

Student Perspectives on a Short-Term Study Abroad Experience

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Research that uncovers Japanese undergraduate student perspectives in connection to the short-term study abroad experience can provide valuable insights for educational program developers. The current study focused on what Japanese university students visiting Canada on a short-term study abroad program felt were the ideal elements of this kind of educational experience. Data were collected from participants at four points before and during the experience. Qualitative data analysis methods were used to identify the most prominent themes. Findings pointed to meaningful intercultural encounters, rich content-focused classroom experiences, and varied extra-curricular activities as being the key elements of an effective program. However, program developers should be mindful that intercultural encounters may not occur naturally, and extra-curricular activities might not happen spontaneously. Creating an ideal short-term study abroad program involves finding ways to encourage organic intercultural encounters and providing unique and engaging activities outside of the classroom.

本研究は、日本人短期留学生の視点から留学を捉えることが、有意義な留学プログラムを作成する重要な手がりとなりうることを明らかにしたものである。調査は、カナダに留学した日本人大学生のグループを対称とし、短期留学において最も重要な要素は何かという点について留学前、留学中に計4回おこなった。そのデータを定性的に分析した結果、学生にとって理想的な短期留学とは、有意義な異文化体験、内容重視の授業、そして様々な授業外活動を含む留学であることが明らかになったのだが、有意義な異文化体験や授業外活動は、海外に来たというだけで自然に発生するものではなく、生徒の自主性だけに任せたプログラムでは、うまくいかないことが多い。それゆえ、理想的な短期留学プログラムの作成にあたっては、生徒が自然に異文化体験ができる方法や留学先ならではの授業外活動をどのように提供できるかという点を考慮して、プログラムを作成する必要がある。

LEARNERS OF English as an additional language, including those from Japan, may not always have the opportunity to take long periods of time out of an undergraduate program of study in order to pursue language acquisition in an overseas immersion context. In addition, there are costs and program interruptions associated with studying abroad for longer periods of time that can be a burden for some students. As a result, short-term study abroad programs are becoming increasingly attractive (Jackson, 2008). However, these programs still represent a considerable financial investment. Research investigating the value of the experience gleaned from such programs can contribute to understanding the elements of an effective short-term study abroad program. In this paper, the terms ideal, successful, positive, meaningful, and effective are used interchangeably with the short-term study abroad experience to refer to both the educational benefits and students'



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overall satisfaction and enjoyment of the experience from the point of view of the participants in this study.

This paper reports on the findings of a quality assurance study into Japanese student perceptions of a short-term study abroad experience in British Columbia, Canada. The aim of this qualitative study was to create a space for participant voices to be heard and accounted for. By understanding what students feel are the ideal elements of a short-term study abroad program, researchers can gather information for education programmers who are developing learning experiences for visiting international students from Japan.

The Short-Term Study Abroad Experience

For the purposes of this study, short-term study abroad programs are defined as postsecondary educational programs involving English language teaching and consisting of less than 4 weeks of study. Short-term programs can take many forms, with a wide variety of complex variables that affect students who are often more diverse than most educators realize (Jackson, 2008). These variables can include program length, student relationships, living arrangements, and instructional practices (Churchill & DuFon, 2006). Although short-term study abroad programs are complex and difficult to organize, they are a worthwhile endeavour as the experience can be life changing for international students who take advantage of the cultural and language learning opportunities surrounding them (Jackson, 2008). However, the extent of the benefits that short-term study abroad programs offer can be impacted by the extent to which students are received into the study abroad context (Kingerer, 2009). Without meaningful interactions with a host community that is open to welcoming outsiders into their midst, the benefits of study abroad may be lessened. It is these interactions with the local populace that study abroad students typically expect, and these expectations often motivate, and are motivated by, their desire to advance their language skills (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott,

& Brown, 2013). Although short-term study abroad students may want to have a direct experience of another culture, they may, unfortunately, not have many chances to interact with the host culture (Horness, 2014). As a result of the complexity of short-term study abroad programs, there appears to be no simple formula for developing a successful study abroad experience, but encouragement of intercultural interactions is part of a complex recipe for creating a positive learning experience (Benson et al., 2013).

The goal of the current research project is to present understandings of what constitutes an effective short-term study abroad program from the perspective of the students. The study was influenced by a sociocultural understanding of the short-term study abroad experience in which language learning takes place by students using the target language to interact with other people who are also using the target language. In particular, language learning is facilitated if learners communicate with more competent interlocutors who are willing to negotiate meaning (Long, 1996). This creates a space for language learning that bridges what learners can do on their own and what they can do in collaboration with more capable target language users (Vygotsky, 1930s/1978). Meaningful practice with other target language users leads to an eventual internalization of the target language so that target language use can become automatic (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). However, in order for that to happen, opportunities for frequent and purposeful language use are necessary.

Research Questions

The overarching research question for this study dealt with what participants perceived to be the ideal elements of a short-term study abroad program. In the context of their travel and study experiences, answering this question involved exploring what participants hoped to learn, what they enjoyed most, what they recommended, and what they felt they had actually learned.

The Study

Participants

The program was designed specifically for Japanese business majors from a private university in the Kanto region of Japan. There were a total of 30 students; 70% were female and 30% were male. Participants were just under 19 years old on average ($M = 18.8$, $SD = 0.48$). The average TOEIC score of the students was about 875 ($M = 874.5$, $SD = 42.80$). This level of performance on the TOEIC test indicated that participants had a good working proficiency in English and that they were “able to satisfy most requirements with language that is often, but not always, acceptable and effective” (Educational Testing Service [ETS] Canada, n.d.).

The Program and Location

The study took place on the University of British Columbia’s (UBC) Okanagan campus (also known as UBCO) in Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada. The campus, with approximately 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students in a variety of disciplines, is located 400 kilometres from Vancouver in the Okanagan Valley, an agricultural region famous for vineyards and fruit growing. The campus is located about 14 kilometres from downtown Kelowna and is connected to the city centre by regular public transit. Students lived in hotel-type off-campus accommodations close to the university.

Rather than having English language learning as the sole focus of the program, the curriculum for the program was informed by content-based instructional practices (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Snow, 1997) to promote both language learning and content learning at the same time, with the disciplinary content of Business serving as a vehicle for gaining English language skills. The short-term study abroad experience consisted of a 3-week program in the month of February in which students studied 5 to 6 hours per day from Monday to Friday and had the option of participating in organized weekend activities. Mornings consisted of 3 hours of business

communication classes, and the afternoons consisted of 2 hours of business leadership classes. Themes covered during the business communication and the business leadership classes included topics such as business ethics, entering the global market, and intercultural communication. Working in teams, the students completed their studies with a final project that consisted of developing and presenting a marketing plan for the local wine industry, which was evaluated by a panel of judges from the local business and academic community. Students also had to submit a written marketing plan to further develop a market for a product from a local winery. As part of their research, each student visited two local wineries.

The program was supplemented with UBCO class visits, specialized workshops, and guest lectures. Organized extra-curricular activities—such as campus and city tours, participation in local student club activities, lunches at local restaurants, and winter sports activities—were also arranged. In addition to the organized extra-curricular activities, students had free time in the evenings and on weekends for homework and self-organized activities. All students were enrolled in the campus meal plan and ate most of their meals on campus.

Procedures

Data Collection

There were four opportunities for data collection, and all data gathering was conducted in English. While still in Japan, participants each wrote a previsit 100- to 200-word essay about what they hoped to learn from their travel and study experience. During the first week of the program in Canada, concurrent focus groups of three or four participants were used to identify shared understandings (Creswell, 2012) of the ideal elements of a short-term study abroad program, as perceived by the participants. These data were recorded by the participants on a worksheet with blank boxes in which students could write what they perceived to be at least eight

elements of an ideal short-term study abroad program. Immediately after the focus group meetings, participants hand-wrote a half-page paragraph on the one element that they felt was most necessary in an ideal short-term study abroad program. Then, halfway through the program, open-ended surveys were conducted as a mid-program check to ask the students questions on two topics: what they enjoyed most about the program so far and what changes they would suggest and why. Finally, at the end of the program, students answered open-ended questions about what they felt they had learned, what they felt were the strengths of the program, and what they would recommend changing. (See Appendix A for the Mid-Program Check-in and Final Program Evaluation open-ended questions.)

Data Analysis

A qualitative data analysis method was employed to uncover thematic patterns in participant perceptions of the short-term study abroad experience. Data collected for this study were entered into digitized files with participants' language preserved and transcribed directly in order to avoid appropriating student voices. Therefore, representative quotes in this paper contain nonstandard English. Next, the data were coded for meaning, with each code connected to a representative quote, and then sorted into categories that led to an emerging picture of the participants' perceptions following data analysis procedures as recommended by Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012). The categories were collectively analyzed for thematic affinities, and themes were organized according to the number of representative quotes in each theme. The top three themes that collected the greatest numbers of quotes were presented in the results, with each of the top three themes emerging with 12 or more associated quotes and the most representative quotes being reported below. As the data analysis took place, the researcher attempted to approach the data inductively without preconceived thematic notions (see Gay et al., 2012). As a result, the categories were grounded in participants' own perceptions of short-term study abroad programs.

Results

Three major themes arose in the data in connection to what participants felt were the most important elements of a short-term study abroad experience: frequent and meaningful intercultural encounters, rich classroom experiences, and inclusive extra-curricular activities.

Intercultural Encounters

The theme that emerged most clearly in the data was in connection to learning about Canada's culture through encounters with British Columbians and having the opportunity to interact with local Canadians. In the previsit essays, students expressed a strong wish for cultural experiences. One participant stated, "I want to visit many places to learn Canada's culture. . . . I want to find many Canada's good culture through traveling Canada." The students also desired to have encounters with local Canadians. Many students in the previsit essays expressed how they were "looking forward to interacting with the students at UBC." In the focus group meetings, comments about "having conversation with local students" reasserted this desire for intercultural interactions. The paragraphs written after the focus group meetings in the first week also reinforced this theme. In one paragraph, a participant characterised an ideal short-term study abroad program as being one with "opportunit[ies] to make friends who are native language speaker." Other participants also felt this was necessary, as another participant wrote that "[By having] conversations with local students . . . we can learn from them the natural ways of speaking English . . . we should use as many English as we can by speaking and chatting with students from Canada."

In these paragraphs, participants also identified a way to improve opportunities for interaction, which was by living in places such as student residences or local homestay accommodation. For example, a student wrote, "What kinds of phrases native [English speaking] students uses in daily conversation can be learned easily, and you

could make use of them when you speak with roommates next time.” Another student wrote, “I think homestay is most important . . . because we will be able to use language all the time.”

Although there was a strong desire for meaningful encounters with local students and residents in the host community, the mid-program check indicated that participants felt that they weren’t having the intercultural experiences they had hoped for. One student wrote, “Since we are in Canada we want to . . . meet more people that are actually from UBC.” Although they were on a Canadian campus surrounded by users of the target language, it seemed like the participants were not meeting local students. This point was echoed by another student who wrote, “I guess we should at least have some opportunity to be with the students from UBC.”

However, the intercultural experiences that participants did have were considered an important part of the program. In the final evaluations, a student reflected, “I have experienced to take some lectures at UBCO and learned and felt how the UBC students learn and think. So attending some classes are valuable.” In addition to interacting with local students, visits with other people from the Okanagan region were also prized, especially when connected to students’ field of study: “It was really great opportunities to take some UBC’s classes, and meeting the local business people.”

In the end, a recurring theme in the final evaluations was the perceived lack of meaningful intercultural encounters. One student expressed this feeling along with a possible solution by referring to the final marking project: “We wanted more opportunity to communicate with UBCO students. Or maybe we could have done the project together.” In other words, this participant wished local students could have been included in the learning experiences of the Japanese visiting students. This feeling was also represented by another student who wrote, “We should have more contacts to the people in Kelowna. I hear too much Japanese during this stay.”

Classroom Experiences

In the previsit essays, learning connected to the field of business received a high priority. Students wanted their classes to have a business focus. One student reported, “I hope to learn international business that cannot experience if I were in Japan.” It appears that students were looking for a unique educational opportunity that would “enable [them] to think about business strategies from different view.”

Analysis of the data in the paragraphs written in the first week also revealed that, in addition to learning about business, participants also felt it was important that classes be interesting and enjoyable because “if [students] think classes are boring and sleep during classes and stay at the dorm or house during their free time, they will not learn much.” Suggestions to promote interesting classes could be found in the midterm program check; for example, the students appreciated having guest speakers. One participant wrote that the students enjoyed “listening to a UBC real professor’s lecture and having a discussion.” Another student also wrote about one guest speaker she enjoyed, noting that “this lecture was very interesting and a good chance to think.”

Despite having enjoyable experiences such as the guest speakers, when asked during the mid-program check what students would change, participants indicated that there was room for improvement. In particular, participants were looking for the disciplinary content they had indicated they wanted in the previsit essays, with one student expressing the desire for more discussions in class along with “classes about more academic things (business).” This desire for business-related content carried over into the final evaluations. One student wrote, “The classes should be more specific. Since we only have three weeks we have a limited time. We should learn the things we can’t learn in Japan.” As mentioned in the previsit essays, participants were looking for unique experiences, and they did not want to cover materials they could cover in Japan. One student professed, “I thought it would have been better, if we had

the opportunity to experience things we can only do here at UBC, like the classes with [local professors].”

Although there were some reservations expressed in the data, there was a sense that students did feel that they had gained some new content knowledge. In the final evaluations, students wrote extensively about what they had learned about marketing and business in general. One student indicated, “I learned the way of marketing and Okanagan wine industry well. Practical business work both theory and group work. We can make most of this opportunity for real business place.” This feeling was supported by another student who maintained, “I learned business words in English, and I also further learned more business related materials.”

Extra-Curricular Activities

Extra-curricular activities were also touted in the first week paragraphs as an ideal component of a short-term study abroad experience. One student claimed that “partying and sports is the time you can get to talk to people. Being interactional is a good thing when you try to learn second language,” and another student maintained that “when we have free time we should enjoy and have fun . . . this is because only studying might make you bored [sic] after a few while, but if you enjoy playing too, you can be fresh.”

In the mid-program check, extra-curricular activities continued to be a major theme. In addition to participating in activities such as *Zumba*, one student wrote, “I enjoyed ice-skating and eating chicken wings because it was the time I actually felt I’m in Canada.” The idea of having more extra-curricular activities was also prominent in the data from the mid-program check. A student wrote, “I suggest it should contain more activities such as heading for town or go snowboarding, because here is surrounded by nothing so that we are not allowed to do anything.” Another student backed up this sentiment by indicating that “having activity after class will be more fun.”

The desire for more extra-curricular activities was also found in the data from the final evaluations. One student indicated, “We should have had more extra activities as a group. I mean we wanted to go on skatings, sightseeing and skiing as a whole group so we could be more close to each other.” Students’ reflections in the final evaluations suggested that the extra-curricular activities that they had experienced were one of the program’s strengths. In particular, one student seemed to enjoy the business related field trips: “. . . connection with wineries. It’s pleasure to visit the place that we’re going to promote and doing fieldwork.” The uniqueness of the out-of-class activities was also emphasized in the data, with another student maintaining, “We could visit the winery and experience it by ourselves, which was good since we don’t have any opportunity to visit winery in Japan.”

Discussion

Although it might be assumed by educational planners that Japanese students coming to Canada are primarily looking for opportunities to develop their English language proficiency, the picture emerging from the data shows the reality to be more complex. Although the desire to practice and improve English language skills did appear from time to time and may have been an underlying motivation, from the participants’ perspectives, it did not appear to be a primary factor in creating an ideal short-term study abroad experience. In general, the hope for meaningful intercultural encounters with the local English-speaking population was most prominent. This theme was followed closely in prominence by themes connected to content-rich classroom experiences and varied and abundant extra-curricular activities.

The prominence of participants’ desires to interact with local users of the target language speaks to the students’ understanding that interaction is a key factor of learning English. This desire to interact aligns with Long’s (1996) conclusion that interaction focused on

negotiating meaning with another speaker can promote language learning by connecting language input, learners' natural acquisition abilities, and productive output. Thus, communicating with target language speakers can help to create Vygotsky's (1930s/1978) social space for language development. However, merely being surrounded by local English speakers is not the same as interacting with local English speakers.

From the participants' perspectives, the abundant interactions they hoped for failed to materialize. This finding mirrors Tanaka's (2007) conclusion that study-abroad might not provide as many opportunities to use English outside the classroom as students might anticipate. This lack of interaction may have been, in part, because some participants might have felt shy speaking with locals and unable to take the initiative on their own (Tanaka, 2007). It may also have been because participant attempts to interact with local English speakers were discouraging if the participants were not encouraged by the local people (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2012). Participants expressed the wish that the program planners create opportunities to meet local target language users. This idea is in line with Norton and Toohey's (2011) assertion that teachers can foster social interaction with local users of the target language by being aware of how learners see and understand themselves and how they are seen and understood by others. In addition, program planners cannot assume that international students on short-term programs will naturally find opportunities to mix with the local population. Planned interactions, such as integration into local classrooms aligned with students' disciplinary interests or invitations to take part in local student club events, may be necessary to fulfil participants' desires to use English with local English speakers in meaningful and extensive exchanges.

The findings also support a *language-through-content* approach to program planning. Rich classroom experiences were a vital element of an ideal short-term study abroad program for participants, and learning disciplinary content knowledge was an important part of

those classroom experiences. The implication for program planners is that contextualized language learning that takes place alongside the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge is what short-term study abroad students may be looking for. The data also gave a strong sense that participants were hoping to gain content knowledge that might not be readily accessible in Japan. Thus, program planners should take into careful consideration what students are studying in their home institutions in order not to repeat content students feel they have already mastered. However, although it is important to take student perceptions of their prior learning into consideration, it may also be the case that students want to tackle materials that they may not be ready for. A careful balance needs to be struck so that student interest in the classroom activities is maintained without employing overly difficult materials that would impede language- and content-learning goals.

It was further evident that students' free time also needs to be adequately organized so that there are varied and inclusive extra-curricular activities in the evenings and on the weekends. There was a strong sense that the participants were looking for experiences that they would not have in Japan. Although the participants wanted to have a distinct feeling that they were in Canada, they also wanted these activities to be arranged for the whole group so that all participants could take part in a shared experience.

The implications of the findings of this study are limited by being related to just one program that took place in British Columbia. However, by examining what students in the current study perceived to be important in a short-term study abroad experience, valuable insights can be gathered for future program development. For example, housing participants in on-campus student residences and hiring local student ambassadors to interact with students outside of class could facilitate opportunities for interactions with the host community and provide participants with a local student experience. In the classroom, adopting an inquiry-based approach, in which students form the questions that guide their studies, can

complement content and language-integrated learning, support student autonomy, and shape their learning experiences to fit their disciplinary interests. Finally, taking advantage of evenings and weekends to plan organized extra-curricular activities led by local student ambassadors could help short-term study abroad students make the most of their free time in a new and unfamiliar place. These are examples of ideas currently being considered for implementation in future iterations of this program.

Future studies could focus on programs with students from a wider range of cultural backgrounds. Investigations into the perceptions of members of the host culture, such as local students, would also be valuable for understanding, from their point of view, why natural interactions don't always take place and what would encourage organic intercultural encounters between short-term international students and the local population.

In sum, it appears that simple exposure to the target language community is not adequate for a meaningful short-term study abroad experience. As increasing opportunities for short-term study at Canadian institutions become available for Japanese students, a closer examination of what they want in an overseas experience and what the host culture may offer can begin to create a satisfactory bridge for intercultural interaction. As Jackson (2008) pointed out, overall careful planning, diligent implementation, and adequate resources are needed for an effective overseas study experience.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Mid-Program Check-in and Final Program Evaluation Open-Ended Questions

Mid-Program Check-in Survey Open-Ended Questions

- What do you enjoy most about the program?
- What changes would you suggest for the program and why?

Final Program Evaluation Open-Ended Questions

- What did you learn? How did this program change you?
- What are the strengths of this program?
- How could this program be improved?
- What activities/program features would you recommend changing and why?
- What additional activities or program features should we add if we run this course again?
- Is there anything else that we should know? Please provide any further comments below.