

Researching Study Abroad

—Declining Participation in Japan and an Overview of Past Research—

海外留学に関する研究：日本人の参加低迷と過去の研究概要

By

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Abstract

This brief review article discusses past research on study abroad in both the Japanese and wider contexts. The research has taken place within two broad strands: quantitative investigations into the impact of learning context on the development of language proficiency; and qualitative and ethnographic explorations of how individual factors are influenced by learning abroad. The review argues that methodologies situated in the second strand may offer greater insight into study abroad experiences given the multiple and unique factors involved. When such research is used in promotional material over a reliance on anecdotal remarks, parents and prospective participants may be more convinced of the potential benefits of overseas study. This may particularly be the case in a Japanese context characterised by declining participation rates in Japan. It may also help participants to develop realistic expectations of the kinds of development that can take place on a sojourn. This would be particularly helpful for short-term programmes, the fastest growing sector of study abroad, where gains may be seen more in terms of motivation, confidence, attitude to English and culture learning, than on the development of language proficiency. The review article discusses past research in the area, with a focus on Japan. It begins by looking at the recent trend of declining participation and challenges some commonly cited reasons.

Key Words: study abroad, intercultural communication

1. Introduction

Japan is now facing new demands in the requirements of English language learning as a result of internationalisation and the resulting increase in cross-cultural communication. This is

reflected in recent MEXT policies to develop skills for intercultural communication and improve awareness of foreign countries and cultures (MEXT, 2003; 2009; 2011). One way to achieve this is through study abroad (SA) programmes which are prioritised in education policy and most Japanese universities now offer various options (Clavel, 2014).

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Despite this, the number of Japanese students attending courses overseas has steadily declined in recent years. The reasons commonly cited for this decline, despite contrary evidence, include low birth rate, economic recession, financial concerns, a lack of confidence in English language ability, and an inward-looking orientation of young people. In addition, those that do take part often arrive in new cultural environments with unrealistic expectations about what can be achieved on a sojourn; they may also lack the necessary accompanying skills to maximise SA learning opportunities and deal with intercultural misunderstandings (Dehmel, Li & Sloane, 2011).

In order to help improve participation, it may be helpful to draw more on empirical research in SA promotional material over the anecdotal and impressionistic remarks which are currently in wide use (Sato, 2012). It may also help to provide more consistent pre-departure training programmes to develop skills and strategies for more effective learning and more positive intercultural experiences while abroad.

This brief review article has two aims: firstly, to discuss the declining SA participation in Japan; secondly, to discuss past research on SA which may be used to paint a clearer picture of what can be achieved on a sojourn, with a focus on short-term courses. Such research could also be used for reference in order to convince parents and prospective students of the benefits, and to enable the development of realistic SA expectations (Sato, 2012).

To achieve this, it discusses two strands of research which can be seen in the literature: studies largely about the influence of learning context on the development of linguistic skills, and studies exploring intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of individual learners in terms of how experiences abroad impact on learning.

2. Declining study abroad participation

SA is now prioritised in national education policy in Japan as a means to develop skills and attitudes for communication with people from diverse cultural backgrounds and deepen understanding of foreign countries and cultures (Clavel, 2014). The rationale behind this is based on acceptance that individual skills and expertise in English language and intercultural communication are important resources for economic growth (Wyckoff, 2013).

MEXT's current goal, as part of its 'Tobitate! Study abroad JAPAN' campaign, is to double the number of university students going abroad from approximately 60,000 in 2010 to 120,000 by 2020 (Kameda, 2013). However, this may be difficult given that over the last few years the number of Japanese students studying abroad has been steadily declining (Fukushima, 2010; Tanikawa, 2014) (see *Figure 1*).

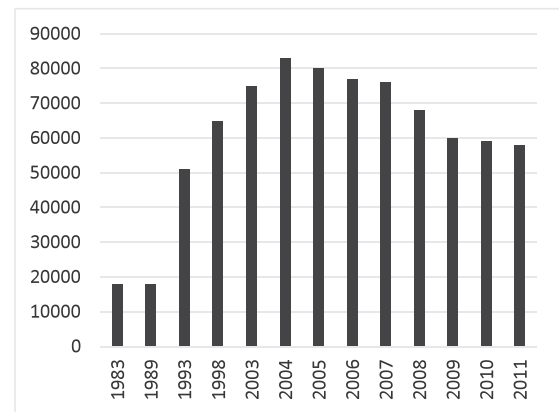


Figure 1: Number of Japanese students studying at tertiary institutions abroad, 1983-2011 (from MEXT, 2014).

There are numerous reasons cited for this decline. They include the following:

- low birth rates;
- economic recession;
- a feeling among some learners that they lack the language skills required to study abroad;

- financial concerns.

These reasons are commonly cited to explain the decline despite contrary perspectives: birth rates may be low but university matriculation rates are higher than ever before (Kinging, 2015); the economic downturn set in after the decline had started (Kinging, 2015); learners may feel they lack the language skills required to study abroad, but on many short-term courses, special language skills or cultural knowledge may not be required (Burgess, 2014); financial concerns are likely to be a concern but many learners may be unaware of the broad range of scholarships available (Newfields, 2013).

A further reason commonly given is risk-aversion among young Japanese (Fukushima, 2010; Tanikawa, 2014), known as the phenomenon *uchimuki shikō* (youth inward-looking orientation). Young individuals in Japan often find themselves blamed in media and public discourses for the decline in SA participation and the lack of development in intercultural communication skills (Burgess, 2014). Some analysts see logic in this and talk about the ‘developed’ and ‘peaceful’ nature of Japanese society resulting in young people preferring to stay in a ‘secure’ environment while pointing to government and society as factors that motivate students from South Korea and China to be more outward-looking (Shiina, 2010).

This may be true given that growing middle classes in those countries are increasingly able to fund study abroad but it fails to address whether Japanese are really more inward-looking. Following a British Council (2014) survey of approximately 2,000 Japanese students aged between 16 and 25, this position appears difficult to maintain. The survey showed that the majority of respondents were interested in SA and had similarly positive attitudes to overseas learning as individuals in other developed countries. Safety

and costs were the given reasons for staying home. *Uchimuki shikō* in discourse is further challenged by a recent survey by the PTA Federation showing that parents were more negative about study abroad than their children- less than 50% of those surveyed wanted their children to become ‘global citizens’ (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2014, cited in Burgess, 2014).

The problem may be due in some part to companies hiring new graduates. A report by Nikkei Business (2011) described the Japanese recruitment system as rigid, and as such, many students studying abroad miss companies’ recruitment drives (Nikkei Business, 2011). A further concern is the possible prejudice faced by SA returnees (including graduates from foreign universities) who appear confident or outspoken when looking for work. In a 2012 survey by the Japanese recruitment company DISCO of 1,000 companies, cited in the New York Times, less than 25% reported that they planned to hire those with study abroad experience (Burgess, 2014).

3. Past research

Current SA research has its roots in two key investigations: Carroll’s (1967) quantitative investigation of language proficiency among 2,782 participants, and Schumann and Schumann’s (1977) study in which individual learning experiences abroad were reviewed. Research since has been carried out within two strands originating from these two approaches: examinations of the effect of learning contexts on linguistic skills development, and explorations of learners’ individual aspects in how these relate to experiences abroad and impact upon learning (Serrano, 2010).

The first strand has tended to use more quantitative approaches in focusing on developments in areas including language

proficiency development (Rivers, 1998), speaking fluency (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004), vocabulary acquisition (Ife, Vives, Boix & Meara, 2000), grammatical competence (Dekeyser, 1990), and communication skills (Isabelli-García, 2003). However, a limitation of much of this research is the lack of comparative studies with controlled groups (Rees & Klapper, 2008).

The second strand is concerned more with individual factors relating to learners and has used qualitative and ethnographic methodologies. Research here has been able to consider the unique qualities of an SA experience. Due to the increasing acknowledgement that experiences abroad are complex and contexts diverse, it has tended to be more particularistic in its focus on individual views (Kinging, 2009).

Studies in this strand include explorations of perceptions of SA experiences (Wilkinson, 1998), interaction and socialisation (Cook, 2006), intercultural understanding (Alred & Byram, 2002), attitudes and beliefs (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003), and ways in which social and interpersonal factors may have an effect on language learning (Teichler & Maiworm, 1997).

4. Mixed outcomes of study abroad

While most research carried out in both strands has focused on the benefits of SA, studies looking at potentially negative consequences have received less attention. These studies include reports that SA does not automatically lead to improved linguistic proficiency (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003) and that SA may be detrimental to learning among those with low motivation to engage with the local culture (Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). Further studies have reported on how difficult intercultural experiences can reinforce negative stereotypes of both the target culture and individuals within that culture (Allen, Dristas, & Mills, 2007), strengthen national identity

(Block, 2007), and lead to an increase in ethnocentrism (Isabelli-García, 2006).

In light of these reports, it seems necessary to ensure that appropriate pre-departure preparation is provided to help learners manage the potentially difficult intercultural encounters while abroad. This could also help learners develop realistic expectations about what can be achieved during sojourns. However, it is unfortunate that often SA participants find themselves abroad without the adequate accompanying measures to help them achieve this (Dehmel, Li & Sloane, 2011, p.11).

Such training may be particularly relevant for short-term SA where there are reports that only limited opportunities for language practice and superficial contact with the target culture may take place (Day, 1987). Such programmes may also involve a group orientation and a 'holiday' mentality which may be problematic for the development of English language skills and intercultural understanding since participants may remain isolated from the target language and culture (Kinging, 2009).

5. Short-term programmes

Due to the costs involved and the relative ease in terms of organisation, short-term programmes are the fastest growing sector of SA (Szekely & Krane, 1997). Since such courses may require only limited linguistic and cultural preparation they can also appeal to a greater number of participants (Engle & Engle, 2003).

In Japan, several investigations have been conducted focusing on short-term programmes. The majority of these studies fall into the first strand of research in their focus on learning setting and language proficiency development (e.g., Kitao, 1993). Research falling into the second strand has focused on areas such as learner attitudes towards

the target culture (Nozaki, 1987) and changes in interpersonal values (Higuchi, et al, 1982). Other investigations into short-term SA have shown greater gains in motivation, confidence, and attitude towards the target language than in language proficiency (Geis & Fukushima, 1997; Brauer, 2005).

Therefore, it may be better to view gains from short-term SA as long-term in the improvements in these areas rather than on the development of language proficiency. The potential developments here can provide justification for further promotion of such programmes in Japan, a view supported by Shiozawa (2001, cited in Brauer, 2005, p. 97) who writes:

“There’s no end to the benefits of overseas study or short-term study abroad trips. [Students] cultivate an objective perspective on Japan...develop confidence from relying on themselves...take notice of their insufficient communicative skills and return to Japan motivated to study English”

Conclusion

This short review article has indicated that SA may not be universally beneficial; however, if educators want to maximise the chances for their students to have positive and developmental experiences while abroad then they have to be implicated by organising adequate pre-departure training.

This brief article has also argued that in order to attract more students to take part in SA programmes, it may be helpful to refer more to empirical research. There is a great deal of existing research to fit this purpose; however, research following qualitative or ethnographic methodologies using a longitudinal design from the second strand of research may provide a more comprehensive understanding of SA experiences

which could resonate with researchers or teachers in other contexts and influence policy or practice.

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