

Back-to-the-Future Essays Aid Study Abroad Gains

Harumi Kimura

Miyagi Gakuin Women's University

Brenda Hayashi

Miyagi Gakuin Women's University

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Positive long-term outcomes can result from short-term overseas programs despite the fact that past research has not demonstrated tangible language outcomes. In this exploratory study, we investigated how a 2-week interactive, participatory overseas language experience positively impacted a group of Japanese university students. Through mindful participation in a variety of activities, the participants were able to develop life skills, expand their life options, and renew L2 learning motivation. After the program, the students composed "back-to-the-future" essays, which they wrote pretending they were their future selves, writing as if they were looking back on their past. They elaborated their vision and realistically narrated the progress towards the plausible future state they desired to be. The essays could guide them to actively exert agency on learning behaviors they believed match the vision they nurtured in relation to their study-abroad experiences.

この探索的研究は、日本人大学生が参加した相互交流を図る目的で行われた2週間のプログラムを例に挙げ、短期の留学プログラムであっても長期的に見て肯定的な結果を生むことができると論じる。これまでの研究では短期プログラムによる成果は具体的に示されていない。留学中、参加者は様々な活動に真摯に参加する中で、生きる力を身につけ、将来のキャリアについて視野を広げ、第二言語学習の動機づけを新たに自覚した。帰国後は留学で得た経験を基に「未来から見た自分史」を書き、将来になりたい自分(第二言語使用者としての自己)を詳細に描いた。その過程で、ビジョンとして描いた自分の姿に近づくための具体的な行動・対策を練り上げ実行に移した。留学時の体験を元に「未来から見た自分史」を書いたことが自分の望む自分の姿を豊かに育て、自発的な学習行動につながったことを示す。

It is reported that the number of university students who participate in short-term study-abroad programs is increasing, while long-term programs are becoming less popular after 2004 (MEXT, 2017b, 2017c). Definitions of short-term and long-term vary; thus, for this particular study, we define short-term as those in summer, winter, or spring break. In this paper, we examine the shortest type of study-abroad program, less than 2 weeks, and propose two ideas for planning effective programs so that participants can make use of the experience, create a vision for the future as skillful L2 users, and nurture L2 learning motivation. One idea is the planning of flipped study-abroad programs, in which L2 learning per se does not take priority during the stay, and participants take part in a variety of activities to experience face-to-face interaction in their L2, develop multicultural awareness, and expand their horizons. Usually, the term *flipped* is used in the phrase *flipped classroom*, in which students view lecture videos at home and practice, discuss, or do both in the classroom. Here, flipped means that we do not expect participants to study their L2 in classroom settings during their stay but to do it at home after they have returned. The other idea is having participants compose back-to-the-future essays after they have returned to their home country so that they can sustain L2 learning motivation, develop autonomy, and relate L2 learning to other life goals.

It is generally assumed that study abroad provides a prime context for L2 development (Kinginger, 2013). The experience of staying or living in another culture gives participants contextualized exposure to the target language and culture; thus, participants, by and large, have improved overall L2 fluency (Freed, 1995). However, the results of some studies are contradictory. According to the research syntheses by Kinginger (2013) and Jackson (2013), some studies have demonstrated positive effects in specific linguistic domains, but others have not. It is also notable that although some participants made significant gains, others did not; thus, there exist huge individual differences in terms of the learning outcomes of study abroad. Based on these conflicting and confusing results concerning linguistic gains, the two researchers called for a detailed investigation of what

participants actually did during the programs in relation to a variety of specific learning outcomes or lack of any tangible outcomes.

On the other hand, past studies have demonstrated other positive outcomes outside of linguistic domains. Ludlum, Ice, and Sheetz-Nguyen (2013) argued that, despite the slashing of funding for study-abroad programs in North America, the long-term benefits of study abroad are tremendous. They examined the outcomes reported in previous studies and concluded that students became more engaged in developing interpersonal skills, team building, and problem solving skills; there was improvement of cultural knowledge and transformation of world views; and student growth was found in the areas of emotional resiliency, personal autonomy, flexibility, and openness. They proposed the short-term study-abroad experience as a means of providing experiential learning opportunities to students.

In Japanese contexts as well, positive outcomes have been reported. For example, Sasaki (2011) investigated long-term development in L2 writing motivation in addition to favorable changes in terms of writing quantity and quality. Yashima (2010) reported that students who took part in international volunteer programs demonstrated a significant decrease in ethnocentrism. These and other motivational and affective outcomes should be explored further.

To recap, research on study abroad should expand its scope in at least the following five ways. First, past studies have, in general, been limited to longer programs, and shorter programs are underresearched. Second, the examination of possible merits of study abroad should go beyond linguistic gains and cover aspects of affective and cognitive development. Third, there is a need to relate the activities the study-abroad participants engage in during their stays to specific learning outcomes. Fourth, long-lasting influences of study-abroad experience should be explored. Fifth, participants' emic perspectives need to be included in a discussion of what quality study-abroad programs are like. This will be informative for the purpose of organizing more effective study-abroad programs that benefit participants.

In the next section, we explain a vision-based approach toward L2 learning. Although it does not replace the motivational frameworks previously proposed, we believe that vision helps connect day-to-day realities of L2 learning to a bigger picture, enrich learning experiences, and therefore sustain L2 learning motivation.

Vision-Based Approach to Sustainable L2 Learning Motivation

In recent L2 learning motivation research, attention has been shifted toward the significance of learner vision. For example, Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014), flag-bearers of vision-based approaches to L2 learning and teaching, believed that vision can make L2 learning more engaging and rewarding because how learners envision themselves as successful L2 users in the future is likely to be relevant to sustained learning behaviors and effective strategy use. The vision-based approach is distinct from previous frameworks in at least three ways. First, it takes a holistic view and learners are not described as an amalgam of different learner-internal characteristics such as aptitudes and personalities or external influences such as learning contexts and culture. Second, vision has sensory aspects with tangible images, and it is distinct from abstract, cognitive goals. Third, vision is more personalized and specifically contextualized than L2 learning motives such as integrative and instrumental. In short, vision entails what learners would desire to become in the future. Past studies have demonstrated strong links between L2 learner's ideal future self images, their visionary aspects, their attitudes toward L2 learning, and intended efforts (see, e.g., Dörnyei & Chan, 2013; You, Dörnyei, & Csizér, 2016). However, we do not know yet how vision can be generated, modified, sustained, and nurtured in the long run.

Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) argued for visionary intervention for learners to personalize future vision, and one way to do this is by writing a retrospective essay called back-to-the-future essays. Back-to-the-future essays are a life story that language learners produce. They pretend they are now their desired future self and they are looking back on their past. In a retrospective manner, learners write, as realistically as possible, about how they have managed to achieve the desired language learning goals, overcome obstacles, and find the energy to persist. To create a life story as a future history, people need to envision a clear and elaborate ideal self-image, and the vivid image in their mind helps them to actively exert agency on behaviors they believe will match the image they have of their ideal self.

In this study, we argue that in short study-abroad programs, L2 learning itself should not be the only focus. The participants can engage in other activities in the foreign environment. They can study the L2 after they come back if they get incentives to continue during their stay abroad. We also argue that teachers or organizers of the study-abroad program should help the participants create visions for their future as successful L2 users, sustain their L2 learning motivation, and relate the motivation to other life goals. Motivation is susceptible to change and at least to some extent illusive, but it can also be boosted.

In the next section, we describe a study-abroad program in which participants were engaged in a variety of activities of value during their short stay.

Flipped Study Abroad

The flipped study-abroad program that we describe is the *Kakehashi* (the Bridge for Tomorrow) project, a 2-week fully-funded exchange program between Japan and North America promoted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA) and implemented by the Japan-U.S. Educational Commission (Fulbright Japan), the Japan Foundation, and the Laurasian Institution (MOFA, 2016). The objectives of the program are (a) to promote mutual trust and understanding among the people of Japan and the North American region and to build a basis for future friendship and cooperation and (b) to promote a global understanding of Japan's society, history, diverse culture, politics, economics, and diplomatic relations. Four Japanese university groups, each consisting of 23 students and two chaperones, were selected to go to various cities in the United States in November 2013. To achieve the aforementioned objectives set by MOFA, the *Kakehashi* participants (a) made presentations to disseminate information about Japan and its attractive points including those of local regions, (b) visited and observed Japanese companies and educational research institutions to take part in workshops and other events, (c) attended experience-based programs such as homestays and home visits, (d) experienced American culture, (e) interacted with local people, and (f) paid conscious attention to foreign language use (see Table 1).

The four university groups gathered in Tokyo for a 1-day orientation prior to departure. In the morning sessions, the participants listened to lectures about the United States. After lunch, each university group performed one of its presentations in front of all the participants and received instructive feedback. The four groups arrived in Chicago, Illinois, where they spent a couple of days practicing their presentations in their own university groups before performing for the larger audience of all program participants. The program was organized so that the participants could relax and experience American culture before leaving for their assigned regions.

By giving four official presentations in North America, the participants were able to disseminate information about Japan. By visiting two companies, two universities, and two community centers, they were able to speak spontaneously and exchange opinions with people at the sites. And by visiting two different homes and enjoying two cultural events (i.e., the theater and a marching band contest) during their stay, they were able to experience American social activities. In short, the activities that they engaged in were not about learning how to use the English language and did not take place in a controlled environment.

Table 1. *Kakehashi* Itinerary

Date	Activity	Type of activity
11/3	Arrive in Chicago Visit John Hancock Center, Chicago Cultural Center, and Lincoln Park Zoo	(d)
11/4	Orientation program in USA Presentation rehearsals at hotel Visit the Art Institute of Chicago	(a) (f) (d)
11/5	Visit Roosevelt University and give presentation (Give presentation, have a campus tour, and interact with Roosevelt University students) Visit Millennium Park	(a) (f) (d) (e) (d)
11/6	Visit Museum of Science and Industry Visit Do It Right This Time (DIRTT) Green Learning Center. Listen to lecture and Q&A session Visit Masuda, Funai, Eifert & Mitchell, Ltd. (Law firm). Listen to lecture and Q&A session Evening reception at office of Japanese Consulate General, Chicago	(d) (b) (e) (b) (e) (e)
11/7	Leave Chicago and arrive in Los Angeles Travel to Riverside, visit the Center for Social Justice, and see the Mine Okubo Exhibition Presentations and interaction with locals at Youth Opportunity Center	(e) (e)
11/8	Visit Riverside City College and give presentation (Give presentation, have a campus tour, and interact with local students) Tea and interaction with locals at the home of the President of Riverside City College Presentation and interaction with locals at Arlanza Community Center Watch a theater performance at Riverside City College	(b) (e) (d) (e) (b) (e) (d)

Date	Activity	Type of activity
11/9	Visit famous tourist spots in Riverside (e.g., Farmers' Market, tour of Mission Inn)	(d)
	Watch Marching Band contest	(d)
	Interact with community locals at barbecue party	(a) (c) (e)
11/10	Leave Los Angeles and arrive in San Francisco	
	Visit tourist sites in San Francisco (e.g., Fisherman's Wharf)	(d)
11/11	Visit Stanford University and participate in a foreign language lesson, campus tour, lunch, and interaction with students	(e) (f)
	Return to San Francisco and visit tourist spots (e.g., Sutro Baths, Golden Gate Bridge)	(d)
11/12	Leave San Francisco and arrive in Tokyo	

Note. Activities: (a) disseminate information about Japan, (b) visit Japanese companies and institutions, (c) attend homestays or home visits, (d) experience American culture, (e) interact with local people, (f) pay attention to foreign language usage.

Methods

Participants

Six women's university graduates participated in the study. They were all participants in the *Kakehashi* project in 2013. Their pseudonyms, majors, target languages, and different life paths are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants

Pseudonym	Major	Target language	Life path
Haruna	early childhood education	English	social worker
Mahoko	music	English, Italian, German	dental assistant
Maiko	intercultural studies	English	airport staff
Meiko	Japanese literature	Polish, English	graduate student
Risako	intercultural studies	Italian, English	student
Suzu	music	English, other European languages	teaching assistant

Data Collection

The six participants wrote two back-to-the-future essays in Japanese. At one follow-up meeting of the *Kakehashi* project in 2015, they were provided with an explanation and a model back-to-the-future essay. They wrote and submitted the first essays in 2015 and the second ones in 2016. The average length was 1,122 characters (approximate English equivalent, 373 words; maximum 2633 characters/878 words, minimum 536 characters/179 words). The average future projection time was 17.6 years (maximum 30, minimum 2). One of the 12 essays was accompanied by a visual description of future plans, a timeline.

Data Analysis

We used a traditional data synthesis method (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify themes embedded in stories the participants narrated as to-be-lived experiences in their essays. We first identified and coded themes individually and then had a discussion to negotiate and elaborate on our understandings.

Results and Discussion

In this section, we demonstrate, based on our interpretation of their essays, how the short-term study-abroad program produced a variety of positive outcomes. We identified four themes: L2 learning motivation, risk-taking attitudes, appreciation of diversity, and career options. We also identified one noticeable feature in two of the essays: a third-person account. Please note that in back-to-the-future essays, the past self actually means the present self, and the present self means the desired future self.

L2 Learning Motivation

Despite the fact that improvement of L2 skills was not the purpose of the 2-week *Kakehashi* project, L2 learning motivation was one theme found in the essays. The overseas experience clearly gave impetus to Suzu to continue her L2 learning. She wrote, "I'd like to study early music in some foreign country." As a step toward attaining that future goal, she has already taken music lessons entirely in English and sung at concerts in English, German, and Italian. For Risako, the interactions using English encouraged her to put more efforts into studying Italian, a language that is closely related to her future ideal self. She wrote, "I made up my mind that I would study in Italy during *Kakehashi*." She subsequently applied for and received a scholarship to study in Italy (the Tobitate pro-

gram, MEXT, 2017a) and is taking concrete steps to realize her career goals as a speaker of Italian. Usually, for non-English majors, L2 learning motivation is related to other life goals, such as becoming a professional musician, writer, or social worker (see the Career Options section below as well).

Risk-Taking Attitudes

Suzu took a risk after graduation and decided not to land a stable job to support herself. Instead, she took a flexible job to continue her music career, working part-time at a fast-food restaurant. Her willingness to forego stability so that she could pursue her vision of a music career is in concordance with growth in emotional resiliency and personal autonomy as reported in the research synthesis (see Ludlum, Ice, & Sheetz-Nguyen, 2013). She wrote, “I was desperate: working part-time, practicing (singing), taking lessons, reading, and searching the Internet—doing anything that can lead to my future career.” She emphasized that the struggles she experienced were meaningful:

Once my future did not look promising, but the difficulties I got over and the skills I nurtured (during the period) made me what I am, and the experience was a must-have. I did not lose sight of what I desired. I’m glad I have chosen this career path.

Suzu did not let adversity define her. She coped with difficulties by perceiving bad times as a temporary state of affairs and moved on. Thus, she transcended painful events.

Appreciation of Diversity

Study abroad provides students with a chance to discover new cultures and environments, helping them to strengthen cultural awareness and understanding. For example, Haruna, an early childhood education major, became a social worker. Experiencing *Kakehashi*, she became interested in supporting foreign residents living and staying in Japan. Looking back on the experience after 50 years, she wrote, “I thought meeting a variety of new people would make our life richer.” Maiko worked at an international airport but 15 months later quit the job to study English more. She studied in the Philippines and moved to Australia. She wrote, recalling her experience 2 years ago, “Living in a foreign country was an option. I wanted to raise my children to be open-minded and free of discrimination.” Both Haruna and Maiko seem to have gone beyond their own cultures and appreciate diversity and cultural relativism, which is one of the purposes of learning foreign languages.

Career Options

The participants expanded their career options. Meiko entered graduate school and is studying multiculturalism. Participating in the study abroad strengthened her desire to have her own writings published. She wrote, “I’ve started to write about current topics and stories for children based on my travel experiences.” Indeed, she has already taken action. She submitted a short story to a contest and started looking for jobs at publishers. Risako is currently studying both the Italian language and agritourism in Italy. She is visiting farms and experiencing an internship with local people. In her essay, she envisioned herself using the foreign languages that she loves when she returned to Japan. She wrote, “I would be working as an [Italian-speaking] tour guide and interpreter.” In addition, she declared, “I would open an inn in Miyagi, named *Miyama*,” which is connected to her vision of organizing farm stays. Suzu is teaching music to disabled children as a volunteer. She clearly visualized her future: “I would start a music school, named *Ensemble*.” The *Kakehashi* experience appears to have helped these participants develop and strengthen their vision over their future career. Furthermore, this specificity—the names of the inn and the school—is likely a hallmark of back-to-the-future essays, in which writers imagine themselves vividly in their future situations. However, this requires further investigation.

Third-Person Account

Among the 12 essays, two read like letters to the participants’ past selves. The two writers took an observer’s perspective. Using a third-person in narrative is linked to action-readiness in studies on mental imagery (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006) and tends to push the writer into trying to make it happen. In her first essay, Suzu talked to her past self, “What do you think I’m doing after 10 years? What you are dreaming about has come true!” When she produced this essay, Suzu was having a hard time and struggling after failing an entrance examination to a graduate school. In her second essay, Mahoko also wrote as if she was talking to her friend, finishing up her essay with “Hang in there, Past Me!” Mahoko changed jobs after finding out, on her first job, that it is difficult to have a good balance between a job to earn a living and a career to pursue music. Both women encouraged their past selves, telling themselves that they could somehow overcome the difficulties by taking concrete actions.

Conclusion

Based on a qualitative long-term study of participants of a study-abroad program, we demonstrated that even a short-term study-abroad program of 2 weeks could be a

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powerful, transformative experience for participants in terms of developing L2 learning motivation, risk-taking attitudes, appreciation of diversity, and career options. The essays indicated that the study-abroad experience had helped participants reformulate the purposes for L2 learning and use strategies that best suit their ever-changing intentions in order to achieve their life goals. However, this is an exploratory study, and we need to triangulate our data with other sources such as semistructured interviews and focus group discussions, which we plan to conduct in future studies.

We recommend that organizers of short-term study-abroad programs develop a thoughtful plan in which participants can experience a variety of activities and interact with people during their stay. Through mindful participation in the activities, the participants were able to move beyond simple conversation and started developing interactional competence because their desire to communicate was strong. They also developed life skills and expanded their life options. Now that they have come to appreciate the value of good L2 skills, they have strengthened, reignited, and reframed L2 learning motivation so that they can transform their vision into action. We believe L2 learning can come later if students have fostered a desire to become more skillful L2 users during their time abroad.

The university students who took part in the *Kakehashi* project spent their time in the United States delivering presentations in English; interacting with local students, community members, and businesspeople; and visiting cultural sites. In short, their program was a flipped study abroad. They sat in a classroom only once during their stay and used the English language with international students studying Japanese. An emphasis on improving their English language skills was not the purpose of their classroom participation. Rather, their mission was to disseminate information about their own country and interact with a variety of American residents in different social situations. They used English in situations where they were in control (i.e., presentations) and were challenged to use English spontaneously (e.g., responding to questions after a presentation and talking with strangers at social events). The participants renewed their L2 learning motivation and became able to relate L2 learning to their life goals.

We also recommend that teachers or organizers of study-abroad programs encourage their students to create a vision of their future as successful L2 learners and sustain their L2 learning motivation. By having students write retrospective back-to-the-future essays, we found that for our participants, the 2013 program was indeed a transformative experience, one that continues to influence decisions and behaviors as they move forward constructing a vision of their ideal self. Continual reflection and projection of the ideal self are the major advantages of having the participants write back-to-the-future essays rather than do standard diary-type writing.

To conclude, short-term study-abroad programs can be meaningful experiential events to the extent that they are implemented as flipped study abroad. In addition, the use of back-to-the-future essays is an excellent follow-up activity for teacher intervention or one that students can continue to use by themselves even after graduation.

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Bio Data

Harumi Kimura teaches at Miyagi Gakuin Women's University, Sendai, Japan. She earned her doctorate from Temple University. She studied L2 listening anxiety in her doctoral research and her academic interests include second language acquisition, learner development, learner psychology, multilingualism, and cooperative learning. She coauthored a book with Dr. G. M. Jacobs, *Cooperative Learning and Teaching*, in the *English Language Teacher Development Series* (2013). In her free time, she enjoys hiking. <kharumi@mgu.ac.jp>

Brenda Hayashi teaches at Miyagi Gakuin Women's University, Sendai, Japan. She has studied at UCLA and Macquarie University. Her academic interests include intercultural communication issues (English and Japanese), cognitive linguistics, and English language education. She coauthored a book, *Learn the Basics of Teaching English as a Foreign Language* (2015). She enjoys dancing and playing with her pets in her free time. <bhayashi@mgu.ac.jp>

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