

Preparing Students for Study-Abroad Programs: Tasks, Skill-Building and Self-Reflection

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Abstract

In recent years, the Japanese government has been aiming to improve the level of English among Japanese students. One of the methods targeted to reach higher skill levels is to encourage students to study abroad in English speaking countries. This paper aims to introduce issues related to study abroad programs at the preparation stage. Research, as well as observations and empirical evidence, reveal the necessity of structured curriculum for university students planning to study abroad. This paper reviews relevant research as it related to trends, problems and solutions this researcher has observed while instructing pre-program courses, or via observations while attending as faculty on study-abroad programs. Particular focus is given to how Japanese female EFL students at the university level can best be prepared for study abroad programs. Hofstede's cultural assessments of Japanese culture among other research, is used in assessment. Recommendations are made for pre-program study including group-work activities, individual presentations, self-reflection activities, and safety precautions. All of these recommendations work well in coordination with targets surrounding English skill development.

KEYWORD : Study-Abroad, Curriculum, EFL/ESL, Preparation

Needs of students studying abroad

To set the framework for a discussion of the needs of Japanese university students, Hofstede argues to first take a look at views of the type of society these students are familiar (2015). In Japan, this can help students prepare for immersion in a new culture, by first understanding their own culture better. A deep understanding of one's own culture can provide a clearer sense of personal identity. Understanding one's own culture also has linguistic benefits as it eases communication activities with homestay families who often ask many questions to students about their country, culture, traditions and customs (Cohen et al, 2005, Paige et al, 2005).

In terms of understanding regional character, some of the most well-known definitions of Japanese culture (available in English) are characterized by social-psychologist and international cultural expert, Geert Hofstede (McSweeney, 2002; Hofstede, 2015). Hofstede created a database of socio-cultural information based on his years of experience working at IBM doing employee interviews which were conducted in the 1970's. This data was compiled and compared country to country in an effort to create country specific rankings of typical social truths and cultural norms. The purpose of the categorizations were done in order to smooth intercultural relations between members of different countries around the world (2015).

Hofstede's conclusions have been criticized by McSweeney who argued that the very foundation of Hofstede's research concept is flawed (2002). Despite this criticism, elements of Hofstede's concepts of *individuality*, *long-term view* and *indulgence* have recently been confirmed by research done for the UN sanctioned *World Values Survey* (2015). Hofstede's survey is considered to have an extremely high level of legitimacy and it is currently referenced and relied upon by governments and international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank (Inglehard et al, 2015).

Hofstede's country rankings are available on "The Hofstede Centre" website (2015). This website displays scores for countries around the world based on different cultural and societal characteristics which many believe are typical of the group as a whole. According to Hofstede's research, Japan is ranked quite high as a merit-motivated society where hard work is believed to lead to success. This confirms this researcher's observations in past program preparation courses. It was discovered that credited tests and tasks (such as graded presentations) as well as graded reports are an important element of classes in general and the pre-study abroad course in particular. It was found that it not only helps students prepare for the demands of the study programs abroad, but it also helps Japanese merit-focused students take the pre-class more seriously. In addition, giving grades for reports, projects and presentations in the pre-course allowed the students to reflect on how they are progressing. It also enabled students to meet course requirements. Strictly graded preparation courses like this are a good method to introduce students to how they can expect to do in EFL course work during their study-abroad program (Paige et al, 2005).

A closer look at absenteeism for classes taught that are graded and credited, versus classes that are taken without credit shows a significant difference in absenteeism. (Figure 1). The

(2015) Non-credit Pre-Program Seminar (77 sts)		(2014-15) Credit Pre-Program Seminar (37 sts)	
Weekly Attendance: 45%~66%	Weekly Absences: 44%~55%	Weekly Attendance: 89%~100%	Weekly Absences: 0~11%

Figure 1: Class Attendance and Absenteeism in Credit vs Non-Credit Pre-Study Abroad Classes

course without tangible *merit*, in terms of university credit, has a much higher level of absenteeism. This seems especially significant as the group with higher attendance rates for their pre-program course did a study-abroad program for less than 2 months, which should indicate little to moderate motivation levels. In contrast, the non-credit program course students were preparing to study abroad for a full semester (6 months) and should have displayed higher levels of motivation to study. Despite the clear benefits that taking the class (seminar) might provide these students; without the merit of university credit, only half of the students attended diligently. It can be predicted that in the following term, when the same group of students has a graded, pre-program class for credit, the rate of attendance will consistently hit the higher 89%~100% mark and absenteeism will be less than 10%. (Figure 1). In light of the issue of absenteeism, Hofstede's theory that Japan is a culture where people feel most comfortable with routines and advanced preparation is termed *uncertainty avoidance* (2015). In this case, the absentee behavior from the pre-program preparation activities seems to be out of character. In fact, Hofstede's list ranks Japan at one of the highest levels in the world for uncertainty avoidance at 92 (2015). Perhaps the students did not clearly understand that the *merit* of this non-credit course is to *avoid uncertainty* through preparation and learning more about their upcoming study-abroad program. Perhaps there may also have been other unexplained mitigating circumstances. According to Paige et al, personality also has a strong effect on individual motivation (2005). Further analysis on culture, personality and motivation is needed before any further conclusions can be made.

Hofstede's analysis of culture was helpful, in the pre-program curriculum planning stage, on the needs of university students in Japan who are preparing for study abroad. It highlights a need for cultural training in pre-program course orientation to expose students to as much local knowledge, relevant language, cultural training and English communication training as possible in order to prepare them for their upcoming English immersion experience abroad.

Preparing for English immersion

In order to prepare students linguistically and culturally, as closely as possible to what they will encounter in the upcoming EFL immersion situation, the pre-program classes should be taught in a similar fashion. This might best be accomplished by native English speaking teachers (NEST) as in this researcher's experience, most study-abroad programs only employ NEST teachers. On the other hand, studies have shown great effectiveness and positive perceptions by Japanese students at the university level of Japanese instructors who conduct their classes in English (Tsukamoto, 2011). These Japanese EFL teachers have often also experienced living, working, and/or studying abroad themselves. This may give these Japanese teachers of English (JTE) the advantage of having first-hand knowledge of studying English as a second language. Some researchers argue that JTE's may also be better able to explain certain functions of English (like grammar) due to their own study and travel experiences (Young & Walsh, 2010; Walkinshaw & Duongthi, 2014).

Tsukamoto discovered, through her research using questionnaires with Japanese university students, that regardless of their skill level in English; a great majority of students preferred English classes to be taught completely in English whether it was taught by a JTE or NEST (2011). There has been little research in Japan on the use of English (or the students' perception of a teacher's classroom use of English) in preparatory classes taught before study-abroad programs. In the US, however, research on teaching pre-study abroad courses in the native language (as opposed to the target language) has been done. The research of Michael Paige and his colleagues in the US show that there were difficulties in implementing an L1, all English (mother tongue), pre-study course without the teacher feeling the need to translate workbook tasks into the target language (TL) of the country in which the students would be studying (2005).

Interestingly, however, other researchers have found that implementing a study-abroad workbook, is a successful method if done in the L1 (student's first language) in getting students to discuss self-reflective concepts (Iwasaki, 2001). In Iwasaki's study, students were able to explain how they perceived the target language and culture in the L1. Of course language practice is important before sending students abroad, but this reflective, mental preparation: discussing concerns, worries and perceptions before travelling abroad, is also of vital importance. Self-expression and explanation of personal thoughts and worries has been shown to be a very difficult task for even highly proficient EFL learners to do in the TL in Japan (Ikeno, 1998; Iwasaki, 2001).

Another conflict in motivation in this researcher's classes may have been a lack of perceived need. While attending the preparation class for studying abroad, all the students had general English communication classes twice each week taught by NESTs. Therefore, gaining familiarity with the all-English immersion classroom taught by a native speaking English teacher was not an issue in this case. Perhaps the need for exposure to an English classroom environment is more of an important issue overall if the pre-study abroad course is the only course students take in English for the study period prior to studying abroad.

Intercultural understanding

Intercultural understanding is another important component of pre-program preparation that is often difficult to prepare students effectively for prior to any travel or study experience in a foreign culture. Cohen's research team, however, that their pre-program study materials, *Maximizing Study Abroad*, was able to succeed in building "strategies" for students preparing to study abroad (2005). The tasks in their materials were found to be effective in helping students prepare mentally and emotionally for the study-abroad program (Cohen, et al., 2005; Paige et al, 2005). The materials were also positively reviewed by language instructors at US universities as a means of preparing students for foreign study programs. The researchers, however, did concede that instructors who used the materials criticised the lack of tasks in the target language (TL) which created extra preparatory work for them (Cohen et al, 2005).

When promoting study abroad programs to Japanese students, it is also worth highlighting how a student's future career options could be enhanced by gaining knowledge in intercultural understanding through their study abroad program experience. Hofstede's list states that Japan's culture emphasises a long-term view in business; which he claims can also often be applied to societal norms in general (2015). In this way, students should be able to see benefit, if they can adopt a long-term view perspective of how the study abroad experience will benefit their future lives and careers. One way this long-term view of studying abroad could be explained clearly to students is by using the stories and reports of alumnae of the program. For example graduates of the study-abroad program could act as mentors to current students by giving a slideshow presentation about their experiences abroad and how the experience has affected their current lives and post-graduation careers. This might motivate students to work harder in the pre-program course if they can more directly perceive "merit" to their future job and life (Hofstede, 2015).

Group work

Creating support systems for students is an essential element of study-abroad success. One way to establish stronger ties between students is through group work. Hofstede believes that Japanese people work very well in groups (2015). Therefore students on a study abroad program placed in a new class, by English ability, should be able to work together well even if they were not friends prior to the program. In this researcher's experience, Japanese female university students have shown adaptability in their ability to work well with other students in their department, their university and then amongst members of their class in different study abroad situations. It seems to take a greater amount of adjustment time to bond with students from other countries, but if they share a homestay family, or class by ability level, Japanese students are very adept at creating meaningful relationships in their groups. When preparing Japan EFL students for foreign study, there is a necessity to incorporate group work into curriculum design. At the very least it should be a component of every week's lesson plan. Research has shown that female students in particular have shown better ability to perform in tasks, and have a clearer understand of themselves, if they have positive relationships with other members of a group (Apter, 1990; Knudson-Martin, 1994). In this way, when working with others, female university students can learn more about their own character, strengths and weaknesses. Setting up groupwork activities creates social learning opportunities which assist a learner during study abroad. This is done by supplying peer learning models, necessary support, and feedback.

Independent Learning

Despite the benefits of groupwork, independent learning opportunities are also a vital part of preparing students to study abroad (Hardy-Gould, 2013). Study abroad programs usually

include many instances where students have no one to rely on but themselves. In recent programs this researcher has attended, students were expected to do a range of activities on their own. This ranged from needing to sign up for a student card, to taking public transportation on their own to school each day. Their daily communication with their homestay family was also a challenging activity they had to try on their own. If the pre-study program does not challenge learners to work alone in the course, a transition to acting independently can be more jarring. Teacher trainer Hardy-Gould (2013) of Oxford university press, argues that self-reliance, termed *learner autonomy*, is especially important for students in university education.

In the field of higher education, learner autonomy is particularly important. Students may have limited classroom contact time for learning English but they may need to rapidly increase their knowledge and skills. It is therefore important for them to become self-reliant language learners who can continue learning efficiently outside the classroom. Hardy-Gould, OUP (2013)

Multiple methods of communication

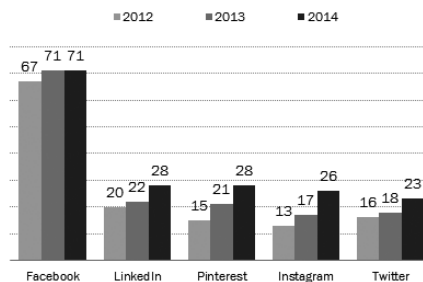
One way students studying abroad can assert their independence is by using multimedia platforms to research information and communicate with members of the host community.

In this digital era, most university students worldwide, including Japan, use multiple methods of communicating with one another via internet connections. Of course, safety and privacy issues are an important concern that should be incorporated as part of study-abroad orientation, but the benefits of using multi-media communication platforms while abroad may override the risks. Most Japanese university campuses have traditional as well as technological ways a student can get in touch with a teacher, but WiFi everywhere in Japan is still limited. Students can come to an instructor's office, call, leave a message, or see the teacher's schedule and wait outside a classroom to make contact. There are often also university-based technological methods of communication such as a "portal" where students can see university information, or contact teachers and tutors. Messages can be set up to forward to email accounts for further convenience.

When studying abroad, however, these methods of communication are not usually affordable or easily available to students during the study-abroad period. That said, WIFI access is more readily available assisting in the needs of students for easy communication with the attending faculty, homestay family, host

Social media sites, 2012-2014

% of online adults who use the following social media websites, by year



Pew Research Center's Internet Project Surveys, 2012-2014. 2014 data collected September 11-14 & September 18-21, 2014. N=1,997 internet users ages 18+.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2: Social media sites use in the USA from 2012~2014 (Pew Research Center, 2015)

institution, and fellow students on the program. During study abroad programs, this researcher has discovered that most students do not have traditional telephone services while abroad and rely instead on WiFi connections using the telephone only when at the homestay family.

In the US, the PEW research group has discovered that 71% of all Americans use facebook, and 70% of those facebook users check it daily (PEW, 2015). By looking at the Pew research center's graph, we can see how the use of social media among adults in the US has increased between 2012 and 2014 and how much more prevalent the use of Facebook is in the US. Other interesting is that of the group of adult social media users, 52% of online adults used multiple media platforms, for example: Facebook as well as Twitter.

In this instructor's discussions with program directors abroad who hosts thousands of students each year, they applaud the use of social media for communication and social networking with student. Some program coordinators set up Facebook pages for their international students as places for them to establish deeper ties with the staff, teachers and homestay families. Although many universities have unclear policies, the UC San Diego's University Communications and Public Affairs page argues for the use of social media in higher education:

There was a time, not so long ago, when universities and colleges ignored the potential of social networks. Today, we now know that, if used correctly, social media can help us share information and build relationships with our various audiences. From recruiting new students and faculty, to raising money, to diffusing incidents and situations-leveraging Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other networks are powerful tools in the hands of communicators.

UCSD Communications and Public Affairs website (2015)

The University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth found that 99% of universities in the US were actively using Facebook (2013). Many schools also reported very active blogging websites on campus and a majority of school administrators were found to be very active on social media-using the online median to communicate with existing students and to recruit new students (Barnes & Lescault, 2013).

Survival Strategies

Pre-program preparation classes have been shown to enhance the study abroad experience by teaching cultural survival strategy. Grove (1989), an instructor of EFL students claimed that the pre-course helped students build a deeper understanding of their own culture. Grove also found that the pre-course relieved anxiety, and helped develop realistic expectations of the situations and language students would encounter (1989). In an earlier study, researchers found that students who were given more learner autonomy through independent tasks were more at ease when living and studying abroad. Interestingly, Hansel & Grove found that female students who worked within a group were able to trust others more. In turn, this allowed them to have faith in their own abilities which created positive changes (1986). In this

researcher's experience, a very highly motivated, high ability learner who does not work well with other students in the group, or form relationships with others while on the program abroad, will not have a satisfying or rewarding experience. On the other hand, a group member who works well with others, and is able to create meaningful bonds with others abroad, will have a very rewarding experience. This positive experience will also shape their future career and life choices (Grove, 1989; Hansel & Grove, 1986).

Pre-course classes can help prepare students by giving them useful linguistic and cultural survival skills. Before students travel abroad to study in a completely English environment, an instructor can equip learners with survival skills that will help them make sense of English immersion and cultural differences that will surround them once they arrive in the host country.

Wardhaugh (1992) discusses the issue of fitting into different cultures and societies through use of appropriate and culturally relevant communication strategies. For example, preparation of conversational topics for homestay family use and casual interactions. Pre-program projects like preparing scrapbooks can become a useful resource for communication abroad. Using pictures of family, friends, free-time activities, student life, campus, part-time job, sightseeing activities in their hometown, souvenirs and famous products can provide students conversational aides abroad. It also provides opportunities to role-play, participate in speaking activities, and gain knowledge or clarity about their own culture and country. It's also a chance to listen to and learn from their fellow students. It's also important for classroom materials, pre-program homework, projects and research to be linked to program targets. This should help make the pre-program to study-abroad program more seamless. When setting up a new pre-program course, it's important to make sure it connects to the particular needs of the students. There should be opportunities for learners to present and use pre-program created materials once they arrive on their study abroad program.

Being able to tell a class that the hard work they do in the pre-class will be a necessary aspect of their program abroad should be highly motivational. It may also help merit-motivated learners feel more control over their future success (Hofstede, 2015). It also allows the instructors on the study abroad program an opportunity to see what type of work each student is capable of, what each student's interests are, and provide a pre-determined focus for the first few classes.

In the case of preparing students for business or tourism study abroad programs, collecting tourist brochures, maps and guides, or company profiles into notebooks can be an effective way of building a portfolio of relevant resource material for the program abroad. This data can help students compare and contrast company data and design between their home and host country during the program.

Discussion

Many students over the years have referred to their time studying abroad as a pivotal moment

in their lives. They say it was a time when they learned not only about culture and language, but also about themselves. It helped build their English skills and confidence in communication. It also taught them a lot about how they fit into the world. Time outside of a student's own university or country can provide clarity in this time of transition before adulthood. Many learners also report being better able to adjust to the differences in language, culture and lifestyle if they are able to make meaningful relationships while studying abroad (Knudson-Martin, 1994; Issenmann, 2008). If instructors and program coordinators can find ways to set up pre-program classes to help students feel confident and ready to tackle the challenges of studying abroad, then we can feel we have really accomplished something meaningful that transcends beyond the classroom. If, on the other hand, we cannot get students to apply themselves to pre-program study, or even to see the value of attending preparation classes and activities; then we need to reassess and readjust our methodology. Study-abroad program promotion as well as pre-program study should inspire Japanese university students to study abroad in order to fulfill future educational, career and personal goals.

There is a need for further research in the area of pre-course curriculum development for Japanese university students. Even doing effective questionnaires to judge how students feel about their pre-study course, the use of the native or target language, and other impressions, would be illuminating. In-depth questionnaires or interviews with students about how they feel they can best prepare for study-abroad programs would also be informative. There is a need for research that could discover how instructors, tutors, administrators and facilitators of study-abroad programs can better motivate and encourage learners to make the most of the pre-program study opportunities available regardless of university credit.

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