

Lost in Assessment: The Social Dimension of Global Talent

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In Japan, study abroad (SA) is closely linked to the policy construct of *guroubaru jinzai* (global talent), which frames international mobility as a means of cultivating globally competent human resources. In practice, this competence is most often evaluated through standardized English test scores. While language gains are an expected and valuable outcome of SA, relying on linguistic assessment as a primary measure of the SA experience risks overlooking an array of skills that students acquire, narrowing what counts in the development of global talent. Drawing on qualitative data from Japanese students studying abroad in Canada, we illustrate that SA also supports the development of socio-emotional and interpersonal competencies that align closely with the stated objectives of *guroubaru jinzai*. We examine how these forms of growth emerge through lived experience and discuss existing assessment approaches that could complement language testing.

日本において、留学 (Study Abroad: SA) は、「グローバル人材 (*guroubaru jinzai*)」という政策的構想と密接に結びつけられており、国際的に活躍できる人材を育成するための手段として位置づけられている。実際には、こうした能力は主として標準化された英語能力試験の得点によって評価されることが多い。言語能力の向上は留学の重要かつ価値ある成果の一つである一方で留学経験の主要な指標として言語評価に依拠することは、学生が留学を通じて獲得する多様な能力を見落とし、「グローバル人材」の育成において何が評価されるべきかを狭めてしまう恐れがある。

本稿では、カナダに留学した日本人学生を対象とした質的データをもとに、留学が言語能力の発達にとどまらず、「グローバル人材」に関する政策的目標と密接に重なり合う社会的・情意的能力や対人関係能力の育成をも支えていることを示す。さらに、こうした成長が学生の経験に根ざした形でどのように生じているのかを検討するとともに、言語テストを補完しうる既存の評価アプローチについて考察する。

In the Japanese higher education context, study abroad (SA) is widely promoted as a pathway to developing *guroubaru jinzai*, or “global talent.” This policy concept reflects an aspiration to prepare students who can function effectively in international and intercultural settings, respond to global labor market demands, and contribute to Japan’s global engagement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024). Government-supported initiatives such as the Re-Inventing Japan Project, Tobitate! Japan, and the Top Global University Project explicitly position SA as a key mechanism for achieving these goals.

In Japan, SA is often presented as a way of producing “global” human resources—though in practice this usually means producing English-mediated, job-ready graduates. This approach to SA fits with a broader neoliberal view of language education, where English communication skill is treated as a form of human capital linked to employability and competitiveness. As Kubota (2016) argues, contemporary language education policies are deeply shaped by neoliberal ideologies that position communication skills, intercultural competence, and a global mindset as forms of human capital linked to employability and competitiveness.

Consequently, English proficiency has taken on a particularly prominent role in Japan and elsewhere in the world. Standardized language tests such as IELTS and TOEFL are used to determine readiness for mobility, to track progress during SA, and, importantly, to demonstrate outcomes upon return. These tests provide institutions with tangible,

comparable data and offer students a credential that can be readily displayed on a CV. As such, they have a legitimizing function in the evaluation of SA outcomes.

However, using language testing to measure gains attained during SA emphasizes certain outcomes while marginalizing many others, rendering them invisible not only to key stakeholders such as learners aspiring to develop global talent capacities, but also to those responsible for recognizing such capacities in selection and evaluation contexts. Moreover, research has long suggested that SA supports more than language development (Norton, 1997, 2010; Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Yashima, 2013). Yet, changes that students experience in identity, confidence, and intercultural engagement are rarely incorporated into formal assessment practices, in part because they are perceived as subjective, difficult to measure, or difficult to foster systematically.

More specifically, assessment practices tend to overlook the wide range of cultural, interpersonal, and personal skills that students develop during SA, as these forms of learning are rarely explicitly acknowledged, valued, or rewarded. Within current Japanese institutional discourse, ideals of self-optimization, employability, marketability, individual success, and competitiveness (Smith & Samuel, 2024) remain loosely defined. Perhaps for that reason they are rarely articulated as assessable constructs and why post-SA assessment continues to privilege more easily quantifiable outcomes, such as linguistic gains and the assertion of certifiable proficiency levels. As a result, both educators and students may struggle to understand how broader SA outcomes should be recognized and evaluated. Smith and Samuel (2024) succinctly capture this situation in the following critique:

There is no long-term roadmap, concrete target, or, indeed, formal evaluation system for learners to aspire to, but a collection of indistinct slogans and neologisms, leading to confusion amongst sojourners and educators when attempting to conform to SA policy (173-4).

This paper argues that competencies that are often treated as peripheral are in fact central to *gurōbaru jinzai* and are meaningfully developed through SA experiences. Drawing on qualitative data from Japanese students studying abroad in Canada, we show how learners describe acquiring social, emotional, and intercultural capacities that enable them to engage across difference, adapt to unfamiliar contexts, and act with confidence and empathy. Consequently, we invite a reflection on ways that evaluation practices could be broadened beyond linguistic proficiency to include alternative forms of assessment that can capture these social, emotional, and intercultural dimensions of learning.

Challenges in Defining *Gurōbaru Jinzai* in Japan

A central challenge in the literature on *gurōbaru jinzai* concerns the difficulty of clearly defining and operationalizing the construct within higher education policy and practice. While the Council on the Promotion of Human Resources for Globalization Development (2011) articulates a broad set of desired competencies comprised of three factors, the construct itself remains underspecified.

- **Factor I:** Linguistic and communication skills.
- **Factor II:** Self-direction, positive attitude, sense of responsibility and mission, spirit of welcoming challenge, cooperativeness, and flexibility.
- **Factor III:** An understanding of other cultures and a sense of identity as a Japanese citizen.

(Council on the Promotion of Human Resources for Globalization Development, 2011, as cited in Take & Shoraku, 2017)

In the university context, these competencies are often defined in terms of: (1) linguistic and communication skills, (2) intercultural competence, (3) adaptability and flexibility, (4) innovative thinking and problem-solving, (5) global mindset and awareness, (6) self-direction and resilience, and (7) cultural identity and citizenship (Take & Shoraku, 2017). In response to government-driven internationalization efforts, Japanese universities have increasingly embedded these objectives into admissions criteria, curriculum design, and graduation policies, thereby institutionalizing *gurōbaru jinzai* and SA as a guiding framework for educational reform (Take & Shoraku, 2017).

In addition to institutional implementation, there have also been pedagogical efforts to make the concept more accessible and meaningful to students. For example, Hofmeyr on her project website *Exploring intercultural competence for professional success: perspectives from Japan* (https://wps.itc.kansai-u.ac.jp/ashofmeyr/?doing_wp_cron=1784299525.9219739437103271484375) draws on interviews with well-known public figures in Japan to stimulate classroom discussion about what it means to become global talent. Such approaches aim to render the abstract construct more relatable by framing it through familiar narratives and aspirational role models, thereby encouraging students to view the competencies as real and attainable.

The under-specification of the concept has enabled universities to adapt the notion of global talent to their own institutional priorities, which in turn raises questions about comparability and coherence across institutions (Take & Shoraku, 2017, Yonezawa et al., 2018). One issue is the uneven measurability of these competencies. While language

proficiency can be readily assessed through standardized tests, many of the social, emotional, and intercultural dimensions embedded in the *gurōbaru jinzai* framework are more difficult to define, teach, and evaluate. As a result, these less tangible outcomes are often put to the side in pedagogical practice that may prioritize the more easily quantifiable language skills (Chapple, 2014). This tendency is reinforced by implicit assumptions in institutional practice. As explained in Kubota (2011), there is at times a taken-for-granted inference that demonstrated English proficiency may be interpreted as sufficient evidence that broader forms of global readiness or international competence are also present. The inference, writes Kubota, is that “those who can tackle English can tackle other things, too” (Kubota, 2011, p. 258).

Such disproportionate emphasis on foreign language proficiency has made the development and assessment of the broader competencies of global talent secondary (Ashizawa, 2014; Hashimoto, 2017; Katsumata, 2017; Hofmeyr, 2021b). As Sakamoto (2022) states, this lack of conceptual and operational clarity has led to questioning regarding both the coherence and effectiveness of *gurōbaru jinzai* initiatives in higher education contexts. Such misalignment not only limits how the concept of global talent is understood but also constrains the kinds of learning that are formally recognized and valued within Japanese higher education (Sakamoto, 2022).

Data Collection Methodology

The development of skills associated with global talent has largely remained either within the realm of anecdotal observations by educators and administrators who witness changes in students during and after their SA experiences, or within research grounded in alternative conceptual frameworks, such as the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009; Yashima, 2013) and intercultural communication (Hanada, 2019; Deacon & Miles, 2023; Humphreys & Baker, 2021; Taguchi, 2025). While these studies document important outcomes of SA, they do not examine these gains through the lens of *gurōbaru jinzai*.

The present study proposes this line of inquiry by investigating the development of non-language-related skills encompassed within the concept of global talent by tapping into students’ perceptions of competencies acquired through SA that extend beyond language learning. For this purpose, we draw on secondary analysis of qualitative data from a multi-year research project (Bonn et al., 2020; Demperio & Kozłowska, 2023) conducted at a Francophone university in a major Canadian city. The original project investigated motivational factors among Japanese students before, during, and after SA between 2018 and 2023. For the current study, we reanalyzed the dataset to examine

how students’ narratives reveal socio-emotional and interpersonal competencies central to *gurōbaru jinzai* but often overlooked in assessments.

The dataset includes 17 Japanese university students (15 female, 2 male), aged 19–21, who participated in four- or nine-month exchange programs. During their SA, students enrolled in English and French language courses, engaged in sociocultural activities, and took part in multilingual language exchanges, providing a rich environment for the development of competencies beyond language acquisition.

Original data collection involved focus group interviews conducted in small peer groups of 3–5 participants to foster open discussion and shared reflection (Nunan & Bailey, 2009). Students were prompted to describe pivotal moments before, during, and after SA that influenced their self-perception, learning, or relationships. Additionally, reflective questionnaires with structured prompts asked students to articulate changes in their skills, attitudes, or behaviors.

The original analysis (Bonn et al., 2020) involved inductive thematic method (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Naeem et al., 2023) to identify emergent themes in students’ narratives (for a more detailed description of the data collection and analysis procedures, see Bonn et al., 2020). For the present study, we employed a secondary qualitative content analysis (Dörnyei, 2007) to re-examine the data with a focus on how students described the benefits of SA and how these benefits aligned with competencies emphasized in *gurōbaru jinzai* discourse as defined within three factors by Council on the Promotion of Human Resources for Globalization Development (2011).

In this secondary data analysis, the focus group transcripts were interpreted using a framework-guided thematic analysis. The research team first re-familiarized themselves with the transcripts through independent readings. In the absence of a clearly delineated and commonly accepted set of characteristics associated with global talent, the coding was conducted deductively using the set of seven university admission, graduation and curriculum criteria identified by Take & Shoraku (2017) and listed above. Two researchers independently coded the transcripts and compared their interpretations and resolved discrepancies through discussion. Coded segments were subsequently grouped and recurrent patterns within each group were identified and synthesized into four broader themes.

Revisiting this dataset allowed us to explore underexamined dimensions of the original study. While the earlier study focused on motivation, the current analysis highlights socio-emotional and interpersonal development—competencies rarely assessed in SA research but critical for global talent.

Findings

The secondary analysis of the qualitative data from this particular angle revealed four interrelated recurring themes, each illustrating socio-emotional and interpersonal development alongside expected language gains. While students acknowledged improvements in linguistic proficiency and intercultural exposure, they also emphasized changes that reshaped their relationships to others and their understanding of themselves. Below, we present the four themes supported by participant data. Important to note is that the quotes presented here are not exhaustive. They constitute a selection of the most prominent examples demonstrating how students experience growth in areas that extend beyond traditional language proficiency metrics. The four themes presented below are drawn from 34 quotes across the 17 participants in the study.

Curiosity and Openness Toward Others

Well over half of the students (i.e., 65%) described how observing others' communicative struggles sparked empathy and a desire to bridge linguistic gaps. For example, one student, while interacting with her French-speaking roommate who struggled to express herself in English, reflected, "Sometimes, it's difficult to communicate. That's why I thought, if I can speak French, I could talk with her in French fluently. So, I want to learn more French." The student's reasoning was rooted in fairness: if her roommate was making an effort to communicate in English, she felt compelled to reciprocate by learning French. This response exemplifies how exposure to others' challenges can foster a sense of shared purpose and intercultural competence.

Self-Reflection and Recalibration of Goals

Just over half of the students (53%) engaged in self-assessment, which often led them to reconsider their learning priorities. One participant noted, "When I talk with my friends about some problems in [this city] and Japan, I feel like if I could speak English more, I can explain more to them... So I wanted to study more things to be able to communicate more deeply." Another added, "I thought at first I need to focus on English and then French. (...) right now, because I'm (here) I feel like I need to study more in French because I hear French a lot. In my apartment, my friends, my roommates speak only French basically. (...) they try to speak in English for me, but I feel like I need to learn French. (...) They're trying for me. Why do I not try to speak in French? Why not me?" These accounts highlight how environmental and social cues can prompt learners to adapt their goals, demonstrating self-reflection and resilience.

Emotional Intelligence and Relationship-Building

Nearly three quarters of students (71%) reported how small moments of successful communication carried significant emotional weight. One student shared, "So I answered, 'Je suis Japonaise.' And he smiled. I was so happy because I could communicate with him. I want to study more and more." Another recounted, "She was studying psychology and I studied communication in Japan. So we wrote about that and we reply each other and (...) she said, 'You inspired me a lot.' It gave me more confidence and energy to study English. The experience is (...) inspiring, unforgettable." This points to the role of emotional intelligence and relationship building in fostering connection.

Coping Strategies and Confidence

Similarly, the majority of participants (roughly 65%) emphasized how encouragement helped them to persist through difficulty. One student explained, "It was really hard for me... but my teacher gave us only positive comments. I was so satisfied... it made me want to keep studying French." Another described, "My class TA talked about my characteristics, like, 'You don't need to be shy' or 'You can push yourself more, because you have good energy.' So I realized my English was not so good, but he could understand my characteristics from my awful English words. It was an accomplishment because he could understand my characteristics or my thinking from my words." And a third noted, "So, from this experience, I realized I could have the good relationship or good conversation with him in not perfect English. And I feel I don't need to be shy to speak in English, to communicate with people." These reflections show how external validation and self-awareness contribute to confidence, further reinforcing self-awareness and emotional regulation.

These themes align with the frameworks of Intercultural Communication (ICC) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL). As examples, when students discuss bridging linguistic gaps or adapting to cultural contexts, they demonstrate intercultural competence (ICC). When they reflect on personal growth, emotional resilience, or relationship-building, they exemplify Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Together, these competencies reflect the broader objectives of linguistic and communication skills, intercultural competence, adaptability, and self-direction as outlined in the *gurōbaru jinzai* framework (Council on the Promotion of Human Resources for Globalization Development, 2011, as cited in Take & Shoraku, 2017).

Assessment Implications

The reflections of these students clearly signal that their SA experience was much more than a language-learning opportunity. They gained, among others, confidence, emotional intelligence, and openness to new contexts and different ways of thinking and acting—skills associated with the pillars of *gurōbaru jinzai*. While language-related gains can be documented using well-established measures of language proficiency, assessing the development of these broader global talent competencies is considerably more challenging. One assessment challenge in measuring these skills, as mentioned above, is that the underlying concept (or construct) of *gurōbaru jinzai* has not been adequately articulated (Ashizawa, 2014; Hofmeyr, 2021b). There are, however, existing tools that are designed to evaluate skills that contribute to the development of the factors associated with the *gurōbaru jinzai* concept, and observed in the student reflections in our study, namely intercultural communication and socio-emotional learning skills. In SA research, for example, Hanada (2019) used the Intercultural Development Inventory, or IDI (developed by Dr. Mitchel Hammer in the 1990s), to measure intercultural competency among participants who had completed a SA program. Such a measure may be beneficial to operationalize ICC gains, such as those in our findings with regards to ‘Curiosity and Openness Toward Others’. Additionally, the Behavioral, Emotional, and Social Skills Inventory (BESSI) focuses on evaluating developable SEL capacities (rather than fixed traits) (Soto et al., 2022). The BESSI breaks down social, emotional, and behavioral skills into facets that relate to five specific skill domains where we also observed growth in our findings, specifically in ‘Relationship Building’ (Cooperation and Social Engagement domain in the BESSI) and ‘Coping Strategies and Confidence’ (related to the Emotional Resilience Skills domain in the BESSI).

It is important to note, however, that to our knowledge the BESSI hasn’t been used specifically to measure gains in SEL through SA. In fact, one reason for this lack of SEL instruments in SA literature may be that the skills underpinning SEL are context dependent (Mesquita et al., 2026). In mobilising SEL knowledge, SA students from Japan may find themselves navigating between contrasting SEL inventories (one focused on a western default of identifying one’s own emotions, and other cultural understandings of emotions that imply attention to relational acts and the emotions happening between people). In this sense, a useful scale for measuring SEL skills in Japanese SA students should recognize that gains in SEL may be intertwined with the development of trans-cultural competence during SA. Much like translanguaging broadens an individual’s linguistic repertoire, this competence may expand students’ range of emotional understandings, interpretations, and responses.

Returning to the student gains documented in our study, given the developmental complexity of the skills underlying the construct of *gurōbaru jinzai*, compounded by the limitations of existing frameworks for evaluating ICC and SEL skills, no single assessment instrument may be adequate. This limitation, however, points toward a possibility of adopting pluralistic approaches in educational contexts, including reflective portfolios and guided self-assessment (Shohamy, 2001). While yet another assessment may seem like an unlikely proposition given the already documented emphasis in Japan, like many other nations, for educational systems to prioritize “...standard assessments and output-based accountability” (Takayama, 2013, p. 657), assessment at its core serves to signal to students “what we want our students to learn and making sure they learn it” (Suskie, 2018, p. 8). Making space to document ICC or SEL gains may help elevate their value as separate but complementary aspects of language and intercultural communication development. Importantly, given the transcultural nature of this development, a starting point could be collaboration between the partner universities in determining the objectives for such a measurement and its modality. This co-construction would signal institutional recognition and support for SA gains beyond language proficiency measures such as TOEIC and IELTS, in turn enabling SA students to recognize and articulate these competencies as well.

Discussion

The development of socio-emotional and interpersonal competencies such as confidence, emotional regulation, relational awareness, and a more agentic sense of self, described as central to the SA experience, align closely with the tenets of *gurōbaru jinzai*, which emphasize adaptability, intercultural engagement, and global participation. However, when assessment privileges what is easiest to quantify, global talent risks being reduced to linguistic performance alone. This narrowing does not simply affect institutional reporting but also shapes how students interpret their own experiences and worth. When only language is measured, students learn—implicitly—that only language “counts.” Students can articulate changes in confidence, perspective, and relational ability, but they rarely frame these changes as evidence of becoming *gurōbaru jinzai*. In other words, they experience transformation, but they do not recognize it as “counting.”

Research on identity and investment has long shown that language learning is deeply intertwined with agency and self-positioning (Norton, 1997, 2010; Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). Students’ accounts here illustrate how SA reshapes not only what they can say, but how they see themselves as social actors. They describe learning to tolerate uncertainty, take interpersonal risks, negotiate relationships, and persist despite vulnerability.

These are not peripheral outcomes; they are central to functioning in multilingual and multicultural worlds.

At the same time, the broader policy discourse around SA and global talent remains vague. The objectives of SA and the pathways toward becoming global talent are often presented in aspirational but imprecise terms. Fritz and Murao (2020), for example, urge MEXT and large-scale universities to clarify what they mean by concepts such as “trustworthy global citizens” or “global leaders,” arguing that these labels lack operational meaning (p. 526). Without clearer articulation, students are left to interpret global talent through the few concrete signals available to them—most notably, language test scores.

In interviews with students who had already returned to their home universities in Japan, we often heard deep skepticism about their potential to become global talent. This was striking, given that many of these same students demonstrated knowledge gained through intercultural experience and described profound shifts in how they understood themselves and others. They spoke about feeling braver, more open, more reflective, and more capable of navigating difference—yet they did not see themselves as embodying the *gurōbaru jinzai* ethos.

This creates an irony. Students can narrate their expanded sense of self, their new relational capacities, and their emotional growth, yet they do not name these as characteristics of global talent. They eagerly retake language tests because those tests provide tangible proof of the value of their SA experience. At the same time, they quietly discount other forms of growth because institutional mechanisms signal that these are perhaps not as important as language gains. Assessment practices, in this sense, do not merely evaluate learning; they shape self-perception.

If global talent is meant to include the ability to engage ethically and confidently across difference, then failing to recognize socio-emotional and intercultural learning undermines the very concept it seeks to promote. Students may return from SA with richer selves, but without a language of legitimacy to describe how they have evolved. Making these dimensions visible—through reflection, feedback, and broader forms of assessment—would reveal a type of learning beyond what is assessed in language proficiency measures.

Conclusion

Study abroad contributes to the linguistic development emphasized in Japan’s *gurōbaru jinzai* framework, but it also fosters socio-emotional and interpersonal competencies that shape how students engage with others and imagine their future

roles. When assessment practices focus narrowly on language proficiency, these other gains remain largely unrecognized.

This paper does not argue for more metrics or increasingly elaborate systems of measurement. Rather, it calls attention to what has been overlooked when language testing becomes the dominant indicator of SA’s value. By focusing so heavily on linguistic proficiency, institutions risk encouraging students to overestimate the importance of language at the expense of other competencies they are clearly developing and are inscribed in *gurōbaru jinzai*—confidence, empathy, relational skills, and an expanded sense of self.

A concrete suggestion for SA partner universities would be to explore this space and co-create institutionally appropriate measures for evaluating gains other than linguistic proficiency that result from an SA experience in order to recognize the value of this knowledge. By broadening the scope of assessment, institutions can better align evaluation with policy aspirations and with students’ lived experiences. Recognizing socio-affective learning alongside linguistic outcomes does not diminish the importance of language; it explicitly situates language within a wider constellation of competencies that together constitute global talent. Making these forms of learning visible may help students not only understand what they have gained but also begin to see themselves as the kind of people global talent discourse claims to cultivate.

Bio Data

Jaime Demperio is a language professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). They are involved in international exchange and collaborative learning initiatives. Their research interests include language and identity, learner agency, inclusive ESL pedagogy and reflective practice in language education.

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