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# Research Forum

## **“I Didn’t Know Who Is Canadian”: The Shift in Student Expectations During the Initial Stages of a Study Abroad Program**

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An interview-based case study was used to identify the shift in expectations for 5 Japanese undergraduate students studying abroad at a Canadian university. Using a modified expectancy violation framework, this study examined the initial stage of an 8-month study abroad program, using semi-structured interviews supported by observational data gained in classroom observation. An inductive, qualitative analysis of the interviews revealed that expectation of interaction was the most commonly violated expectation for the participants. Most participants struggled with assuming the identity of a less competent language user but nonetheless sought out opportunities to become competent in their study abroad context, in some cases creating and shaping their own contexts for language use and growth. Further, participants faced the challenge of addressing the native speaker/nonnative speaker dichotomy in a multicultural study abroad environment, particularly outside the classroom. The paper concludes with curricular, policy, and research implications.

本研究は、カナダの大学に留学中の日本人学生5人を対象に、留学先の学校や現地の人々、自身への期待の変化をケース・スタディの手法を用いて調べたものである。8か月間の留学期間の初期段階に授業観察及び半構造的面接を行い、データを修正版期待違反理論の枠組みで分析した。質的帰納的な分析の結果、現地人との交流に対する期待が最も満たされなかったことが判明した。本研究が対象とした留学生は、英語力が劣る話者というアイデンティティーの葛藤を抱えながらも、英語上達の機会を積極的に見出し、英語を使う機会も創出した。さらに、現地の多民族社会の中で、特に教室外で英語のネイティブ・非ネイティブという従来の二項対立の意味を再検討するという課題に直面した。本稿はカリキュラム、政策、本研究の意義についても言及する。

**I**t is widely believed that the best route to proficiency in a second language is study abroad (SA). Miller and Ginsberg (1995) claimed, “the only way that students ever acquire functional language ability, at least at advanced levels, is during study abroad” (p. 393). Although students may enter into the SA experience believing this, they often find their experiences in SA fail to meet those expectations. Studies on the relationship between expectations and overseas adaptation have suggested that the fulfillment or violation of these expectations have a strong influence on students’ ability to acculturate into the host environment (Furnham, 1993). Therefore, it is important for designers of SA programs for Japanese students to understand student expectations in relation to processes of adaptation in order to help students benefit from their SA experience (Bacon, 2008).

## Literature Review

According to Dufon and Churchill (2006), research on the topic of SA has followed similar trends to those in applied linguistics and second language acquisition research, where the research has expanded to include studies of learning processes and individual differences (Churchill, 2009; Habu, 2000; Talburt & Stewart, 1999), dimensions of communicative and academic competence (Bacon, 2008; Marriot, 2000), and the role of the host context in positively and negatively shaping opportunities for interaction and learning (Churchill, 2009; Iino, 2006; Polyani, 1995; Wilkinson, 1998). Studies of Japanese SA participant expectations have argued that program variables may affect opportunities for interaction (Churchill, 2009), especially for programs that group learners in ways that may restrict their interaction outside the classroom (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003).

In terms of theoretical approach, previous research on expectations has applied the expectancy violation model (Feather, 1967) to analyze participant expectations. In his expectancy violation framework, Burgoon (1992) postulated that students enter the SA experience with predeparture expect-

tations influenced by gender, prior experiences, and location of sojourn. This framework was applied to large scale quantitative research with American SA students by Martin, Bradford, and Rohrlach (1995), who called into question the idea that the more similar the host and native culture, the less acculturation difficulty experienced by SA students. Although this framework has been previously applied to large-scale quantitative research, the general model could also inform a small exploratory study. We therefore situated the present small-scale study within the context of Japanese students' shifting expectations. Our broad aim is that this exploratory study will contribute to the growing SA literature on student expectations by addressing the following linked questions:

Did the expectations of Japanese SA students in a two-semester program change from the pre-exchange phase to the initial stages of their SA experience, and if so, in what specific ways?

## Method

Our data were generated from a project orientation, an individual semi-structured interview with each participant (see Appendix A), and contextual field notes from three observations in the participants' classrooms. In order to address some known disadvantages of retrospective event interviews, participants were given time to reflect on the interview questions prior to the interview. Data were collected by the first author, who was a volunteer tutor in the Japan-Canada Exchange Program (JCEP)<sup>1</sup> during her time in Canada as a visiting student from her graduate program in Japan. Because case studies of SA can "present questions for further research in the area of language and cultural acquisition" (Bacon, 2008, p. 640), we characterize this study as *exploratory*; however, findings can be transferred not only to the cohort but also to SA programs in a variety of contexts.

## The Study Abroad Program

The host university is located in a large Canadian city in which English is used in fewer than half of its households. At the time of the study, 14% percent of the students at the university were international, and of these, 50% were from Asian countries. The JCEP, established 21 years prior to the current study, links a mid-size teaching-focused Japanese university and a large Canadian research-intensive university where English is the medium of instruction. The goals of the JCEP are to promote intercultural and academic engagement for students. JCEP students are exempted from

the host university's language proficiency requirements and follow a mainly sheltered curriculum in the sense that the majority of their courses are not credit-bearing at the Canadian host university, and hence are attended nearly entirely by visiting students enrolled in the JCEP, with a handful of exchange students from other countries. JCEP students go to Canada in September, halfway through their 2nd year of study at home in Japan, to pursue two semesters of custom-designed courses in liberal studies taught by EFL instructors familiar with content-based language teaching for JCEP students. Courses consist of a sheltered Canadian Studies course and two unsheltered liberal arts courses paired with noncredit adjunct English language support. In their second semester, the top third of the cohort (screened by incoming academic standing and current English proficiency scores) may replace sheltered courses with one or two freely chosen unsheltered elective courses. Students are placed individually in residence apartments with non-Japanese students. It should be noted that program details are normally covered in a predeparture orientation series that includes several sessions with leaders of the Canadian program and also a description of the host university's student body. Because of an organizational transition for this cohort, the Japanese university shortened its preorientation program and omitted all sessions by the Canadian team.

### ***Participants***

The sample was generated using convenience sampling based on availability and accessibility of the participants; however, as Dörnyei and Csizér (2012) argued, this method is also partially purposeful as students also had to possess characteristics that were related to the purpose of the investigation. The pool of 44 JCEP students was canvassed for participation, and five volunteered to participate in the project. All of them appeared to meet the criteria for the study and were enrolled in the study. The criteria for inclusion were willingness to volunteer (no payment was involved), written consent to participate, and representativeness of the larger student pool enrolled that year in the JCEP. Participants were considered representative of the larger JCEP population based on gender, academic major, incoming GPA, and incoming English language proficiency. The home faculties (i.e., academic majors) of the five participants in the study (three from the most widely represented faculty, International Relations, and one each from Economics and Letters) were reasonably representative of home faculties of the cohort of 44 students in the JCEP that year.

Ayumi,<sup>2</sup> an international relations major, had a TOEFL (PBT) score of 513 but seemed able to articulate her ideas well. She had previously studied abroad for a month in the United States and aimed to improve her English for work in Japan and meet new friends. She also wanted to improve her TOEFL score to participate in an unsheltered elective course. Ayumi lived with four international students—three Asians and one European—along with one Canadian. She joined two campus clubs.

Kana studied economics. Her TOEFL PBT was 527. Kana had previously studied in Canada briefly during high school. During her SA experience, she lived with a Canadian and an American international student, as well as a nonnative English-speaking international student. Kana also volunteered, preparing food at a homeless shelter.

Ryo was studying English literature in the Faculty of Letters, after having worked for 2 years. His TOEFL score was unreported. This was his first time outside Japan. He was the only nonnative English speaker among his roommates: four Canadians and one Australian. Ryo joined campus clubs and volunteered in an undergraduate Japanese class.

Yasutaka was studying international relations. Like Ryo, he had no prior SA experience. Despite his score of 530 on the TOEFL PBT, his speaking proficiency seemed weakest of the five participants. Yasutaka's roommates were Canadians and international nonnative English-speaking students.

Yui, also studying international relations, had spent a high school year in New Zealand. Yui's English proficiency was the highest of our participants (TOEFL PBT 570, meeting the threshold for the university's international student admissions). Yui resided with two international students and a Canadian and aimed to take unsheltered elective classes in the second semester.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

Participants received copies of the interview schedule at the orientation session and prior to being interviewed were given the interview questions in English in order to offset any potential difficulty for students working in their L2. Participants were asked to reflect for several days on the questions and to write down their answers before the interview. Semi-structured individual interviews in English lasted up to an hour and were recorded digitally and transcribed in full. Students were also asked to elaborate on or clarify their spoken responses as well as their previously written responses as an informal way of member-checking at the data collection level (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). At the conclusion of the interviews, participants' previously written responses were collected.

A comparison of topics mentioned in participants' spoken and previously written responses showed full consistency between spoken and written topics for each of the five participants. Transcribed interviews were then analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Two key themes were identified along with nine subthemes (see Appendix B) and refined by the method of constant comparison. These themes were (a) present feelings and ideas about life in Canada and (b) pre-SA expectations.

A subset of the interview transcripts (about half of one interview selected at random, representing approximately 10% of the full data set) was also coded by the second author. The two coders attained 85% coding agreement on the subset. This inter-rater agreement procedure, together with the attention to clarifications during interviews as well as our content check (or "data triangulation") of spoken with written responses' content gave the researchers reasonable confidence in the trustworthiness of the interview data despite the fact that respondents were not working in their native language.

## Findings

We found that during the initial stages of their SA experience, the participants' expectations in terms of setting (university) were mostly fulfilled or exceeded, yielding positive evaluations of this aspect of their experience. However, when examining the subtheme of present interaction and expectations of interaction, we found that participants' reported experiences frequently fell short of preprogram expectations. Therefore, we focus our presentation of findings in this report upon the more problematic subtheme of *opportunities for interaction and expectations of opportunities for interaction* and examine how the participants' expectations of interaction shifted during the initial stages of SA.

### ***Expectations and Opportunities for Interaction: In the Classroom***

Four participants indicated that they had expected to be studying in an environment with non-Japanese students, interacting with students from other countries as well as a variety of Canadian undergraduate students. They anticipated English-only classroom interaction with students, which for a great deal of student interaction was not the norm at the host university because of the sheltered program as well as the university's cosmopoli-

tan, predominantly multilingual student makeup. Ayumi was disappointed about being in a classroom with other Japanese speakers:

I don't like the class environment, because we should talk in English, but we talk each other in Japanese, so I don't like it. (Ayumi)

Although everyone agreed that an English-only classroom would be beneficial, Yasutaka commented that using Japanese allowed them to code-switch to discuss ideas or terms that were unknown in English, although he also commented that this impeded his opportunity to try to negotiate meanings in English. Yasutaka's and Ayumi's comments regarding language use in the classroom were corroborated by observations of classrooms in which students code-switched between Japanese and English, often using Japanese to discuss difficult concepts as well as to check meaning for instructions and presentations.

Although pre-SA expectations regarding interaction with classmates fell short, participants' expectations regarding their instructors in Canada were largely exceeded. Although students had expected that they would have difficulty interacting with instructors, all commented that their instructors provided an unexpected source of interaction. Ryo especially felt that the teacher-student relationship in Canada was closer and more casual than those relationships they had experienced in Japan:

I can talk with my teacher easily, so if I have a question, I can ask my teacher, but before I came to Vancouver, I have never asked my question to a teacher. (Ryo)

Although students could easily communicate with their instructors, it was not always possible with others outside the classroom.

### ***Expectations and Opportunities for Interaction: Outside the Classroom***

Participants initially expected that in a country where English is one of two official languages, there would be many chances to communicate with native speakers (NSs) of English. Students had to face the reality that they had arrived with 44 other Japanese students. As Ryo commented, his expectations regarding an English-only environment outside the classroom had shifted:

I expected that there are lots of opportunity to speak English, but as I said, we can use only Japanese in here, we can live with Japanese here so we have to, we have to be aggressive to speak English or make friends. (Ryo)

Pellegrino (1998) also found that, during SA, learners often interacted with NSs less frequently than planned.

### ***(Present) Interaction with Roommates***

One of the largest expectations our participants held for interaction was with roommates, as all participants resided on campus with other international and Canadian students. However, students soon realized that interaction with roommates was not guaranteed. Ryo was able to articulate the difference between his expectation of interaction with his roommates and the reality:

Everyone is kind for me, but they have their community or their group, so we don't have enough time to speak English or talk conversation, so, yeah, because also students here has a lot of assignment, a lot of paper, they are always busy. (Ryo)

Some participants realized that the academic English studied prearrival was not the register for informal interactions and they lacked the listening and speaking fluency to communicate information. Kana noted the discrepancy between her listening and speaking fluency in her L1 and L2:

They are not Japanese people. They, like, when I, when we just talk and they, like, I want to say something like happy or fun happened in Japanese. I can say like that, but in English I cannot say and also I can't listen to what my friends say. (Kana)

Yasutaka also commented that he lacked the skills to begin and maintain conversations in informal communication with roommates, developing an identity as a less competent member of his household, making participation additionally difficult. However, he soon began weekly tutoring sessions to help him build conversational skills to become an active contributor to interactions.

### ***Shaping Opportunities for (Present) Interaction***

From the beginning of their SA experience, students looked for opportunities for interaction on campus beyond their dormitories in university clubs, events, and as volunteers. When reflecting on expectations, students explained that they believed they would be more successful in making friends during the initial stages of their SA. Ryo began to realize that he would have to shape his own opportunities for interaction:

I'm facing this problem that there are few opportunity to speak native people English, but it's my problem, cause if I don't start to something, it's something never happen. I have to be more progressive. (Ryo)

All participants discussed their membership in clubs and noted that some members of these associations were students who had joined in order to practice Japanese. When asked if they used Japanese to interact with these students, participants indicated that they resisted in order to practice speaking English. That is, they resisted using their multilingual competence in situations where it could have been a tool to build relationships with other students through language exchange.

Ryo realized that Japanese could be a means to exercise what Kramsch and Whiteside (2011) termed *symbolic competence*, creating and shaping the contexts in which language is used and learned. He decided to volunteer as a teaching assistant for a Japanese class, repositioning himself into the teacher role, in which he was required to code-switch between Japanese and English in order to present Japanese culture and attractions.

### ***Ethnicity, Culture, and Expectations of Interaction***

Despite students knowing about the multilingual and multicultural make-up of the host university and its city, they nonetheless commented that the demographics of the university and the city were much more diverse than expected. Yui reflected on the difference between her expectations and her experience of this diversity:

At first I thought [host city], the whole Canada was Canadian people—I imagined there is white people but my expectation was not correct actually—there is a lot of Asians, a lot of Canadians. Well, Canadian includes everything, but there's a lot of others including Japanese and I'm really shocked, but things

turned to be okay, because then I can meet a lot of people I wouldn't meet in Japan. (Yui)

Although Yui's expectation in this regard was violated, she saw this as positive, increasing her opportunities to interact in English with a wider variety of people than she had expected. However, others' expectations of interaction were violated negatively, as some had pictured Canadians as Caucasian, native English speakers. This topic is usually addressed in the preprogram orientation course in Japan which, as previously mentioned, was seriously truncated for this cohort. When asked about interaction with "Canadian people," Ayumi answered:

I don't know who is Canadian and who is not . . . even she or he is the face is like Asian, but the person is Canadian.

Early in their SA experience, participants began to question classifications of ethnicity and culture in relation to their expectation of NS interaction. When asked about ethnicity and culture in relation to new friendships, Ayumi felt social groups on campus tended to be defined by culture and ethnicity:

I feel like there is a tendency that Asian people and European or American or Canadian people are a little separated . . . at some events and always when I'm walking in the street, I saw Asian and Asian or Canadian and Canadian like that, so I feel like it. (Ayumi)

Participants struggled with difficulties of ethnic and cultural classification in a multiethnic, multicultural community. Several mentioned that it was easier to make friends with other Asian international students from Korea or China because they shared knowledge or interests in topics such as Asian pop culture. Participants' initial expectations of interaction with only NSs in Canada had expanded to embrace interaction with other nonnative speakers (NNSs) in situations where English was used as a lingua franca. In these situations, English became a shared resource to create the opportunity for interaction beyond what the students had expected predeparture. Ayumi was able to use English as a lingua franca with NNS friends:

I can talk to Korean . . . more easily and many students say I became a friend, but she or he is Korean, so many students have Korean friends or Chinese. (Ayumi)

## Discussion

Similarly to the research of Martin, Bradford, and Rohrlich (1995), this study found that unmet expectations of SA are not always evaluated negatively. When expectations are either fulfilled or violated positively, participants will also have a positive evaluation about that aspect of their SA experience. This was seen in the positive violation of Yui's expectation of Canadian ethnicity as she realized the definition of a Canadian was much more diverse than she had expected, leading to opportunities for interaction that she had not experienced in Japan. The results also coincide with Martin et al.'s findings that when predeparture expectations are violated negatively, students will form a negative evaluation of that aspect of their experience, as was seen in the violation of students' expectations regarding interaction and language use within the classroom. Through the lens of this theoretical framework, we propose several implications of these exploratory findings.

First, in terms of student preparation for SA, to ensure that the legitimate expectations of students are met as far as possible, the design of the program could have been more effectively explained to the participants using the Japanese university's standard predeparture orientation course that, for organizational reasons, was not fully implemented for our participants' cohort. Similar to the findings of Churchill's (2009) study, predeparture coordination between the host and home universities was of utmost important to participants' successful involvement in the SA program. However, an SA program itself cannot be solely responsible for positive or negative evaluations, because students' agency and capacity for self-regulation also influence engagement in SA (Allen, 2010). The findings of this study imply that pre-SA orientations may need to include a discussion of ethnicity, language, and culture to prepare students for SA in multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual host communities.

Second, in regard to research implications, the NS-NNS dichotomy needs to be studied in relation to SA in multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual host communities. Ayumi's observation, that she didn't know who was Canadian and who was not, supports Isabelli-Garcia's (2006) argument that SA research on interaction and L2 acquisition needs to take account of social and demographic challenges to the ways in which NSs are classified and conceptualized (see Talburt & Stewart, 1999.)

Third, from a policy and practice perspective, these findings suggest that preparation for SA should address skills that students will require not only inside but also outside the classroom. That may mean explicit teaching of communicative skills that better equip students for "extracurricular" inter-

actions during the initial stage of their SA experience. As also found by Miller and Ginsberg (1995), many participants found teacher talk comprehensible but were unable to comprehend communication outside their classrooms.

One limitation of scale in this study is that it was only able to address expectations of SA during the first 3 months of the sojourn. This allowed for only one interview with participants. Having a single interview with students is likely to have influenced their perspectives on their pre-SA expectations. Participants' perspectives may have shifted during the 8-month SA experience, as seen in other SA literature (Bacon, 2008) and would need to be re-evaluated upon program completion to create a full-scale comparison. Nonetheless, studies on expectations during short-term SA (Pitts, 2009) have found that even during a limited time period, individuals were able to compare expectation gaps and overlaps and normalize their experience in the process of refining expectations.

When examining implications for further research, it is evident that there is a continued need for research that addresses student expectations of the SA experience. It is the authors' hope that this exploratory study will inform a future longitudinal investigation that will allow for a more comprehensive analysis of this issue.

## Notes

1. The program's title is a pseudonym, to protect the identities of participants.
2. Pseudonyms are used for participants.

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## Appendix A

### *Interview Protocol*

1. How do you feel about your life in Canada?
2. What do you think about your classes at the host university? (class environment, class topics, assignments, difficulty).
3. What do you think about your teachers and the staff members at the host university?
4. What do you think about the school campus and about the host city?
5. Before you came to the host city, what did you think your life here would be like?

6. Before you came to the host city, what did you think your classes at the host university would be like? (classroom environment, course topics, types of assignments, difficulty)
7. Before you came to the host city, what did you think your teachers and staff at the host university would be like?
8. Before you came to the host city, what did you think the school campus and the host city would be like?
9. What kind of preparation did you receive before you came to Canada (academic, linguistic, cultural)? Do you think this preparation was enough? If not, how could the preparation be improved for future students?
10. How have your expectations of this program changed after 2 months in the host city?

## Appendix B

### *Coding Themes/Subthemes for Analysis*

1. Present feelings and ideas about life in Canada
  - a. (Pres-Set) Setting (host city)

Yeah of course the people in Canada is also kind like shoppers shop staff. (Kana)

- b. (Pres-School) Host university
      - i. Campus
      - ii. Class environment
      - iii. Curriculum
      - iv. Teachers and staff

I chose Family Studies because I was interested in that but yeah I like learning new things and I like learning so I'm learning sociolinguistics and reading behind the image and like that. (Yui)

- c. (Pres-Int) Interactions/opportunities for interaction
        - i. People students are interacting with
        - ii, Opportunities for interaction
        - iii. Communicative competence

I think I quite go outside and participate a lot of parties because I belong the Asia Club and Japan Association Club so I make a lot of friends there. (Yui)

d. (E-C) Ethnicity and culture

So I feel that there is a tendency that Asian people and European or American or Canadian people are a little separated. (Ayumi)

e. (Trans) Transformation of self/learning

Uh little by little I uh speak English and then make friends so yeah so I enjoy the my life in Canada. (Yasutaka)

2. Pre-study abroad expectations

a. (Ex-Set) Expectations of setting (host city)

I expect that there are more entertainment place like to like amusement park or but not so much in here but it's good I don't need like that place. (Ayumi)

b. (Ex-School) Expectations of host university

- i. Campus
- ii. Class environment
- iii. Curriculum
- iv. Teachers and staff

I expect the campus is larger than my university. (Yasutaka)

c. (Ex-Int) Expectations of interactions/opportunities for interaction

- i. Expectations of who they would interact with
- ii. Expectations of opportunities for interaction
- iii. Expectations of communicative competence

It's difficult to make friends than I expected. (Kana)

d. (Ex-Self) Expectations of self

I expected I will be lazy for housework but now it's not so. (Ayumi)