

An NPRM Approach to Study Abroad-Related Motivation and Anxiety

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Reference Data:

Lingley, D. (2015). An NPRM approach to study abroad-related motivation and anxiety. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *JALT2014 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper describes a project designed to measure the potential for near peer role models (NPRMs) to enhance motivation via online video calls, in terms of enhancing motivation to study abroad and reducing the anxiety associated with such an endeavor. Although the use of NPRMs has garnered much attention for its effectiveness in promoting positive attitudes in relation to English language learning, the primary goal of this project was to measure the effect of NPRMs in altering perceptions and feelings related to studying abroad. By utilizing online video telecommunications software, the participants were shown examples of ideal models engaged in highly desirable activities to highlight the possibility of achieving a similar outcome. The results showed an enhancement in motivation and a reduction in anxiety regarding studying abroad.

本研究は、インターネットビデオコールを活用したNPRMsの可能性について、学生達の留学に対するモチベーション向上、又留学への不安を緩和する効果の観点から論じたものである。NPRMsの活用が英語学習の意欲向上に効果的である事はすでに周知ではあるが、本研究においては、留学前の学生達の留学に対する認識や、心理面において、NPRMsの効果や活用におけるさらなる可能性を証明しようとしたものである。インターネットビデオコールを通じて本研究に参加した留学中の学生達は、留学前の学生達にとって、彼らの理想であり、又自分達にも達成可能な目標例として認識されると考えられる。本研究の結果は、こうしたインターネットビデオコールの活用が、学生達の留学に対する不安を緩和し、学習意欲の向上に寄与する事を証明しようとしたものである。

THE SUCCESSFUL use of near peer role models (NPRMs) in language learning classrooms has been previously documented. Studies conducted by Murphey (1998), Murphey and Murakami (1998), and Murphey and Arao (2001) effectively used NPRMs to promote positive changes in attitudes towards learning English by having participants watch short video clips of more capable peers using and talking about English. The results of these studies indicate an increase in student self-efficacy in terms of confidence in their ability to achieve language-learning goals after exposure to NPRMs. This paper reports on a project designed to increase motivation levels and reduce anxiety related to studying abroad through the use of NPRMs. This study was specifically designed as an attempt to determine whether or not motivation levels with respect to studying abroad could be enhanced and if study abroad-related anxiety could be reduced among 2nd-year university students who were exposed to NPRMs via live Internet-based video calls from students immersed in study abroad settings. Based on initial observations that many students had experienced a decline in motivation and an increase in anxiety in respect to studying abroad, the approach of using NPRMs to act as potential ideal examples was planned.

This project differs from previous work with NPRMs in that the primary goal was not to improve students' language ability or attitude toward English but rather to enhance motivation and reduce anxiety associated with studying abroad. In spite of this difference, the ultimate outcome was indeed an overall improvement in class performance.

To effectively enhance or alter motivation levels, it was felt that an approach designed to socialize the participants would be most effective. It was believed that the participants, after exposure to NPRMs, would more clearly see themselves as having the potential to be successful study abroad participants. As they did so, it was hoped the participants would revert to the highly motivated state that they had held upon entrance to the university and also would reduce their fears about study abroad.

In order to achieve the goal of the project, it was decided to expose the participants to two sessions via Skype with NPRMs who displayed ideal examples of successful study abroad. Questionnaires were distributed to the participants both prior and post calls. The questionnaires were designed to elicit self-reported data pertaining to participants' level of motivation and anxiety toward studying abroad and whether these levels were altered after the in-class calls from NPRMs.

Background

Murphey (1998) and Murphey and Arao (2001) defined NPRMs as peers who are similar in age, social standing, or profession and who may be admired and respected. The central idea underpinning NPRMs is that, under the right conditions, exposure to such peers can create a desire to imitate them or at the very least the NPRMs can be an inspiration to achieve a similar position as the model. Murphey's assertions regarding the effectiveness of NPRMs are the result of successful studies (Murphey & Arao, 2001; Murphey & Murakami, 1998) in which university students watched short video

clips of older students successfully speaking English and explaining the positive points of having such skill. The participants in this study reported positive belief changes, and many expressed an ambition to be like the models they watched.

Murphey's (1998, 2001) research on NPRMs was, in part, based on Bandura's (1977, 1986) social learning theory, which posited that individual behavior is based on perceived positive outcomes as witnessed in models. Bandura outlined four factors that must be present to ensure effective modeling, and the fourth and final one is related to motivation. Specifically, there must be some incentive in place in order for the modeling to work. In this project the incentive was the ability to achieve the goal of studying abroad. Showing students peers similar to them who had not only achieved that goal, but were currently living it, was intended to reinforce their motivation.

Vygotsky (1930s/1978) believed that in order for learning to be most effective and to coincide with mental development, it was necessary for students to learn from adults or from peers who were more capable. In what he referred to as the "zone of proximal development," the distance between the actual and the potential level could be bridged more effectively with the aid of others, and this potential level would be considered a more accurate marker of development (p. 85). The NPRMs in this study modeled an example of potential level that the students could realistically aspire to.

Overview of the Project

An initial exploratory study consisting of several one-to-one interviews was undertaken with the purpose of gauging the participants' current levels of motivation toward studying abroad, as well as why and by how much those levels had declined since entrance to university. A further purpose was to gather possible explanations for any decrease in motivation. Through these one-to-one interviews, a general pattern emerged, illustrating that the average student en-

tered the university with both high motivation and expectations for undertaking studying abroad, but that both declined over their first year of study. Based on this initial data, an action research project consisting of two questionnaires and two in-class video calls from NPRMs was undertaken. This study was guided by the following three research questions:

1. Do NPRMs enhance levels of motivation for studying abroad among students currently studying in Japan?
2. Do in-class calls from NPRMs reduce anxiety levels related to specific fears among students currently studying in Japan?
3. Are online video conference calls an effective approach to delivering messages from NPRMs?

Participants

Data were collected over a 3-year period from 160 (111 female and 49 male) 2nd-year university English majors in eight intact classes at a private university in western Japan. The students were taking compulsory English within a general English skills program in which they received 360 hours of instruction over their first 2 years from two native English-speaking instructors. Classes were streamed based on the students' scores on the institutional version of the TOEFL test. The TOEFL score range of the participants in this study was 450-515, indicating considerable variation in English abilities within each class. The study was conducted in Communication classes in which the author was the sole teacher, meeting the students for a total of 3 contact hours each week for the duration of one academic year.

The sessions were conducted twice with each class over one semester and occupied approximately 40 minutes of total class time. Additionally, a nominal amount of class time was spent administering questionnaires and explaining the project and what was expected of the students during in-class calls.

Classrooms were equipped with an overhead projector and screen with a built-in audio system allowing for callers to be seen and heard by the entire class. A laptop computer with an external microphone was connected to the system, which created an interactive exchange through which the caller could hear all members of the class. This further aided in creating a close-to-live experience for both the caller and students.

Rationale

Based on my observations and student interviews, it was noted that students' levels of motivation to take the necessary steps to embark on a study abroad program had declined since they first entered the university. One-to-one student interviews also revealed that the majority of the participants harbored varying degrees of anxiety related to studying abroad.

The fact that student motivation declined seems to be consistent with Dörnyei's (2001) conclusion, based on longitudinal research of attitudes and motivation, that students often lose motivation as they advance through their schooling. While the specific reasons for this decrease varied in the current study, some common demotivators were related to the demands placed on students to qualify for competitive study abroad programs. In order to qualify for studying abroad, specific benchmarks related to linguistic ability, academic achievement, and application procedures must be achieved. These tasks often seem overwhelming to students, especially to those who lack the proper support that should come from teachers, and, more importantly, peers.

Procedure

As noted by Dörnyei (2001), longitudinal studies are most effective to measure motivation levels, so it was decided that over the course of one semester the participants in the project would be asked to complete two questionnaires: one prior to the in-class calls and one

afterwards. With the intent of accurately gauging student motivation levels, the first questionnaire was completed early in the semester before the students became aware of the project, thus diminishing the potential of response bias. The first survey consisted of questions that were designed to elicit information about students' current level of motivation towards studying abroad and also asked students to self-assess their own level of anxiety related to studying abroad. The final question of the survey asked students to list the specific worries they had in relation to studying abroad. The questionnaires were given to the participants in English with detailed explanation provided to avoid any comprehension difficulties.

Based on the results of the first questionnaire, the NPRMs were consulted and made aware of some of the specific study abroad-related anxieties that students had. Upon consultation with NPRMs, these specific fears were classified as either having the potential to be modified or not. Examples that fell into the potential-to-modify group were (a) doubts regarding one's own English ability, (b) lack of confidence, (c) making friends, and (d) interference with job-search activities; such fears as lack of money, differences in food, and homesickness were classified as difficult to change. The NPRMs were asked to speak to these specific concerns during their calls, as many of them had had the same trepidations prior to embarking on their own study abroad.

In an attempt to stay as close to Murphey's (1998) definition (that NPRMs be close in age and social standing), the models chosen were one academic year ahead of the students and from the same university. After the NPRMs were chosen and consulted, they were instructed to cover three explicit areas during their call. The areas were (a) how they managed to navigate the requirements needed to qualify for studying abroad, (b) the positives and negatives of their experience, and (c) how they overcame their fears and concerns about studying abroad. To maintain a level of impartiality, the callers were asked to discuss the positive points of their study abroad experience as well as the negatives without bias in either direction.

After the initial in-class call, four or five students were selected for one-to-one interviews to gauge how the calls were perceived. These interviews suggested that overall the calls had been positively received and that they had elicited some encouraging positive changes and created a level of excitement among class members.

Each class experienced two calls from two different NPRMs, and after the second call the participants were again asked to complete a survey in which they reported on their current level of motivation to study abroad and their study abroad-related anxiety.

Results

Pre-NPRM Calls

In response to the question asking the participants to gauge their own motivation levels to study abroad, the results (see Table 1) showed that 106 of 160 students classified themselves as either highly motivated or motivated, with a clear majority falling into the latter category. On the other hand, 21 of 160 students reported having low motivation or no motivation. Twenty percent chose the neutral option; this was interpreted as an indication that these students either had no interest in studying abroad or had already given up on applying for study abroad programs.

Table 1. Q: How Would You Best Describe Your Motivation Level to Study Abroad? (N = 160)

Answer choice	Number of responses	Percentage
Highly motivated	28	17.50
Motivated	78	48.75
Neutral	32	20.00
Low motivation	14	8.75
No motivation	8	5.00

In terms of anxiety levels (see Table 2), 118 students answered that they had either a lot of anxiety or some anxiety related to studying abroad. Another 32 students chose the “I have a little anxiety” option. Almost 94% of those surveyed reported some level of anxiety related to studying abroad, so it was clear that this was a relevant issue that required attention. The findings also contradicted the answer to the question regarding motivation to study abroad, because if 20% of the students had already given up or decided not to study abroad, they should not have felt any anxiety at all. This suggested that even those students still held some interest in studying abroad. In all, only 10 of 160 students stated that they had little or no study abroad-related anxiety.

Table 2. Q: How Would You Best Describe Your Level of Anxiety About Studying Abroad? (N = 160)

Answer choice	Number of responses	Percentage
I have a lot of anxiety	50	31.25
I have some anxiety	68	42.50
I have little anxiety	32	20.00
Not much anxiety	7	4.00
I have no anxiety	3	2.00

Post-NPRM Calls

From the original number who completed the first survey, eight students, or 5% of the participants, failed to complete the second questionnaire. This decrease was the result of absences during the in-class call days.

As seen in Table 3, the results after the in-class calls showed a 16.7% increase in the number of students who classified themselves as highly motivated. Overall there was a 12% increase in the number of students who reported being motivated or highly motivated. The

number of students who reported having low or no motivation also decreased by 3%, indicating that the NPRMs had affected even the least motivated students in a positive way.

Table 3. Q: How Would You Best Describe Your Motivation Level to Study Abroad Now? (N = 152)

Answer choice	Number of responses	Percentage
Highly motivated	52	34.20
Motivated	67	44.10
Neutral	17	11.20
Low motivation	16	10.50
No motivation	0	0

The largest change in results was seen in the question related to anxiety about studying abroad, as shown in Table 4. There was a 26.3% drop in the number of students who reported having either a lot or some anxiety as compared to the pre-NPRM questionnaire. In total there was a 16% drop in the number of students who reported having anxiety. Equally encouraging was an increase from 6% to 21.7% of students who chose *no anxiety* or *not much anxiety*. These numbers were interpreted to mean that those students had lost some of their anxiety, although the initial survey answers could have meant the students had simply decided not to study abroad. Because all the questionnaires were in English, it is also possible that the decrease in neutral answers was the result of students having a better understanding of the questionnaire the second time.

Table 4. Q: How Would You Best Describe Your Level of Anxiety About Studying Abroad? (N = 152)

Answer choice	Number of responses	Percentage
I have a lot of anxiety	13	8.50
I have some anxiety	59	38.80
I have little anxiety	47	31.00
Not much anxiety	25	16.40
I have no anxiety	8	5.30

In regard to the final research question about the facilitation of access to NPRMs over Skype, students were asked to comment on the post-NPRM questionnaire about the use of the in-class video calls. The students were explicitly instructed that they could answer this question in either English or Japanese. About 95% of the comments were positive in response to the question “What was your overall opinion about the in-class Skype calls?” The few negative comments were related to not being interested in studying abroad or not feeling a connection to the NPRMs because the respondents did not personally know them. One respondent speculated that the NPRMs were already “good at English” before undertaking study abroad and thus were not good examples.

The positive comments mostly expressed a desire to be like the NPRMs because the NPRMs could speak English well and had achieved their goal of studying abroad. These answers support the idea that NPRMs can be used to illustrate an ideal example that the participants could aspire to be like.

There were also several comments related to anxiety in which respondents affirmed they felt relief about their own worries after listening to the NPRMs’ personal accounts of overcoming fears related to studying abroad.

Ancillary Results

Besides the questionnaire results reported above, I also noted a marked improvement in both attitudes and effort in all aspects of the class after the in-class calls. This change continued for the remainder of the semester. However, in the second semester approximately half of the students seemed to revert to the levels observed prior to sessions with NPRMs. This suggests that the effectiveness of NPRMing may have limited “shelf life,” and in order for students to fully benefit, revisiting the approach could be beneficial.

Discussion

Although the results of this study were positive overall, more investigation is necessary before categorically stating that that video sessions with NPRMs successfully enhance motivation levels and reduce anxieties associated with studying abroad.

Many of the previous studies had the immediate goal of improving language abilities by enhancing attitudes. However, this study differed slightly in that the immediate goal was to in effect “light the tunnel” for the participants to see the potential for their own success in achieving their study abroad goals. After students took part in this project, I witnessed an increase in effort and motivation to improve language abilities, and approximately 30% of the participants asked to contact the NPRMs on their own. This suggests that this study ultimately had outcomes that were similar to those of the previous studies.

Within the scope of this study, the timing of using NPRMs worked well, as the 2nd year is when the majority of the students begin the initial process of preparing to study abroad. However, the temporary nature of the effects of NPRMing was noted, demonstrating the need for this approach to be repeated so that the positive changes could have potential to become permanent.

Limitations

A few factors may have influenced the results of this study. First, the questionnaires and one-to-one interviews were conducted in English. Although the participants were explicitly told that answering in Japanese (during the interviews and on the qualitative questions of the surveys) was acceptable, the fact that such a small number chose to do this could indicate that the majority felt an obligation to use English. It is possible that more in-depth and specific data could have been gathered with a Japanese questionnaire and interviews conducted in Japanese. Therefore, the results of this study need to be regarded with caution, as the possibility exists that they were affected by the participants answering questions using their second language.

The second limitation is directly related to the scope of the study. As it was a classroom-based project, the results cannot be generalized to other groups because the data was collected from eight intact classes without a control group.

A third limitation is that this study did not include a control for the existence of students who had connections with friends who had studied abroad, so those peers also may have had an influence on them and thus skewed the results. Currently, the university offers many seminars and information sessions featuring former exchange students who give presentations about their experiences, which could also have influenced some of the participants.

Finally, the results of this project may have been affected by the variety of study abroad options available to the participants in this study. Although the most attractive study abroad option was mostly referenced during the data collection stages and the NPRMs were all taking part in the most desired option, some students may have been considering other study abroad options, leading to less reliability in the results.

Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the potential for NPRMs to effectively address both motivation and the anxieties associated with studying abroad among university students. A decline in motivation to study abroad was discovered and used as a basis for having NPRMs address and modify the situation by making live Internet-based video calls from their host countries. Given specific information gathered through surveys, the NPRMs were able to address specific worries and concerns while modeling an example of accomplishment as they gave their talk to the participants.

With regard to the original research questions that guided this project, the results were positive in both the enhancement of motivation levels and the decrease of specific fears that caused anxiety. The final research question about the effectiveness of Internet-based video calls to facilitate NPRMing was also answered in the affirmative, based on student perceptions of the calls and the resulting positive changes among participants.

Although the original research questions were answered and the goals of the project were met, there are still some areas that require further research. Specifically, regression was noted in the semester following the project, indicating that the use of NPRMs has limitations. An examination of how long the effect of NPRMing remains seems to be an ideal place for further inquiry. This study also did not account for the presence of other NPRMs that students might already have had and how these role models affected the behavior of the participants. An investigation into already existing NPRMs would be another promising area for further research.

Bio Data

Dana Lingley has been teaching EFL in Japan and Mexico in various contexts for 17 years. He is currently an instructor at Kansai Gaidai University where he teaches 2nd-year students. His main research interests center on motivation, authentic materials, content-based instruction, and autonomous learning.

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