

Launching and Evaluating a Study Abroad Initiative Program

Jason Peppard

Yamagata University

Bryan Jennings

Yamagata University

Lazaro Echenique-Diaz

Yamagata University

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Participation in study-abroad programs has been shown to support second-language development, academic growth, and long-term professional outcomes. However, participation among Japanese university students has not yet fully recovered to pre-COVID-19 levels. To address this challenge, Yamagata University launched the Study Abroad Initiative Program (SAIP), a preparatory framework designed to build English proficiency, confidence, and motivation for overseas study. SAIP integrates CLIL-based elective courses, English-speaking activities, IELTS preparation, and intensive workshops to support students at varying levels of readiness. This study evaluates student perceptions of the SAIP using questionnaire data, participation records, and testimonials, alongside longitudinal data on study-abroad enrollment from 2021 to 2025. Results indicate high student satisfaction, increased motivation to study abroad, and a substantial rise in participation rates. The findings suggest that early, structured preparatory programs can play a key role in strengthening study-abroad engagement.

留学プログラムへの参加は、第二言語能力の発達、学業的成長、ならびに長期的な職業的成果を高めることが示されている。しかし、日本の大学生の留学参加率は、コロナ禍以前の水準までには回復していない。この課題に対応するため、ある大学では、英語運用能力、自信、そして留学への動機づけを育成する準備プログラム「Study Abroad Initiative Program (SAIP)」を導入した。SAIPは、CLIL型の選択科目、英語によるコミュニケーション活動、IELTS対策、集中ワークショップを統合し、学生の準備段階に応じた支援を提供している。本研究では、質問紙調査、参加記録、学生の声に加え、2021年から2025年までの留学参加者数の縦断的データを用いて、SAIPに対する学生の認識を分析した。その結果、学生の満足度の高さ、留学意欲の向上、留学参加率の大幅な増加が確認された。これらの結果は、早期かつ体系的な準備プログラムが、留学への参加促進において重要な役割を果たすことを示唆している。

Participation in study-abroad programs has been increasingly recognized as contributing to both second-language growth and broader academic development (Idehara, 2007; Lee et al. 2012; Milian et al., 2015). Research by Higuchi *et al.* (2023) found that Japanese university students who went overseas made noticeably larger gains in English proficiency than peers who remained on campus. In addition to language improvement, overseas study has been linked to outcomes such as greater global awareness, increased motivation to learn, and stronger employment prospects (Asankulova & Thomsen, 2023; Milian et al., 2015)

In Japan, the number of students taking part in these programs has not yet fully returned to pre-COVID-19 levels, although the figures have been rising steadily in recent years (Japan Association of Overseas Studies, 2023; Japan Student Services Organization, 2024). Universities have played an important role in supporting and encouraging participation, but additional effort is still required if institutions hope to match or surpass the numbers seen before the pandemic. Early engagement appears to be especially influential, as many students may benefit from additional time to build the language skills and confidence commonly associated with overseas study.

To respond to these needs—particularly the need for early language support—the English Working Group (EWG) at Yamagata University created the Study Abroad Initiative Program (SAIP). This program offers first-year students a structured set of preparatory opportunities, including extracurricular English-speaking sessions, mock

IELTS examinations, and a selection of CLIL-based courses that students can choose according to their interests. Together, these components aim to strengthen students' academic English, boost their confidence, and guide them through the proficiency requirements of various exchange programs.

This paper investigates how students perceive the SAIP program by examining questionnaire data and student testimonials. The study focuses on two central research questions:

- RQ1. To what extent do SAIP participants feel the program prepares them for studying abroad?
- RQ2. Based on the survey responses, in what ways can SAIP be refined to offer better support and encourage higher levels of participation?

By exploring these issues, the paper aims to contribute to ongoing discussions about how Japanese universities can enhance and expand study-abroad engagement in the post-pandemic era.

Literature Review

Recent research has continued to highlight the positive impact of study-abroad programs on Japanese university students' language development. Higuchi et al. (2023), drawing on a large regression-discontinuity dataset, found that students who participated in overseas programs showed measurable gains in English proficiency. Their analysis suggests that time spent in an immersive English environment plays a major role in strengthening language ability. In their study, students who engaged in activities such as CLIL coursework, speaking practice, or targeted test preparation tended to make greater progress. They also observed that students who began their programs with higher English proficiency often benefited even more from the experience, lending support to the rationale for building those foundational language skills before departure that underlies preparatory programs such as SAIP.

A growing body of work also examines the long-term economic and professional value of studying abroad. Asankulova and Thomsen (2023) report that participation in overseas programs is associated with higher employability, stronger professional networks, and improved intercultural competence, even years after graduation. These outcomes suggest that studying abroad should be viewed as an investment in human capital, reinforcing the importance of university initiatives that encourage students to participate.

Taken together, these studies illustrate that study-abroad programs offer substantial benefits—not only for students' language development, but also for their professional

growth. They also show that preparatory programs can play a meaningful role in increasing student motivation and strengthening L2 confidence. To realize these advantages, however, students often require structured guidance and institutional support. Programs such as SAIP at Yamagata University can help bridge the gap between student interest and actual participation by providing the preparation, information, and encouragement necessary for students to take part in overseas opportunities.

Methodology

Developing the SAIP

Background

The decision to create the SAIP at Yamagata University was prompted by lengthy negotiations within the Undergraduate Educational Institution's English program which resulted in several changes starting in the 2023 school year. First, the course structure changed from two English classes per week and one online course each semester, to one class per week and two online courses. Class sizes were reduced from a maximum of 36 students to 25 students, and the total number of English teachers was reduced from 36 to 16, which led to the creation of five new full-time positions. The full-time English teachers, six in total, formed the newly established English Working Group (EWG), which is responsible for all first-year English courses across all five faculties at the university. The first major task of the EWG was to create optional extracurricular offerings for students wishing to improve their English while promoting the university's studying abroad partnerships, with the result being the SAIP.

SAIP Components

The SAIP consists of the five main components outlined below.

- **Speaking Practice**
First, Speaking Practice consists of 20-minute time slots that provide students with one-on-one practice sessions with the teacher of their choice. Students can choose between free conversation practice or IELTS speaking test practice sessions. These can be especially helpful for students who have already decided to study abroad as many of our partner universities in Europe require a minimum IELTS score of 5.0 for acceptance into their programs. In addition to English, sessions are also available in both Spanish and Chinese for free conversation sessions. These sessions are offered once a week with each teacher of the EWG providing three

available time slots for a total of 18 weekly slots. The time slots are offered on a first come first serve basis via a sign-up sheet.

- **IELTS Mock Test**

Next, an IELTS Mock Test is provided two times each semester. Students complete the listening, reading, and writing sections online and the speaking section is administered by members of the EWG in one-on-one sessions. Students can choose which teacher they would like to take the speaking test with, and they are provided with a counseling session following the test to discuss their strengths and weaknesses, and what needs to be worked on. Taken together with IELTS focused Speaking Practice sessions and the two mock tests, motivated students can get a fair amount of practice before taking the official test.

- **English Days**

Two English Days are held each semester. These are full-day events held on weekends and open to all students. All international exchange students are invited, and the event is promoted as a fun and casual day of games and communication activities using English only. The English Days appear to be well received by Japanese students looking to improve their English through real language use with all the English teachers, as well as international students from a wide range of countries.

- **English Camp**

The English Camp is a two-day intensive English skills workshop with a much more academic focus than the English Days. The English Camp involves a smaller group of highly motivated students and involves activities designed to improve their presentation, communication/discussion, writing, problem solving, and critical thinking skills. In addition to short workshops with the EWG teachers on developing the above-mentioned skills, students work in groups or pairs and are required to conduct a small research project with a final presentation at the end of the second day. There is also a social element, as the students spend the night at the venue with an English movie and discussion session in the evening.

- **CLIL Courses**

The final component of the SAIP is the inclusion of the Special Subjects in English course which includes six different CLIL classes to choose from. CLIL refers to Content and Language Integrated Learning, in which students study both subject matter and the target language simultaneously, rather than simply learning the language. The purpose of these CLIL classes is to offer students who may be interested in studying abroad a chance to experience what taking courses fully in

English might be like in a foreign country. Each of the six EWG teachers teach a subject of their choosing, with one additional class (Golf Basics) being taught by one of the EWG teachers in partnership with a teacher from an outside faculty. Looking at the class descriptions below, it is easy to see that the teachers chose to teach their hobbies and interests. This makes for a highly motivated teacher as well as highly motivated students, since these classes are optional and credited, whereas all first-year English classes are mandatory for all students. See Appendix A for full descriptions of the classes that were offered.

Data Collection

Data for this preliminary and ongoing evaluation of the SAIP consists of data on students participating in study abroad exchanges at the university provided by the International Relations Department, and from the participation data collected from all five components of the SAIP. In addition, a questionnaire is given to participating students at the end of the English Camp, and another questionnaire is administered online to students taking the CLIL classes at the end of each semester. At this point, however, data is rather limited as the SAIP is in its infancy, and participation in the English Camp and CLIL classes tends to be relatively low compared to compulsory first-year English classes. Study-abroad enrollment figures (Figure 1) are compiled annually by the International Relations Department and reflect all outbound exchange participants university-wide, not only those who took part in SAIP components, allowing a preliminary comparison between overall enrollment trends and SAIP-specific engagement. Verbal consent to participate was obtained from all students prior to their completion of the questionnaires and their involvement in the English Camp and CLIL activities described above.

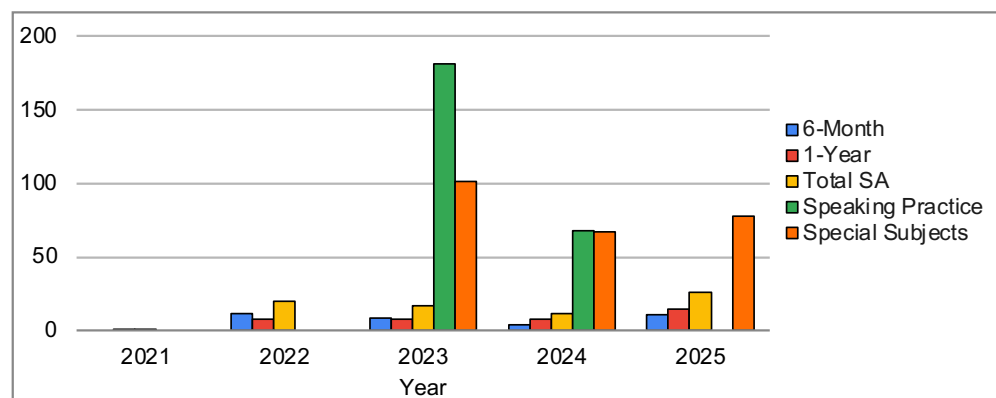
Results

Longitudinal Trends in Study-Abroad Participation

The primary metric for evaluating the institutional impact of the SAIP is the rate of student participation in overseas exchange programs. Data provided by the International Relations Department (2021–2025) demonstrates a robust post-pandemic recovery. As illustrated in Figure 1, student participation increased from a baseline of a single student in 2021 to 26 students in 2025. A notable qualitative shift in the nature of participation was also observed. In 2025, for the first time in the recorded period, a majority of students ($n=15$) committed to full-year academic stays rather than six-month programs.

This trend may suggest that the preparatory support provided by the SAIP modules is contributing to students' linguistic confidence and academic readiness for sustained international engagement, although other contributing factors cannot be ruled out given the descriptive nature of this data.

Figure 1
SAIP Enrollment and Activity Participation

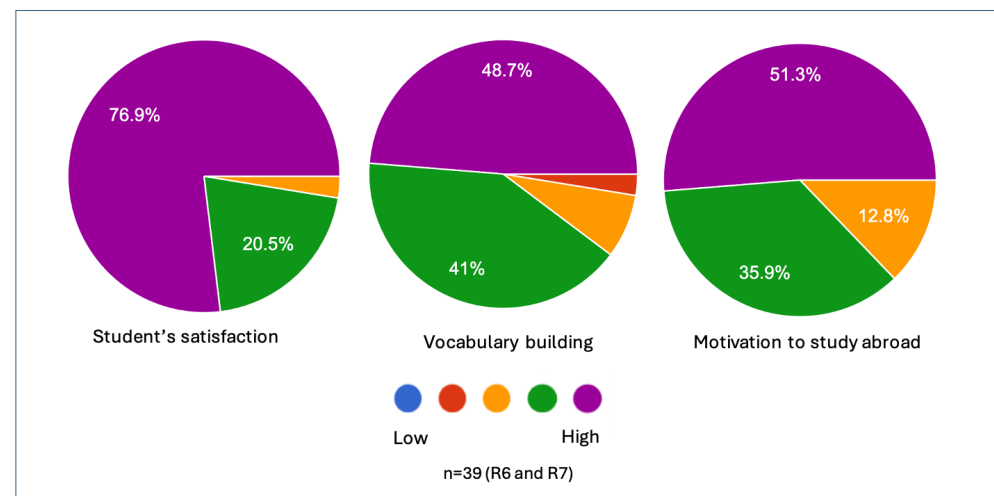


Note. 6-Month, 1-Year, and Total SA indicate the number of students who studied abroad for six months, one year, or in total, respectively, in each year shown. Speaking Practice and Special Subjects (the CLIL-based elective courses described in the Methodology) are included for comparison as the two longest-tracked SAIP components.

Student Perceptions and Motivational Differentiation

Quantitative analysis of the student survey ($n=39$) indicates overwhelming support for the CLIL-based Special Subjects (Figure 2). A significant number of respondents (97.4%) reported high course enjoyment, and a unanimous 100% stated they would recommend the curriculum to peers. When comparing these modules with mandatory English requirements, 87.2% of students identified the SAIP courses as being “more” or “strongly more” motivating toward their study-abroad goals. Qualitative responses highlighted the efficacy of using English as a functional tool as a means of reducing language anxiety and improving perceived linguistic skills (84.6% agreement). These qualitative insights were drawn from an open-ended survey item and the student testimonials noted above.

Figure 2
Impact of the CLIL-based Special Subjects on Students' Satisfaction, English Improvement, and Motivation to Engage in the Study Abroad Program.

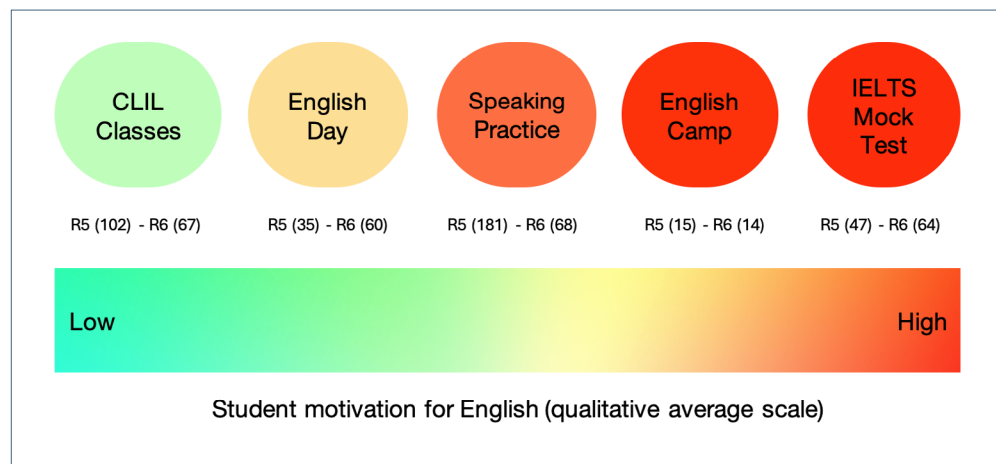


Note. In each panel, the color legend runs from least positive (blue) to most positive (purple). For example, purple denotes the highest or most favorable response option for that item.

Perceived Motivation and Instructor Assessment

The program's reach can be further understood through a perceived motivation analysis that maps participation volume against qualitative instructor assessments of student motivation. Entry-level components, such as the Special Subjects and English Day sessions, act as low-barrier engagement points for a broad student base (Figure 3). In contrast, the Speaking Practice module functions as the program's engine for habit formation, as suggested by relatively high rates of repeat attendance in previous years. High-intensity modules, including the IELTS Mock Tests and the English Camp, successfully target the most motivated cohort, directly preparing them for the formal proficiency requirements of international exchange.

Figure 3
Perceived Student Motivation for English and SAIP Opportunities.



Note. R5 and R6 are denominations for the Japanese Academic years 2023 and 2024. Numbers in brackets = number of students. “Special Subjects” refers to the CLIL-based elective courses described in the Methodology.

Discussion

This study examined student perceptions of the Study Abroad Initiative Program (SAIP) at Yamagata University and considered how its components contribute to preparedness for overseas study. Overall, the findings suggest that SAIP is functioning effectively as an early-stage preparatory framework that supports both student motivation and practical readiness for studying abroad.

Regarding the first research question, survey results indicate that participants generally feel well prepared for overseas study, particularly through the CLIL-based Special Subjects. High levels of reported enjoyment, perceived English improvement, and willingness to recommend these courses suggest that students view them as both engaging and relevant. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that meaningful, content-based language use can reduce anxiety and strengthen confidence in L2 use (Higuchi et al., 2023).

Students also reported that using English as a functional tool rather than focusing solely on language form was especially motivating. This suggests that early exposure to English-medium instruction, particularly in interest-based or non-traditional subjects, can help lower psychological barriers and make the prospect of studying abroad more attainable. In this respect, the CLIL courses appear to provide a realistic but accessible introduction to overseas academic study.

The Speaking Practice and IELTS-focused components further support this process by addressing concrete proficiency requirements. Although participation in these higher-intensity modules was more limited, instructor observations suggest that they effectively serve students who already have clear study-abroad intentions.

While the findings are encouraging, participation across SAIP components remains uneven, particularly in activities requiring higher commitment. In addition, the study relies primarily on self-reported data and descriptive participation figures. Future research incorporating standardized proficiency measures and longitudinal tracking would allow for a more detailed evaluation of learning outcomes and program impact. Relatedly, perceived motivation (Figure 3) was assessed through instructor judgment rather than a standardized instrument, and observed attendance and enrollment patterns may reflect additional, unmeasured factors; more rigorous and controlled measurement is an important direction for future iterations of the SAIP evaluation.

Conclusion

This paper reported on the launch and initial evaluation of the Study Abroad Initiative Program at Yamagata University, focusing on student perceptions, participation patterns, and early institutional outcomes. The results indicate that SAIP has contributed to a noticeable recovery in study-abroad participation following the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as increased engagement with preparatory English-language activities.

By offering a range of interconnected components, from low-barrier engagement activities to more intensive proficiency-focused preparation, the SAIP addresses several obstacles that have traditionally limited Japanese students’ participation in overseas programs. In particular, strong student support for the CLIL-based courses highlights the value of interest-driven, English-medium instruction as an effective motivator and confidence-building tool.

Although the study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data and a relatively short observation period, the findings suggest that early, structured, and flexible institutional support can play an important role in translating student interest into actual study-

abroad participation. As Japanese universities continue efforts to rebuild and expand international programs, initiatives such as the SAIP may offer a practical model for fostering language development, academic readiness, and global engagement among first-year students.

Bio Data

Jason Peppard holds a PhD and MA in applied linguistics/corpus linguistics from the University of Birmingham (UK) and a BA in psychology from Saint Mary's University (Canada). His research interests include communicative and task-based language teaching, corpus-based approaches to syllabus design, and critical discourse analysis.

Bryan Jennings holds an MA in applied linguistics and a BA with a double major in radio/television/film production and history. His research interests include task-based language teaching and comparative studies of anger expression across Japanese and Western cultural contexts.

Lazaro Echenique-Diaz holds a PhD in evolutionary genetics and an MSc in population genetics, both from Tohoku University, and a BA in biology from Havana University. He has published extensively in ecology, conservation biology, and animal evolution/phylogenetics.

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Appendix A

CLIL Class Descriptions

- **Fundamentals of Drawing**
Learn the basics of drawing. This class is for beginning artists only. If you've been interested in learning how to draw animals, people or the outside world, but don't have the skills yet, this class will help you start your drawing journey while practicing English.
- **Digital Photography**
In this class, we will be learning about digital photography and how to improve our picture-taking skills. This will be a practical, hands-on, course, and you will need to have access to a camera for weekly assignments, but any camera is OK, including your smart phone camera. In class however, you will learn how to use a dedicated camera with full manual controls. In addition to developing your basic photography skills, this class will help you improve your English proficiency, with a focus on photography-related vocabulary and concepts, creativity and critical thinking skills, and promote collaborative learning through, peer feedback and presentations.
- **Climbing Biomechanics**
What does a computer-animated, fast-running T-rex from the movie "Jurassic Park" have in common with Honda's humanoid robot Asimo? The answer is Biomechanics, the science of how hard structures, and soft structures, work together to produce motion in living organisms. In this class, students will learn about Biomechanics by using their own bodies in different practical activities, including outdoor excursions, with a special focus on efficient body movement, injury prevention, and rehabilitation.

- **Critical Thinking through Board Games**

This course will improve students' English, explanation and critical thinking skills using cooperative and competitive board games.

- **Movie appreciation**

In this class, you will be immersed into different worlds, laughing or crying, getting shocked and then relieved. Not only getting used to English, but also experiencing different cultures, trying to understand different viewpoints and thinking deeply about current issues. It is so fun to exchange feelings about the movies after watching them. Writing a review about your favorite movie helps you deepen your thoughts while sharpening your writing skills.

- **Introduction to Design**

Almost everything in our lives is designed: our clothes, homes, transport. Without the power of design, modern society could not exist. The history of design is a story of failures and disasters. But because of these problems, the things we use everyday are much better than in the past. Design is where art, science, engineering, and imagination combine to make our modern world. Let's explore it together!

- **Golf Basics in English**

This course combines theme-based English instruction with the fundamentals of golf to help students develop both language proficiency and physical skills. Through task-based activities conducted in English, students will improve their speaking and listening abilities while learning basic golf concepts. By the end of the course, students will be able to understand simple golf-related instructions in English, explain golf rules and etiquette using easy English, and demonstrate correct grip, stance, and alignment to hit a golf ball approximately 50 yards. Classes will be held in a mix of classroom sessions, practice range lessons, and short course play, allowing students to learn golf fundamentals through practical, hands-on experience.