1980) and provides for better recall than a listing of events (e.g., Rogoff & Waddell, 1982). The telling of stories serves to set them in our minds, understand the experiences, and transmit this understanding to others.

For researchers, the use of narratives, of which narrative frames represents one specific type, replicates for research purposes the human tendency to see events in terms of a series generally described in a story form.

We seem to have no other way of describing ‘lived time’ save in the form of a narrative. Which is not to say that there are not other temporal forms that can be imposed on the experience of time, but none of them succeeds in capturing the sense of *lived* time: not clock or calendrical time forms, not serial or cyclical orders, not any of these. (Bruner, 2004, p. 692, emphasis original)

Within the qualitative research traditions, narratives provide researchers with a tool for obtaining data about the phenomenon under consideration that allows for a clearer understanding of a small group’s experiences. “Narratives are socially constrained forms of action, socially situated performances, ways of acting in and making sense of the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 641). To make sense of the world, “[n]arrative researchers treat narrative – whether oral or written – as a distinct form of discourse. Narrative is retrospective meaning – the shaping or order of past experience” (Chase, 2005, p. 656). As Riessman (2002) points out, “[l]ocating narratives of personal experience for analysis is not difficult” (p. 219), while also arguing that narratives be preserved to retain the full meaning of the story. More importantly for researchers, narratives, including the narrative frame structure, provides “a method to uncover the commonalities that exist across the stories” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 14).

Barkhuizen (2010) points out that narrative frames are an *instrument* for collecting data, not a methodology, theory, or philosophy. As an instrument, narrative frames can be used to bring together different stories from different people in order to extract the commonalities in their stories. Narrative frame instruments have been used to examine the experiences of teachers (Barkhuizen, 2009; Barkhuizen & Benson, 2008; Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008), pre-migrant imagined identities and learning (Barkhuizen & de Klerk, 2006; de Klerk & Barkhuizen, 2004), and post-migration life and language learning (Barkhuizen, 2006). Narrative frames resemble in structure the types of



scaffolding Warwich and Maloch (2003) see as important for developing skills in both reading and writing. The structure of narrative frames provides the writer with “guidance and support in terms of both the content and structure of what is to be written” (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008, p. 276), allowing the researcher to collect the story that is both relevant to the experiences and comparable between participants.

The construction of the narrative frame itself consists of a number of anchor points followed by blanks that serve to constrain the way the narrative unfolds by dictating what type of information occurs in which sequence and in which relation to other information (see Figure 1 and Appendix 1). The anchor points are set within the narrative, rather than appearing in list form, in order to make the layout more closely resemble the story structure students are familiar with and, therefore, easy to complete based on their experiences. The anchor points in the narrative frame also provide support to the writer by helping elicit ideas. This form of writing frame provides “starters, connectives, and sentence modifiers which gives children a structure within which they can concentrate on communicating what they want to say whilst scaffolding them in the use of a particu-

lar generic form” (Wray & Lewis, 1997, p. 122). In order to fill in the blanks, participants formulate the narrative in a certain way (sequentially as well as thematically), with a focus on the areas that the researcher is targeting for investigation. As Barkhuizen and Wette (2008) point out, “narrative frames provide guidance and support in terms of both the content and structure of what is to be written” (p. 276). Although frames constrain the content and sequence, they allow participants to use their own language and terminology and provide the researcher with better points for comparison. This results in data points that are related to each other in a specific way (i.e., their place in the narrative) but still personalized.

### *Study abroad programs*

Once considered a luxury, study abroad programs are now viewed as a necessity, with more universities establishing programs and more students participating in them. Most programs are designed to address multiple objectives: academic/intellectual, professional, personal, and intercultural (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006). Anderson et al. (2006)

I began studying at Abcd University \_\_\_\_\_ ago. When I first started  
studying at Abcd U., I decided to \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_. I also \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_. So I \_\_\_\_\_ ...

Figure 1. Example of the structure of narrative frames, with textual anchor points and space for the participants to write their own narratives, used to help university students begin writing their own stories

found programs increase participants' intercultural understanding, though Tsuneyoshi (2005) questions the Japanese program she examined regarding these findings. Regardless, Gillespie (2002) points out that while the academic aspects of programs are reviewed regularly, there is a lack of research regarding the other program objectives and argues for the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods of assessment of overseas study programs.

## The Study

### *Aim of study & participants*

The key issues for this study were to understand the commonalities of the experiences of a small group of students ( $n = 4$ ) participating in an overseas internship and determine what changes should be made in the pre-departure program to better prepare students for the internship and home stay. This study employs narrative frame as an instrument for gathering the data needed to understand these experiences and improve future preparation programs.

The participants, university students in their third or fourth year majoring in either business or communication, spent six weeks in an L1 English country as assistant Japanese teachers at five secondary schools in four separate communities. They stayed with families in the host country, giving them both work (teaching) and home experiences. The minimum TOEIC score for program participants is 650.

Prior to departure, program participants attended six 50-minute workshop sessions. Sessions 1 to 3 were designed to prepare them for the life abroad, provide cross-cultural communication training, and help them manage their expectations regarding their home stay and work environments. Sessions 4 and 5 provided training in talking about Japanese culture, general advice on language teaching, and some teaching techniques to prepare for their internship

duties. Session 6 reviewed the preparation topics and covered issues related to their travel and emergencies.

Upon return, participants wrote short essays regarding their experiences and made presentations of about 20 minutes about these experiences. These elements were part of the requirements for credit in the program. In addition to these elements, the participants were asked to complete the narrative frames to provide the program administrators with information they could use to compare the students experiences, gain information about internships, and improve the pre-departure training program. This paper analyzes the narrative frames.

### *Instrument*

The narrative frame for this study consists of two parts, a section for brainstorming prior to writing the story and the narrative frame itself (see Appendix 1). Samples of the completed brainstorming sections and one of the stories are given in Appendices 2 and 3 (all names are pseudonyms).

### *Results & discussion*

Upon completion, the researchers examined the narrative frames to determine the themes in the stories and arrive at an understanding of the commonalities in the stories. Analysis of narrative frame stories is recursive. Possible themes in the stories were identified. Themes in one narrative were confirmed or modified by reference to those appearing in other narratives. For this project, the researchers were challenged to consider alternate interpretations before deciding on the best fit to the data. Throughout the process, the data are assigned codes, allowing for the stories to be compared. The small size of the data set precluded intercoder reliability procedures as the researchers jointly coded all narrative frame stories and reached agreement on the themes present.



Twelve themes were identified in the four stories created through the narrative frame process: a) Reasons for joining program, b) Preparation (including pre-departure knowledge of country), c) Internship tasks, d) Satisfaction with the program, e) Dissatisfaction with the program, f) Personal effort during the internship, g) Personal improvement through the program, h) Free time activities, i) Host family experience, j) Overall view of program upon return, and k) Suggestions for next year's

students (general and specific). The recursive coding of the stories allows the themes to be identified, the stories compared, and the comments considered by the program administrators. The results of this comparison appear in Table 1. In this table, the numbers represent the appearance of each theme within the four narratives, with narratives containing multiple instances of the identified themes.

**Table 1. Themes identified in narratives and the frequency of themes (in parentheses)**

<i>(1) Reasons for Joining the Program</i>	<i>(2) Preparation for Program</i>	<i>(3) Internship Tasks</i>
Future goals (4)	Teaching preparation (3)	Aide (4)
Current goals, education (3)	Japanese culture study (2)	Motivate students (2)
Enjoyment (2)	Study of country (2)	Teach alone (1)
Knowledge (1)		Teach Japanese culture (1)
<i>(4) Dissatisfaction with Work &amp; Internship Program</i>	<i>(5) Areas of Personal Effort in Program</i>	<i>(6) Areas of Personal Improvement through Program</i>
Insufficient tasks (3)	Be involved (2)	English skill (2)
Lack Japanese grammar (1)	Teach Japanese culture (1)	Japanese skill (2)
Non-Japanese classes (1)	Help teachers (1)	Knowledge of Japanese culture (1)
	Learn about country (1)	Image of Japanese (1)
	Meet people (1)	
<i>(7) Satisfaction with Work &amp; Internship Program</i>	<i>(8) Comments on Host Family Experience</i>	<i>(9) View of Program upon Return to Japan</i>
Students (3)	Personal relationship (3)	Positive experience (4)
Teaching Japanese (2)	Family atmosphere (3)	Visit again (2)
Helping teachers (1)	Helpful (2)	Program too long (1)
	Teaching about Japan (1)	Negative experience (1)



(10) Free Time Activities During Program	(11) Other Comments on Experience	(12) Suggestions for Next Year's Students (General)
Observed at work (2) Activities with students (2) Activities with colleagues (1) Shopping (2) Sightseeing (2) Housework (1)	Personally meaningful (4) Better than study program (1) Positive & negative (1)	Prepare for teaching more, participate (3) Research Japan (2) Lower expectations (1) Increase time (1) Decrease time (1) Speak to people (1)
<hr/> <i>(13) Suggestions for Next Year's Participants (Specific)</i> <hr/>		
Study Japan, traditional & pop culture (3) Prepare activities, items (3) Study Japanese grammar (2) Study English pronunciation (1) Learn about country (1) Take PC (1) Go with others (1)		

To illustrate, when coding the reason for joining the program, the anchor point, "I decided to take part in this program because I wanted" led to the participants writing:

1. to learn how to teach in oversea and also how to learn Japanese
2. to write about something related with education on my [senior thesis]
3. to go to [country]
4. to see students use the Japanese I taught

They continued these ideas following the next anchor point, "I also thought" which led to:

5. I wanted to teach because I liked teaching my friend

6. I should go this program as a Internship because I am taking a teaching course now
7. wanted to enjoy my last summer holiday in university
8. I need to study abroad to be Japanese business woman

These completions in the narrative frame were coded as future goals (1, 4, 6, 8); current goals, education (2, 5, 6); enjoyment (3, 7); knowledge (4). Clearly, other coding is possible from the completion sentences provided by participants, but the themes identified were considered by these researchers to be appropriate for the data. This information, distilled, points to the reasons for joining as well as suggestions for improving the pre-departure preparation program.



The narrative frame responses indicate that participants enter the program for multiple reasons (see Table 1 and discussion above), had some preparation for the program and participated primarily as an aide during the program. However, while all narratives indicated that there was some point they enjoyed about the program and were involved in a variety of tasks in their work place, they felt dissatisfied with a few aspects, especially the lack of tasks to do in their work place. Specific areas of personal improvement, particularly those related to knowledge of Japan and Japanese culture, were also noted in the narratives. Beyond their work tasks, participants took place in out-of-work activities ranging from observing other classes and activities with students, to participating in activities with their teaching colleagues and tourism. Host family experiences were also generally positive, though some problems were noted. Both general and specific suggestions for the next year's program were made.

The stories from the participants indicate that a number of changes should be made in the pre-departure preparation workshops that the participants receive. The primary one is the need to add a Japanese-language teaching component, with an emphasis on explaining Japanese grammar in English. In response to the anchor point "Moreover, I think the students going on this internship next year should," one participant wrote:

- know Japanese games exactly that you were doing in elementary school

Following the anchor point, "They also need to," the same participant continued:

- learn Japanese a little such as how to teach the difference between "ichi" and "hitotsu" [Japanese counters]

Similar responses appeared in other narratives (see Table 1). The need for pre-departure training in teaching Japanese is a clear from these. Moreover, the narratives indicate that the pre-departure program needs deeper coverage of Japanese culture, particularly knowledge of Japanese popular culture (animé

and *manga*), of interest to native English speakers at secondary schools, some coverage or review of Japanese history in English, and practice explaining Japanese children's games to native speakers of English. The narrative frame responses also suggest a component focusing on the host country's culture to help prepare participants for the home stay experiences.

The narratives also indicate that changes need to be made at the host institutions so that the interns are able to participate more fully in their workplaces. The lack of duties and the amount of free time during the workday, and the issue of insufficient tasks noted in the narratives, indicate that the program participants need to receive training on requesting duties while at the same time the host institutions need to be asked to involve the interns more in the school and work environment. The narrative frame data, therefore, have indicated a number of areas that can be improved in order to enhance the program both prior to departure and while in the host country.

## Conclusions

Like all research instruments, narrative frames have their limitations. These include frustration on the part of the writer over too little or too much space or the demands of following a structure that the writer may not prefer. Moreover, the prompts may be interpreted in ways not intended by the researchers, the researchers' interpretation of the narrative text may not be the writer's, or another researcher may arrive at a alternative interpretation of the text. There is also the problem of depersonalizing the story. Furthermore, the language of the narrative frame must also be considered. For this group of learners, who have had at least two years of English academic writing, the use of English for the narratives was considered appropriate. However, the use of the writer's L1, in this case Japanese, may have led to a deeper understanding of the experiences and clearer recognition of the changes that need to be made in the pre-departure





program to better prepare future internship groups.

Though these limitations of narrative frames must be kept in mind. As an instrument for collecting data, method narrative frames provide more in depth information than surveys, focus attention on the points of concern to researchers and program administrators, are relatively easy to complete, and give a fuller picture of the experience. These advantages are particularly important for trying to understand the commonality of experiences at disparate locations for a small group of participants.

For study abroad program administrators, this study suggests that the narrative frame structure is a useful tool for obtaining data about students' overseas experiences when participant numbers are inappropriate for the use of a traditional survey. Moreover, narrative frames could be used alone or in conjunction with participant surveys given to larger groups to arrive at a more accurate understanding of learner experiences, particularly when direct observation of the experiences is not feasible. Researchers should consider adding the narrative frame structure as a tool to their research toolbox.

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## Bio data

**Tamara Swenson**, PhD communication, is a professor in the Department of English and International Interdisciplinary Studies, Osaka Jogakuin College.

**Brad Visgatis**, is a professor in the Faculty of Human Sciences, Department of Psychology and Communication, Osaka International University.

## Appendix I

### Internship narrative frame: Brainstorming & narrative frame used for study

Take a few minutes to think about what you did in your internship program.

**Internship program**

Country

Host family

My job

I wish that I had known

Work

Free time activities

People I met

The community

People at work

Problems I had at work

Things I liked about my work

Now that I am back in Osaka

Things I did at work

Surprises

The food

I wish I had

Things I did not like about my work

Boss

While there

Before going

Something I recommend to others

I want to learn how to ...

One thing I did well

notes



Once you have thought about the program and made some notes, please complete the following sentences to tell us more about your internship experiences and help us improve the program in the future.

I took part in the internship program to (country) \_\_\_\_\_ . I decided to take part in this program because I wanted \_\_\_\_\_ . I also thought \_\_\_\_\_ . One thing I knew about \_\_\_\_\_ before I went was \_\_\_\_\_ . I also knew \_\_\_\_\_ . I prepared for my internship by \_\_\_\_\_ . Also, I \_\_\_\_\_ .

Once I got to (country) \_\_\_\_\_ , I went to (city) \_\_\_\_\_ . When I got there, I started to work at (name of company) \_\_\_\_\_ . At work, I \_\_\_\_\_ . I also \_\_\_\_\_ . One thing I enjoyed at work was \_\_\_\_\_ . However, I didn't like \_\_\_\_\_ . During my internship, I tried to \_\_\_\_\_ . I also worked on improving \_\_\_\_\_ .

In addition to my time at work, I also had some free time. During my free time I \_\_\_\_\_ .

\_\_\_\_\_ . Another thing I did was \_\_\_\_\_ .

\_\_\_\_\_ . My host family helped me by \_\_\_\_\_ .

One thing that I liked about staying with them was \_\_\_\_\_ .

Now that I am back in Japan, when I think about my stay I feel \_\_\_\_\_ .

I also wish that \_\_\_\_\_ .

One thing that might help students going there next year would be \_\_\_\_\_ .

I also suggest \_\_\_\_\_ .

Moreover, I think the students going on this internship next year should \_\_\_\_\_ .

They also need to \_\_\_\_\_ .

This will help the students to have a great experience. Finally, I just want to say this about the program, I think that the internship program \_\_\_\_\_ .

Thank you.



## Appendix 2

### Allison's & Carol's Brainstorming Notes

#### Allison's notes

**Japanese classroom teacher**

- ↳ taught classes (7/9-11)
- check assignments / correct
- monitor
- teach the script
- calligraphy / stroke orders
- conversation, etc.
- copying

↳ My boss was really kind but busy cuz she was also a Drama teacher / ss. Sometimes felt like luck at communication. Little bit.

↳ All the teachers were nice, they took me out on the weekends!!

**problems** → taught in two Japanese individually & observed / helped other classes, pulled starts with students, went for walk, → understood how difficult it is to be a teacher, manage class different teaching style.

**problems** → one student got too close @ I had to talk to my teacher & him about it.

**perennial** → a lot of teachers not Japanese culture. → a lot of vocab to explain grammar. Just so each kid talk to as many ppl, try many things.

**libel** → check papers, and making corrections. Disliked none but teaching grammar was really difficult.

**problems**

- pronunciation + English grammar, not read was nice, but too much sugar, oil and butter!! # potatoes!!
- hated the way they do dishes.
- shower / water
- too cold
- nice distance from the school

#### Carol's notes

**New Zealand**

- \* Host family
- 2 years old brother introduced tuturu
- went to his friends house

**\* people at work**

- Gentle people
- relief teacher
- Staff room

**\* Before going**

- searched
- bilingual material
- cheap things

**\* Work**

- pronunciation
- modify
- Show Japanese things
- spoke to students, different lifestyle
- knew their favorite Japanese things:
- excellent students, okonomiyaki
- origami, biryo, icing, Toy greeting

**\* problems**

- couldn't catch their language
- pay → pai
- best → bist

**things:**

- ate fish & chips with host father & brother every Friday.
- lended me byscle

## Appendix 3:

### Betty's story (in bold)

I took part in the internship program to (country) XXXXX. I decided to take part in this program because **I wanted to learn how to teach in oversea and also how to learn Japanese.** I also thought **I should go this program as a Internship because I am taking a teaching course now.** One thing I knew about (country) XXXXX before I went was **it is a XXXX where gather from many immigrants.** I also knew **they are protecting and cherish nature or animals.** I prepared for my internship by **knowing about XXXXX.** Also, **I prepared for origami and I studied how to teach it in English.**

Once I got to (country) XXXXX, I went to (city) XXXXX. When I got there, I started to work at (name of company) XXXX. At work, **I has done the assistance of Japanese classes as teach to students who need help.** I also helped teachers who are **New Zealander.** One thing I enjoyed at work was **I could see how non-Japanese are learning Japanese in English.** However, I didn't like **explaining it to students who couldn't understand and ask because it's a little difficult for me.** During my internship, I tried to teach origami, Japanese games such as **Daruma-sangokoronda [a "Freeze/Run" game]** and **Osaka dialect.** I also worked on **improving my Japanese and English.** I could learn Japanese more such a relate to Japanese tradition.

In addition to my time at work, I also had some free time. During my free time **I was hanging out with my students.** We went to **karaoke, bowling, shopping, movie theater and so on.** Another thing I did was **made Japanese food to my students.** My host family helped me by **speaking English clearly because they speak XXXX English so hearing was a little difficult for me.** One thing that I liked about staying with them was **they like animals same as me so we wen to XXXX zoo as a volunteer.**

Now that I am back in Japan, **when I think about my stay I feel they were really kind, the experience in there was really good for me and so one.** I also wish **that I will have a chance to go there again in the future.** One thing that might help students going there next year would be **good experience.** I also suggest **it will be a good opportunity for students who are taking a teaching training course.** Moreover, I think the students going on this internship next year should **know Japanese games exactly that you were doing in elementary school.** They also **need to learn Japanese a little such as how to teach the difference between “ichi” and “hitotsu” [Japanese counters].** This will help the students to have a great experience. Finally, I just want to say that **I think the internship program was really good and gave me the best memories. I cannot possibly put my thanks into words to them but I will never forget that.** Thank you.

