

Short courses, impact, and follow up: A case study of a group of Japanese students visiting the UK

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has made it a priority for universities to send students to foreign countries in order to encourage internationalisation and strengthen Japan's position in the global marketplace. To respond to this push, most universities in Japan offer study abroad programmes. Existing research examines mainly pre-departure preparations for such overseas short programmes (OSPs) and reports on a general positive gain in terms of language and cultural awareness. However, little research has been conducted into the follow-up or the impact of such programmes. We investigated Japanese students who attended a six-week OSP in the UK through qualitative interviews. We interviewed them during the course and after returning to Japan. The findings suggest that there is little post-course follow-up provided to the students. This article aims to establish the nature of the problem and suggest some ways to achieve greater OSP impact.

文科省は、国際競争力の強化を目指し、大学生に留学を勧めている。大学側も海外の大学と提携して様々な留学制度を提供している。しかし、今までは短期留学前と帰国後の学生の文化的意識や言語能力の変化などを調査する量的アプローチによる研究が多く、帰国後の学生に対するフォローアップの現状を分析したものは多くない。本論は、イギリスで6週間の短期留学をした学生を対象に、帰国後に質的アプローチとしてインタビューを実施し、短期留学制度が学生に与える影響やフォローアップ制度の実態を検証した。その結果、短期留学を経験した学生が帰国後も引き続き語学習得のフォローアップ制度を必要としているにもかかわらず、大学側のフォローアップ制度が不十分である事が分かった。本論では、短期留学制度が抱えている問題を取り上げ、その改善点を提案する。

Asami Nakayama

Nagoya Gakuin University

Joanne Hah Sixian

Hwa Chong Institution, Singapore

Steve Mann

University of Warwick

Following the Japanese government's decision to internationalise its higher education in the 1980s, the education ministry set up agreements with overseas institutions to offer short-term courses to Japanese students. There has been a steady increase in Japanese students going abroad for such overseas short programmes (OSPs) and various benefits have been reported (Umakoshi, 1997). Past studies have established that these short courses have an overall positive impact on the participants' language proficiency and cultural awareness (Brauer, 2005; Kitao, 1993; Miller, 2001). Findings testify to the benefits of OSP in terms of increased students' motivation for continuing and studying English after the programme, deepened intercultural understanding, and improved communicative competence. In particular, Kitao (1993) reported on the participants' changed attitudes towards the host country, that is, participants perceived the USA as a less dangerous and more friendly country which they would like to return to for work or study after the programme. It is also worth noting that these OSPs are attractive in recruitment terms for tertiary institutions.

This article focuses on the experience of students from a Japanese university who attended a six-week OSP in the UK. We believe that their experience is typical of others who attend OSPs. Such courses usually range from several weeks to a period of three months. These programmes have been described largely in terms of pre-departure preparation and the value of home stays in the host country. Descriptions rely on interviews, surveys, and written reports from educators and participants. However, little has been documented about the follow-up or the impact of such programmes after returning back to their own countries. This article aims to provide insights into the complex social and cultural issues involved in providing a study abroad experience and the extent to which an OSP is followed up.

Impact and follow-up activities arising from OSPs

Although OSPs have been reported to be effective in boosting participants' linguistic and cultural competence, as well as their motivation to learn English, it is important to consider how positive effects can be sustained. This is why follow-up programmes might be particularly important. By follow-up programme, we mean a sustained attempt to utilise the cultural and linguistic experience students have had in another country. Follow-up activities might include talking about experiences, critical incident analysis, small scale-research (e.g., compiling and responding to on-line surveys), and compiling and sharing (on-line) portfolios (see Chushner & Karim 2004). Without such activities students may not have the chance to make the most of their linguistic and cultural capital.

Measuring the impact of any kind of short course is difficult. However Harland and Kinder (1997, p. 72) see it as vital for a theory of successful short course provision to consider empirically-validated outcomes and then relate these outcomes to the processes associated with the actual short course or activity. To date, relatively few studies have investigated the impact of OSPs with a longitudinal research design. Those which have attempted to do so have claimed an overall positive impact on the participants' language proficiency and cultural awareness (Allen & Herron, 2003; Brauer, 2005). Worryingly however, Brauer's (2005) survey revealed that the majority of Japanese schools (57%) reported no integration at all between the OSPs and EFL

programs, testifying to opportunities missed to harness this positive experience to reap greater benefits. This paper argues that most studies on OSP programmes do not report tangible follow-up beyond limited assessment. Considering that the OSP is an expensive and valuable source of linguistic and cultural insight, it is surprising that little has been done to follow up on and integrate this experience into ongoing course design.

Methodology

The research featured here is a qualitative case study and there are a growing number in the TESOL area (e.g., Hayes, 2010) that provides insight into learners' and teachers' beliefs and experience. Such studies can offer insights into the phenomenon under investigation in a way that "cannot be adequately researched in any of the other common research methods" (van Lier, 2005, p. 195). This "collective" case study (Stake, 2000) tracks the learners' experience not only during their course in UK but also their return to Japan. We investigated twenty-four Japanese students from the same university who attended an OSP at the University of Warwick in the UK. The programme incorporated EAP (English for Academic Purposes) with intercultural elements. Learners were mainly second-grade students, although there were a few first-grade students who majored in English. Qualitative interviews were conducted with the students and a teacher in Japan three months after their return to Japan. The interview process aimed to understand how students perceived their own motivational development and experience over a period of time. The interviews were semi-structured and incorporated general open-ended questions with specific probes on particular issues. Following Kvale (1996) we used the interviews to elicit comments and narratives and also to clarify and extend previous insights gained. The interviews were conducted in Japanese so that students could respond to them more freely and hence, offer more information. These were subsequently translated into English. In the transcription, we used pseudonyms instead of their real names to preserve the participants' anonymity.

Case studies

Japanese University Tutor

In what follows, we will integrate interview data from both the Japanese tutor and the students in order to explore whether there are any differences in their views towards OSPs. Also, we will

indicate how the students reflected on their OSP experiences three months later.

Starting with the Japanese university of our participants' official homepage, we find the aim of the OSP summarised as follows:

To get students to become internationally minded by giving them an opportunity to study at a British university in order to acquire comprehension and expression skills in English and to experience British culture and society through the host family experience.

Asked about this statement, a Japanese teacher chaperone (Takeshi) expected his students to gain more culturally than linguistically. Despite his expectation that students would develop an increased and sustained motivation for learning English after the course, the university provided very limited follow-up activities and certainly no systematic attempt (i.e., a follow-up programme) to utilise the experiences of the returning OSP students. Nor did they conduct a questionnaire to get student feedback about the OSP.

Students

Our focus was to see how the students on the OSP reflected on their previous English learning experiences and interpreted them after returning to Japan through the interview. How they represented their English experiences related directly to how they could connect English with their future plans or self-image. The interview data established some interesting insights:

Saori

Most participants attest to an attitude change when asked about the effects of the OSP. Saori, for example, pointed out that she could understand more dialogue in English-medium films after her OSP. Although she has never thought of using English at work in future, she showed interest in getting a job that requires her to speak in English. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009, p. 29) describe L2 Learning Experiences, particularly, the "experience of success" as one of the factors in the L2 motivational self system. Saori's successful experience during her OSP illustrates how this led to her increased motivation to learn English following her return and contributed to her desire for an English-speaking job in the future.

Interviews suggest that Saori had a newfound motivation for learning English, however, she

also felt frustrated about the lack of opportunities for sustaining the OSP's positive impetus. She felt that a follow-up course/programme would have provided greater impetus to continue studying the language.

Ken

During Ken's stay in England, an earthquake hit Tohoku on March 11, 2011. Japanese students at the University of Warwick took part in fund-raising efforts for the people affected by earthquake damage. Ken joined these fund-raising activities and was particularly struck by British people's generosity. After returning to Japan, he donated money at similar fund-raising events despite not having done so before. Although he is still in contact with his host family and had a good relationship with them, he wanted to go back to England to communicate with them face-to-face.

Ken was also eager to share this experience with his juniors in order to make them active and positive during OSP. However, he felt disappointed that he had no opportunity to do so.

Kaori

After the course, Kaori is often reminded of her time in England when she hears the news on BBC and encounters the British spelling of words in general English class. Not only in books, but also on TV, she tried to listen to the news in English more carefully although she still has some difficulty understanding it. Her enthusiasm to learn English and understand other cultures seemed to have increased.

Kaori exhibits what Yashima (2002, 2009) terms "international posture" (a desire to learn English to communicate with the world around them). Kaori is more aware of foreign affairs and is more willing to go abroad in order to interact with native English speakers. She is aware that she needs more opportunities to speak English not only with native English people but also with other students. In fact, she told us that she often spoke English with other students on the same OSP programme.

Kaori pointed out that she felt that she had less time to learn English upon her return to Japan. She felt that if there had been follow-up lessons during the first three months after returning home, she might be more motivated to study the language more regularly. From her perspective, follow up of any kind had been limited. The one

follow-up class (focusing on pronunciation by native English speakers) with fellow members of her OSP had been useful. Indeed, she was enthusiastic about communicating with other OSP students. However, in other classes she felt embarrassed to speak English in front of the students who had not joined the OSP. Although the English department holds general English classes for all students, English lessons which catered to OSP students' needs like Kaori's are lacking.

The data collected in this case study confirms that most students felt that their English had improved due to their successful experiences with their host family during OSP which led to them developing positive attitudes towards learning English. However, both teachers and students interviewed were aware and dissatisfied that there was a lack of specific follow-up activities after the OSP.

Implications

In the interviews conducted, there is then no evidence of any systematic follow up. Brauer found that OSP evaluations are "largely limited to attitude questionnaires and pupil feedback" and little is done to assess "linguistic effect or cross-cultural awareness" (2005, p. 110). Our data supports this finding and we also agree that there should be a "synergy between classroom learning" and the "opportunities for genuine communication arising from home stay or other out-of-class environments in the host country" (Brauer, 2005, p. 109). We also argue that more long-term learner impact might be encouraged by getting students to document real-time insights during their stay abroad and reflecting on these diary entries at a later date. This might activate further cross-cultural or linguistic awareness.

Recycling student experiences, especially for reflection on cross-cultural issues, could be useful for other students (in pre-departure sessions) but more importantly for the actual students themselves (in follow up sessions or better integration into language learning sessions). More work could be done in the pre-departure stage to help make students proficient ethnographers of communication. Roberts, Brown, Barro, Jordan, and Street (2001) provide a good resource for encouraging students to investigate the cultural and social patterns of interaction and the values and beliefs that account for them during their stay. Such a quasi-ethnographic perspective

while living abroad could help immerse students in the life of host families. In fact, we see a need to uncover more of such tools and vehicles to encourage follow-up reflection for return OSP students. One possibility might be to use the Intercultural Competency Framework developed by Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick (Spencer-Oatey, 2010). This framework can facilitate self-reflection for returning Japanese students to determine if the OSP experience has enabled them to develop particular intercultural competencies. It can also be used as part of follow-up activities as well as to provide support for competencies during pre-departure courses for future OSPs.

Conclusion

Research to date has mostly focused on the impact of OSPs during or immediately after the end of the course. They have investigated students' linguistic gain, intercultural understanding and awareness, and motivational and attitudinal changes. There is no doubt that University students returning from OSPs can have positive cognitive, affective, and linguistic gains. Our students spoke in a similar way to those featured in Jones & Bond (2000) and reported more confidence with the target language, concern about international affairs, appreciation of different cultures, self-awareness, and independence. Our data supports such a position. However there is a worrying lack of tangible follow-up to capitalize on this positive experience.

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Asami Nakayama works at Nagoya Gakuin University as a lecturer. She completed her MA (ELT) at the Centre for Applied Linguistics in Warwick. Her main research interest lies in motivational changes in Japanese learners of English. She can be contacted at <nakayama@ngu.ac.jp>.



Joanne Hah Sixian works as a lecturer at Hwa Chong Institution, Singapore. She teaches Cambridge A-level subjects to 17-year old students. Joanne did her MA (English Language Teaching) at the Centre for Applied Linguistics in Warwick and is interested in interdisciplinary research and conversation analysis. She can be contacted at <hah.sixian@gmail.com>.



Steve Mann (Associate Professor) joined the Centre for Applied Linguistics at University of Warwick in September 2007. He is Director of MA ELT programmes. He previously lectured at both Aston University and the University of Birmingham. He has experience in Hong Kong, Japan, and Europe in both English language teaching and teacher development. His most recent book, *The Coursebook and Beyond* (2011), is a handbook for novice teachers. He may be contacted at <steve.mann@warwick.ac.uk>.



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