

Student Perspectives on a Short-term Study Abroad Program: A Comparative Case Study

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Abstract

This is a comparative case study of two Japanese university students who took part in a short-term study abroad program in the USA. This study is focused on affective factors that influenced the participants' engagement with the host culture. These factors were investigated through interviews, participant writings, and on-site observation.

Every year, thousands of students at universities in Japan participate in study abroad programs. In this paper I will examine the experiences of two such students who took part in a study abroad program during their August summer break from university in Japan.

Study abroad site and participants

Both participants were Japanese females studying at a university in central Tokyo. Ryuno was a third-year student. She was one of only two third-year students who participated in the program. Her English speaking and listening skills were higher than most of the other students in the program. Yuki was a second-year student. Her English speaking and listening skills were lower than most of the other participants in the program.

The study-abroad program took place on the campus of a small liberal arts university in Minnesota. It was a three-week program and included a weekend homestay with a local family.

Data collection

I accompanied the students on the program as a faculty advisor. Data for this project were gathered through interviews conducted before, during, and after the sojourn, participants' written responses to questions given at the end of the program and after our return to Japan, essays written by the participants about their experiences, and on-site observation.

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Research on Japanese Students in Study Abroad Programs

Most of the research on Japanese students in study abroad programs has been focused on measurement of linguistic gains through study abroad. However, there have also been investigations of learners' beliefs about language learning, attitudes towards the host culture, and responses to the study abroad context.

Geis and Fukushima (1997) used academic evaluations and their own observations to determine the effectiveness of their university's study abroad program. Their study involved 24 Japanese university students on a six-week summer study program in the United States. The students lived in dormitories on a university campus and took part in an intensive ESL program with 25 hours of classroom instruction each week. Pre- and post-tests of English language proficiency were inconclusive regarding gains in proficiency, but Geis and Fukushima believed that, based on their observations, motivation for language learning had increased among the participants. They reported that this increased motivation was noticeable in the students' classroom behavior after they returned to Japan and resumed their studies there.

Other researchers have focused on the influence of learners' attitudes on cultural adjustment. Yashima (1999) administered a questionnaire to 139 Japanese high school students on a one-year homestay program in the United States. She found that extroversion predicted self-rated measures of adjustment, and a strong international interest and less Japanese-centered outlook predicted academic success. Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu (2004) investigated the effect of willingness to communicate on students' perceived satisfaction with their study abroad experience through a questionnaire administered to 60 Japanese high school students on a study abroad program in the United States. They found a positive correlation between their participants' self-perceived communication competence and their willingness to communicate ($r = .46$), and this, in turn, correlated positively with the quantity of communication with host family members ($r = .37$) and students' satisfaction with host family friendships ($r = .31$). They concluded that self-confidence in communicating in an L2 is a predictor of a successful sojourn experience.

Other researchers have examined Japanese study abroad students' success or failure at integrating themselves into the host family and culture. Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) investigated this issue via Wenger's (1998) community of practice model. They used TOEFL scores to measure proficiency and questionnaires including both scaled items and open-ended questions to investigate beliefs and attitudes among their 160 Japanese high school student participants, 16 of whom took part in study abroad programs in the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Canada. The study abroad participants showed greater gains in proficiency, as measured by TOEFL scores, than the study at home students. The study abroad students also demonstrated a higher degree of *international posture*. International posture was defined

as “a tendency to see oneself as connected to the international community, to have concerns for international affairs, and a readiness to interact with people other than Japanese” (Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2008, p. 567).

McIntyre (2007) interviewed five Japanese university students after their return from a study abroad program in the U.S.A. in an attempt to identify sociocultural factors that play a role in Japanese study abroad students’ engagement with their host cultures. The purpose of the study was to determine a set of needs and goals that could then be used to develop a preparation program for long-term overseas study by Japanese university students. McIntyre found that the needs and goals could be grouped into three main areas: cognitive/academic needs, linguistic needs, and sociocultural needs. He found that Japanese students value being attended to and taken care of by their host-culture teachers, they place a high premium on academic reading and writing, and presentation and discussion skills, and they are concerned about their ability to form friendships with members of the host culture.

Churchill (2003) questioned the notion, commonly held in Japan, that study abroad typically provides participants with a language immersion experience in which they engage fully and positively with the host country inhabitants and culture. In contrast, his findings revealed stark differences in the learning opportunities for individual students within a single study abroad program. Churchill used interviews, audiotapes of natural interaction, and his own observations in his study of 39 Japanese high school students on a four-week sojourn in the United States. He found that differences in individual participants’ degree of engagement with the host culture were influenced by beliefs about gender, family dynamics within the host setting, group dynamics in high school, and classroom practices at the study abroad site. In addition, opportunities for language learning were found to be shaped by the ways in which the participants were positioned by members of the host culture, and this positioning was in turn influenced by native speakers’ perceptions of the participants’ communicative competence. Taken together, these factors resulted in very different study abroad experiences for individual students in the program.

These studies reveal a wide range of individual differences among Japanese study abroad participants with regard to motivation, willingness to communicate, engagement with the host culture, and self-perceptions of the study abroad experience. The observations made and the questions raised in these studies suggest that further research is necessary on Japanese study abroad students’ attitudes, beliefs, and interpretations of their experience.

Results

Based on the interview data, students’ written responses to questions, and my observations, three thematic categories can be seen that illuminate the participants’ reaction to, their engagement

with, and their reflection on the study abroad experience. Those three themes are the attitudes that the participants bring with them to the study abroad program, the participants' responses to new experiences, and the participants' self-perceptions regarding change in their lives as a result of their experience in the study abroad program. In the following sections I would like to illustrate these three themes by examining the experiences of the two participants.

Attitude

The summer study abroad program was not Ryuno's first experience outside Japan. In a pre-departure interview she reported having travelled with her family to Hawaii and Los Angeles when she was an elementary school student. In addition, unlike many of the other students on the program, Ryuno was somewhat comfortable using English with native speakers outside the classroom setting. She said that she had spoken English with people when she travelled in the USA with her family, and she occasionally used English at her part-time job in a stationery shop in Tokyo. In a pre-departure interview she also said that she wasn't nervous about speaking English in the USA. When I asked her why she wasn't nervous she said, "I can't speak perfectly, but I can speak a little."

Although she may not have been nervous about using English with native speakers or nervous about the prospect of having to speak English in the USA, Ryuno felt some anxiety concerning her relationship with the other students on the program. She described her feelings in an essay written after her return to Japan.

I only knew one third-year student and the other students were all in different years. I was worried whether I would be able to become friends with these other students. As I thought, I didn't talk to anyone on the plane. But my worry faded away in a few days.

Yuki was more apprehensive than Ryuno about going on the study abroad program. Yuki had never travelled outside Japan before the program and she said that she never spoke English to anyone except her teachers and classmates in English class. She said that she was nervous about going on the program and that she was especially nervous about the weekend homestay.

Response to new experience

As might have been expected based on her responses in the pre-departure interview, Ryuno did not have a difficult time adjusting to life in the USA. In an interview conducted one week after our arrival she said that she'd found it "not so difficult" to talk to the three American student counselors who were assisting with the program. She also said that after one week she felt that she could understand English better than when she'd first arrived. She attributed this both to the listening practice she'd had over the course of the first week, and to the fact that she had come to

know the counselors as individuals. She said, “I understand the counselors’ character.” She also felt that each counselor had a different speaking style and that getting used to those speaking styles made it easier for her to understand them and converse with them.

Ryuno was also comfortable engaging with people she met on campus, even if those people were not directly connected to the program. She reported speaking with people who work on campus, for example in the cafeteria, bookstore, computer lab, and administrative offices. She also said she felt comfortable talking to people outside the university, such as employees at the local mall or supermarket. When asked how she felt about talking with these people she said, “I want to speak English better” and “it feels good to talk to new people.” Ryuno also reported feeling generally comfortable from the first day of the program. She said that she was “not nervous,” because “I’m not a nervous person.” She also said that the best experience of the first week was the opportunity to talk English to more people.

Ryuno’s positive attitude toward her experience was also evident in her response to the weekend homestay. She stayed with a family of six people, a married couple and their three daughters and son. Ryuno was alone on the homestay, as opposed to some of the program participants who went on the homestay in pairs. The eldest daughter in the homestay family was a university student who had studied in Tokyo the previous year on a one-semester study abroad program. The family kept Ryuno busy with many planned activities. She said, “I went shopping with Andrea and saw fireworks, and went to Monica’s musical . . . in high school . . . and Sunday morning we went to church.” As for communicating with the host family, Ryuno said talking with them was “a little more difficult than with teachers or counselors” and “they don’t use Japanese English.”

Ryuno appears to have had a very successful engagement with her host family. She said that she was not at all nervous before the homestay and she appreciated the host family’s effort to fill the two days with activities. She said that the best point about the homestay was that she listened to and spoke “only English, no Japanese.” Finally, at the end of this interview Ryuno said of her first week in the USA that she was “very happy” and that “everything is very interesting.”

Yuki was more apprehensive than Ryuno about participating in the program and she had a harder time engaging actively and positively with the experience, but she felt that she became less anxious as time went by. In our initial interview Yuki said that she was very nervous about going to the USA. Interviewed one week after our arrival, she said that when she first met the counselors it was “very difficult” to communicate with them because “first time we met, very shy.” However, one week into the program she said that she was “now, just a little shy,” and that she felt a little more comfortable than on the first day.

However, although Yuki may have claimed to feel less nervous after her first encounters with American students and after increased interaction with her fellow program participants, some of

her behavior showed that she was less willing to take part in program activities than many of the other participants. She spent a lot of time with her roommate, Mayu, and the two of them together spent a lot of time apart from the rest of the group. On the fifth day of the program we all went to a large amusement park together. I noted that, “The students already have a very good relationship with the counselors. Most students are off together in groups. Yuki and Mayu together, not interested in rides, and not talking with others.” The next day’s afternoon activity was rock climbing at the university gymnasium rock climbing wall. Students were not required to participate in these activities but almost all of them usually came along as part of the group. However, on this day I noted that, “Yuki and Mayu came to my room after lunch. They said they didn’t want to go rock climbing. They wanted to study in their room. Yuki is very nervous about the upcoming homestay.” However, Yuki was not always so negative or pessimistic about her experiences. By the following day she seemed ready to go on the homestay. I noted that, “The students left for their homestays today. Yuki was the first to go. She was very worried yesterday, but today she talked to me a lot just before she left and she seemed OK.”

Yuki continued to feel rather nervous during the first day of the homestay, but she reported that she was eventually able to relax and appreciate the experience. In a post-homestay interview she told me that there were four people in her host family, a married couple with a seven-year old daughter and a five-year old son. She said that before the homestay she felt “very nervous,” and that this feeling remained throughout the first day of the homestay. However, she then said that on the second day she stopped feeling nervous because she was “able to talk more.” She said that she still had a lot of trouble communicating, but the host parents asked her a lot of questions about Japan and she was able to respond in a very limited way. She finally said that the best thing about the homestay was “talking with the family.”

It is true that Yuki was generally much more nervous about taking part in the program than Ryuno, however Yuki was able to overcome her fears to some degree and, in the end, she seemed to have positive feelings about her participation, particularly about the homestay. In written responses to questions given near the end of the program, she wrote the following about the homestay.

The best experience was the homestay. The reason is my family was so nice. At first I was too nervous to talk, but then the children talked to me a lot. I began to feel less nervous and I thought I have to talk too. The homestay family gave me self-confidence.

Again regarding the homestay, she wrote the following in an essay after returning to Japan.

I felt distant with my host family in the beginning. I thought I had to talk to them in proper English, so I was tense and not able to say what I wanted to say. But I realized that it is important to communicate with my heart, using the words I knew and not worrying about the grammar so much. I tried to talk to my host family positively and we became

closer and I became friendly with the children as well. The two of them were very sociable. I had a good time with them. The homestay was over very quickly. I didn't think I would have such fun before I stayed with them. I was very happy.

Self-perceptions regarding change as a result of the program

Both Ryuno and Yuki thought that they had changed because of the program. These changes involved their attitude towards learning English, their assessment of their skill in using English, their openness and willingness to communicate with others, and their understanding of American culture and cultural differences between Japan and America.

Changes in attitude towards learning English

Ryuno felt that living in an all-English environment and talking to native speakers was the best way to improve her English. When asked how her feelings about learning English had changed as a result of the program, she replied as follows.

Living and trying to communicate in an almost all English environment made me start to think that I really need to study and learn English more than ever before. The three weeks went by very fast, but I learned many things that I probably couldn't learn with an ordinary trip. I thought talking to native speakers is the best way to improve my English rather than studying with textbooks. I felt strongly that I should be able to speak English.

Yuki gained an increased awareness of the level of her English skills and what she might do to improve. She wrote the following.

Participating in the study abroad program, I realized how little I could speak English. I thought my English skills were very low. But I thought I want to be good at English more than when I was in Japan. Especially I felt there was a big difference between if you can pronounce something correctly or not. Because my pronunciation wasn't so good, there were a lot of things that I didn't understand even when I knew the word.

Self-assessment of English skill level

After one week in the USA Ryuno felt that her English listening skill had improved. She said, "I can understand better." She also said that her speaking skills had improved "a little." As previously noted, she also thought that the homestay was a valuable English learning experience because she had to use only English throughout her stay with the host family. Near the end of the program she wrote the following concerning her improvement in using English. "I think it improved a little. Maybe, not so much changed but my listening improved. I came to understand English even without paying attention when listening, just like listening to Japanese."

Yuki felt that her “pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary” improved, but her strongest impressions and most detailed comments concerned her increased awareness of her difficulties in communicating in English. Near the end of the program she wrote the following.

During the conversation there were a lot of times I couldn’t say what I wanted to say. I was supposed to know easy words but actually when I spoke, I couldn’t say what I wanted to say. And sometimes I knew the word but I couldn’t make a sentence and people couldn’t understand me. Also, my pronunciation was not good. I was saying the right word but my pronunciation was not good so they couldn’t understand me.

Openness and willingness to communicate

As many of her comments previously noted here indicate, Ryuno was not nervous about communicating in English with native speakers. When asked about the difficulty of using English in America, many of the other students brought up personality factors such as shyness, but Ryuno’s remarks focused on English learning and language issues. She felt that she was talking English more in America because she was getting more listening and speaking practice. She was aware, moreover, that this opportunity to use English with native speakers was contributing to an improvement in her speaking and listening skills. She wrote the following in response to questions given at the end of the sojourn.

Speaking with native English speakers was better than talking to Japanese English-speaking teachers. I learned many words or expressions that are used by young people. As days went by, we were able to communicate even with my smattering of English. And I was able to understand English even though I didn’t listen so carefully.

Yuki was more apprehensive about using English with native speakers at the beginning of the program, and was even reluctant to speak and interact with the other program participants. She wrote that she “couldn’t get used to the place and was homesick the first week.” She struck me as lacking in self-confidence and she spent a lot of time with her roommate, Mayu. Mayu told me that she and Yuki found it “hard to get along” with the other students. They both seemed to feel that the other participants were more actively engaging in the program activities. However, Yuki was able to overcome her initial reluctance to speak English and she gained confidence as she began to interact more with people she met in the USA. When asked how she felt about using English with native speakers, she replied as follows.

At first I was nervous, until I got used to it. Especially the first week, I didn’t know what they were saying and I was just listening. But through the homestay I think I got a little self-confidence. After that I tried to talk to native speakers little by little.”

Increased awareness of American culture and cultural differences between Japan and America

In a pre-departure interview Ryuno spoke of her desire both to improve her English language skills and learn more about American culture through the study abroad program. She said, “I want to learn English and I want to learn about American life, teenage student life.” Writing near the end of the three-week stay, she described some of what she had learned about American culture and some of the differences between Japan and America.

The best experience is that I lived in America for three weeks instead of travelling. Travelling and studying abroad are different even if it was short. I had a very good time, because I was able to spend time with the American students and I felt closer to American university life for the three weeks. I felt differences in values in many ways. There are many good points of Japan, but I was envious of American culture and values. Even if we don't know each other, smiling to each other when our eyes meet is a good habit.

One cultural difference between Japan and America that Ryuno noticed was what she perceived as the relatively casual approach that service workers in America take towards their jobs. In response to a question concerning aspects of American culture that surprised her, she wrote the following.

Freedom for workers. People working at shops were very free, like reading a book or whistling and that is unbelievable in Japan. I was very surprised and also it was nice, I thought. I was also surprised about the flight attendants. They just said “bye-bye,” passing the bags over passengers' heads and they didn't go to the exit door but just sat and talked to each other. I would probably have felt very angry if Japanese flight attendants did the same thing, but I was only surprised about these things and it is very strange to me that I didn't feel upset.”

Yuki's anxiety may have prevented her from focusing on cultural differences as much as Ryuno. However, she was struck by the different atmosphere she encountered at an American university. In a post-program essay she described her impressions.

I went to study abroad at an American university. It was only three weeks, but it was a much better experience than I expected. I was able to spend a very relaxing time there. This was because the whole school atmosphere was relaxing. The facilities were very good, like tennis courts, gym and others on the campus. I didn't have time to get bored. There were also a TV game room, ping pong and billiard rooms. The most surprising thing was there was a big lake on the campus. We could not only swim, but also canoe there. The campus was surrounded by a lot of woods and I could relax very much. We could see wild deer and squirrels when we were lucky. I was surprised to see squirrels

the first time, but I saw squirrels a few times. We can't see these kinds of animals on the campus, so I thought it was America.

Yuki's comments here may seem to be a simple response to her experience, but this difference in atmosphere between a university in the center of Tokyo and a university in a rural part of the USA impressed many of the participants. Yuki's final comments in her post-program essay show that this general sense of many things being different affected her perception of her experience and led her to reflect on the value of encounters with a different culture. She wrote as follows.

We experienced many things every day in the three weeks of study abroad. There were almost only Japanese at the dormitory, so we spoke Japanese without realizing it. I thought it is important to improve each other instead of relying on feeling comfortable being with Japanese. It is true I had some experiences which I will never forget in my life.

Discussion

Both Ryuno and Yuki reported feeling that the study abroad program was a positive experience. In the data there is evidence of change in both participants' understanding of language learning, their willingness to communicate in English, and their awareness of cultural differences between America and Japan. However, Ryuno seems to have had a more positive engagement with the host culture than Yuki. Factors that might account for this difference include Ryuno's previous experience abroad, her relative lack of anxiety concerning interaction with members of the host culture, and her willingness to communicate in a second language. One year after the three-week study abroad program, Ryuno returned to the university in Minnesota for a full semester of study. Her desire to live and study abroad and her sense of herself as a successful member of an English-speaking community can be seen as providing her motivation to pursue her studies abroad.

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