

Effects of Short-Term Study Abroad Programs

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Effects of Short-Term Study Abroad Programs

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Abstract

Study abroad programs have become popular among institutions of higher education in Japan, and such popularity seems attributable to the widespread assumption that the programs facilitate the development of students' language proficiency. A number of empirical studies have investigated the effects of a study abroad experience on participants' language proficiency (e.g., Isabelli-Garcia, 2003; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). However, most of them deal with a semester to a year-long study abroad programs, and it is rare to find ones that have examined the effectiveness of short-term study abroad programs on students' development of language proficiency and other learner variables.

This study examined the effectiveness of short-term study abroad programs on learner development and changes in English proficiency and language learning strategies. The data for the study came from 64 university students who participated in four different short-term study abroad programs. In assessing their effectiveness, we employed a pre- and post-test design using a speaking test and a modified learning strategy inventory (Oxford, 1990). We also examined the changes of their speaking proficiency a year after their return to the home institution.

The findings indicate that short-term study abroad programs can have a positive impact on participants' oral proficiency as well as their use of learning strategies if those programs are appropriately designed. However, it was also found that the oral proficiency gains that participants made in such short-term study abroad programs were largely lost over time.

Introduction

Faced with a gradual decline in the number of Japanese students studying abroad in recent

years, the Japanese government has launched a project to increase those numbers by providing scholarships such as *Tobitate* (Leap for Tomorrow). This initiative is part of the government's campaign to develop global human resources for strengthening Japan's economic status in the global society. Partly thanks to the government's efforts to promote study abroad, there was an increase in the number of students studying abroad between 2009 and 2015 according to the statistics released by the Japanese Student Services Organization. However, this seemingly increased number is attributable to the increased percentage of Japanese studying abroad less than a month, not to the number of students in long-term study abroad programs (McCrostie, 2017). This suggests that increasingly more Japanese students are opting for short-term rather than long-term study abroad programs.

One of the commonly held assumptions regarding studying abroad is that the study abroad experience facilitates the development of participants' proficiency of the target language used in the host country. Churchill and DuFon (2006) in their survey of studies investigating study abroad programs identify various factors which possibly influence students' language development during their study abroad: students' initial proficiency, motivation and willingness to communicate, use of learning strategies, cultural norms of the host country and students' perception of them, and program features such as length of stay, residential arrangements, and classroom environments. In general, those studies investigating the effects of long-term study abroad experiences (e.g., semester- to year-long study abroad programs) on participants' language proficiency report findings to support the commonly held view that study abroad does indeed lead to improvements in students' language proficiency (e.g., Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1995; DeKeyser, 1991; Isabelli-Garcia, 2003; Lapkin, Hart, & Swain, 1995; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004).

Despite the increasing popularity of short-term study abroad programs in Japan, however, there have been relatively few studies which investigated if such programs facilitate

the students' language proficiency. In light of the dearth of empirical studies on the effects of short-term abroad experiences on participants' language proficiency, Sekiya and Park (2006) conducted a series of studies to address this question. The findings from these studies are as follows:

- 1) Even a one-month study abroad program can make a difference in participants' oral proficiency if the program structure contains ample interactive opportunities and the students are prepared to take advantage of them.
- 2) The gain is also reflected in linguistic changes that the participants have made in terms of speech accuracy and lexical diversity.

In the present study, we will address the same research question of whether one-month study abroad programs can make a difference in participants' oral proficiency with further empirical data as well as the following two questions which we did not answer in our previous studies.

- 1) How is the participants' use of learning strategies affected by their study abroad experience?
- 2) To what extent are the participants able to maintain the gains in their overall proficiency made during their study abroad over a period of time after their return?

General Description of the Study Abroad Programs under Study

The study abroad programs under study took place in an American university in Monterey, California in the United States in 2005, 2006, 2008, and 2009. In total, 64 university students participated in the programs. The duration of each program was four

weeks, with a two-day trip to San Francisco with two American chaperones added at the end. The theme of the programs was “American Culture and Society.” These content-based study abroad programs were designed to maximize students’ opportunities to interact with English speakers on the site and to have an experiential, or “hands-on” encounter with American culture and people.

Basically, the participants had three hours of content-based classes taught by two teachers every weekday morning and did various community interaction activities and research projects in the afternoons, guided by two English-speaking tutors. All the instructors and tutors fully understood the interactive nature of the programs, and facilitated participants’ interactions in various tasks and activities.

Program Features Aimed at Increasing Interactive Opportunities

As suggested by our previous study (Sekiya & Park 2006), participants’ gains in their oral proficiency in English during the 2005 and 2006 programs may be attributable to various program features aimed at increasing students’ opportunities to interact in English. Since all the programs under study shared the same program features as the 2005 and 2006 programs, we will recapitulate them below.

1) Interactive curriculum and activities

- (1) Panel discussion: Guests from the local community, including graduate students and faculty members at the university and students’ homestay family members, were invited to the classroom about six times during the program, and students interviewed them on certain issues which they were studying in their class in groups, such as gender, religion, and ethnic diversity in American society.
- (2) Interactive site visits called “Community Interactions”: In these site visits, students

were required to interview people working on sites such as a nursing home, a newspaper company, and a police station and report what they learned from these visits to the class in subsequent lessons. These interactive site visits took place once a week in the afternoon.

- (3) Sharing Japanese culture with American students: Students visited elementary schools and a high school to make presentations on some aspects of Japanese culture in groups to American students and interacted with them. This took place three or four times during each program.
- (4) Research projects: Students carried out a mini-research project in groups on one aspect of American culture and society that particularly interested them. Groups presented their findings through presentations at the end of the programs. In the projects, in addition to using various resources, the students were required to do two kinds of interviews with Americans: street interviews and in-depth interviews. Students spent a fair amount of time preparing questions for interviews and practicing interview skills with the assistance of the teachers and tutors.
- (5) Homestay: To ensure the maximum amount of interaction with the host families, only one student was placed with a homestay family. Students were often asked to discuss class topics with their homestay family members and shared what they learned from the host families with the class.
- (6) Social activities with activity guides: During lunch times, after school and sometimes on weekends two English-speaking activity guides helped students enjoy social activities outside the classroom. They also chaperoned the students on their two-day trip to San Francisco. We considered the students' interaction with the activity guides as an important part of their hands-on American experience.

- 2) English-only policy: An English-only policy was implemented for all the programs in order to maximize the participants' use of English. They were expected to speak English not only with Americans and other English speakers but also with each other even outside the classroom during the programs. (See reflective journaling and pre-departure preparations below as to how this policy was encouraged and supported.)
- 3) Reflective journaling: Throughout the programs starting with the pre-departure retreat, all the participants were required to keep a journal. The journal served not only as a record of their experience and observations, but also as a valuable tool for reflection on their learning of language and culture. Students were also asked to reflect on their English use every day. This served as an important tool to monitor if they were sticking to the English-only policy. They also shared their observations and reflections with the teachers and classmates a few times during their stay. (See Sekiya and Park (2006) for more details.)
- 4) Pre-departure preparations: Pre-departure preparations through eight orientation sessions and a three-day retreat were considered indispensable for the success of the study abroad programs under study. The purpose of these preparations was to foster participants' readiness to maximize their study abroad experience.
 - (1) Team-building: Since the participants were to do many activities in groups such as presentations, research projects, it was crucial for them to build a cooperative team and learning community in English before the program commenced. (See Sekiya and Park (2006) for the details of team-building activities.)
 - (2) Setting personal goals: Students were asked to set their own personal goals for the study abroad program in terms of language learning, culture learning and other aspirations. It should be noted that all the participants in the programs mentioned the improvement of their oral proficiency in English as one of the most important

goals for the programs, suggesting students' common motive for joining short-term study abroad programs.

- (3) Acclimating participants to the English-only policy: As mentioned before, we judged the English-only policy during their stay to be the key to the participants' intensive English immersion experience. In order to acclimate the participants to this policy, pre-departure orientation sessions and retreats were all conducted in English, and through these sessions they were made aware of the value of using only English and being immersed in English intensively during the programs. It should be noted that most participants were already used to using only English with Japanese classmates in their English classes at their home university as well as at the university's Self-Access Learning Center.
- (4) Training students in strategies for the learning of language and culture:
- (5) In order for participants to make the most of their interactional opportunities on the site, students were instructed in strategies for learning language and culture. Various activities from a handbook called *Maximizing Study Abroad: A Students' Guide to Strategies for Language Culture Learning and Use* (Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, & Lassegard, 2004) were utilized for this training. Since the programs under study were designed to provide participants with abundant opportunities to communicate with people in the United States, speaking and listening strategies as well as communication strategies were emphasized during the pre-departure preparations. Here the term communication strategies refers to those strategies used to facilitate learners' oral communication, which include what Oxford calls "compensation strategies," i.e., strategies which speakers use to make up for a lack of certain linguistic knowledge as well as what Oxford calls "social strategies" such as asking for clarification, repetition, paraphrasing, etc. (For more details as to how strategies

instruction was conducted during the retreat, see Park and Sekiya (2006))

In sum, we believe that the interactive features of the program design as well as participants' preparations to take advantage of these opportunities including pre-departure strategy training are critical for the success of short-term study abroad programs to make a difference in students' oral proficiency in the target language.

Purpose of the study

In this study, we examined what changes are made in participants' oral English proficiency and language learning strategies and to what extent such changes are in effect while studying in a short-term study abroad program through the following three research questions:

- 1) To what extent can the participants improve their oral proficiency after participating in one-month study abroad programs?
- 2) Do students retain the gains that they made in the programs 10 months after their return?
- 3) What changes are found in their use of language learning strategies after the programs?

Method

Participants and the study abroad site

Sixty nine students at a university located in Japan participated in this study who attended a study abroad program in the U.S. in 2005 ($N=15$), 2006 ($N=16$), 2008 ($N=20$), and 2009 ($N=18$). However, scores from five students were invalid, and we decided not to include them

in the analyses of the current study.

The program offered and managed by a university in California lasted four weeks including a two-day trip to San Francisco with two American chaperones. The classes in the program were conducted through the medium of content-based instruction, the main theme of which was centered on American culture and society.

Instruments and data collection

An in-house speaking test was employed to assess students' oral English proficiency before departure (pre-test), after return (post-test) and 10 months after return (delayed post-test) from the study abroad program. The test was administered in the form of group oral exam, with three to four students sitting together to perform a group discussion task. While the students were discussing the topic given in the prompt, two raters assigned scores to their performance using a rating scale designed to assess the four aspects of oral proficiency: Pronunciation, Fluency, Grammar and Vocabulary, and Communicative Effectiveness.

Once the double-rated scores were collected, they were subjected to a Rasch analysis using Facets (Linacre, 2006), and the rater characteristics such as severity and leniency were statistically adjusted to generate a set of fair-average scores to each student's performance. While all of the 64 students took the pre- and post-test exams, only 29 of them were available to sit the oral exam for the delayed post-test.

To examine the changes in students' uses of learning strategies before and after the study abroad experiences, we also administered the modified Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL; Oxford, 1990), which was translated in Japanese. Sixty nine sets of student responses were available and so entered into the statistical analyses to answer the research question 3).

Analyses

A series of statistical analyses were conducted with the data to answer the research questions. Table 1 below shows the descriptive aspects of the test data entered into the subsequent analyses of the pre and post-tests comparisons. The dispersion of the data distribution appears similar to each other considering the values of standard deviation.

All of the normality indices of skewness and kurtosis (adjusted by the sample size) fall around 0, indicating the distributions of the data are more or less normal and helping justify the application of parametric tests to mean comparisons.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of pre- and post-tests ($N = 64$)

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skew.</i>	<i>Kurt.</i>
Pre-test	Pronunciation	2.66	0.50	-0.15	-0.33
	Fluency	2.80	0.52	0.13	-0.31
	Grammar & Vocabulary	2.56	0.45	0.20	-0.26
	Communicative effectiveness	2.90	0.47	0.43	-0.04
Post-test	Pronunciation	3.08	0.57	-0.38	-0.67
	Fluency	3.10	0.49	-0.50	-0.39
	Grammar & Vocabulary	3.01	0.48	-0.22	-0.43
	Communicative effectiveness	3.23	0.53	-0.91	0.60

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the delayed post-test. Unlike the pre- and post-test estimations, two of the kurtosis values for the delayed post-tests resulted over 1.00; yet, they still fell within the acceptable limits of ± 2 for the normality assumption of the data structure.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of delayed post-test ($N = 29$)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skew.</i>	<i>Kurt.</i>
Pronunciation	2.91	0.45	0.44	1.19
Fluency	2.95	0.52	0.48	-0.31
Grammar & Vocabulary	2.75	0.44	0.63	1.19
Communicative effectiveness	3.13	0.51	-0.31	-0.16

The mean scores of pre- and post-tests in Table 1 were statistically compared, and the result indicated a significant main effect at $F(4,60) = 17.140$, $p < 0.01$ ($\eta^2 = .533$). Their individual univariate tests demonstrated that across all comparisons, post-test means were significantly larger than the pre-test means as shown in Table 3. The range of effect sizes fell between 0.62 of the lowest for Fluency and 0.98 of the highest for Grammar, suggesting that the study abroad experiences helped the participants develop their proficiency to a large degree.

Table 3. Results of the univariate comparisons

	Pre- and post-comparisons	ES (<i>d</i>)
Pronunciation	pre < post	.78
Fluency	pre < post	.61
Grammar & Vocabulary	pre < post	.98
Communicative effectiveness	pre < post	.69

Another comparison was performed using the mean scores ($N=29$) reported in Table 4, this time including the pre-, post- and also delayed tests. The main effect resulted significant at $F(8,21) = 5.516, p < 0.01 (\eta^2 = .678)$, and the follow-up univariate tests also resulted with all comparisons statistically significant as shown in Table 5. These test results indicate that there is at least one pair of mean scores with a significant difference against each other when statistically compared.

Table 4. Mean scores of pre-, post-, and delayed tests ($N = 29$)

	Pronunciation	Fluency	Grammar & Vocabulary	Communicative effectiveness
Pre-test	2.77	2.87	2.62	2.97
Post-test	3.25	3.21	3.14	3.35
Delayed post-test	2.91	2.95	2.75	3.13

As shown in Table 5, there is no statistical difference between all pairs of pre-test and delayed test means, while both of them are significantly different from post-test means. It suggests that the effect of study abroad decayed 10 months after their return. That is, the gain was mostly lost while studying at their home institution after their return from the study abroad program.

Table 5. Results of the univariate comparisons using ANOVAs

	Results	Pair-wise comparisons
Pronunciation	$F(2,56) = 19.284, p < 0.01$	pre \leq delayed < post
Fluency	$F(2,56) = 5.291, p < 0.01$	pre \leq delayed < post
Grammar & Vocabulary	$F(2,56) = 15.702, p < 0.01$	pre \leq delayed < post
Communicative effectiveness	$F(2,56) = 5.899, p < 0.01$	pre \leq delayed < post

We were also interested in the degree to which the study abroad experiences influenced the students' strategy application to their learning of English and especially which strategies the students came to apply more than before their study abroad experiences. Therefore, we administered the modified Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL; Oxford, 1990) before and after their participation in the study abroad programs.

Table 6 briefly reports the types of strategies assessed by SILL and the number of items for each strategy. It also shows the reliability coefficients of pre- and post-administrations for each strategy.

Table 6. The specifications of Modified SILL with their reliability coefficients ($N = 69$)

Strategies	# of items	Reliability	
		Pre	Post
1. Memory	7	.43	.60
<u>2. Cognitive</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>.72</u>	<u>.69</u>
3. Compensation	6	.67	.47
<u>4. Metacognitive</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>.76</u>	<u>.75</u>
<u>5. Affective</u>	4	.59	.61
<u>6. Social</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>.75</u>	<u>.67</u>
TOTAL	40	.88	.87

Since the reliability coefficients suggest that some of the strategies were not reliably estimated using the inventory, when interpreting the findings, we decided to consider the result concerning only Cognitive, Metacognitive, Affective, and Social strategies that exhibited relatively high measurement reliability. A MANOVA was run, and a significant main effect was found at $F(4,65) = 22.919, p < 0.01 (\eta^2 = .585)$. The paired comparisons of pre- and post-means for each strategy revealed that all the post-measurement means were significantly higher than those of pre-measurement, as shown in Table 8.

The high d values indicate that the effect sizes were considerably and consistently large across the strategies. That is, the study abroad experiences helped the students to become more aware of the individual learning strategies and promoted their applications in their course of learning English. Especially, these four learning strategies of Cognitive, Metacognitive, Affective, and Social were all target strategies for instruction in the curriculum; therefore, it can be assumed that the strategy training was successfully conducted with meaningful

learning outcomes.

Table 8. Pre and Post Mean Comparisons

Strategies	Mean (<i>SD</i>)		Difference (<i>d</i>)
	Pre	Post	
2. Cognitive	3.29 (.53)	3.76 (.51)	.46* (0.9)
4. Metacognitive	3.22 (.59)	3.64 (.57)	.42*(0.7)
5. Affective	3.23 (.66)	3.88 (.66)	.64*(1.0)
6. Social	3.53 (.76)	4.22 (.57)	.69*(1.0)

Discussion

In the following section, we will discuss the three research questions of the present study based on the results mentioned in the previous section.

Research Question 1: To what extent can the participants improve their oral proficiency after participating in one-month study abroad programs?

This research question was explored in our previous study with 27 participants (Sekiya & Park 2006). With more participants in the current study, 64, the same question was addressed. The results confirmed our previous finding: even a one-month program can make a sizable difference in participants' oral proficiency if the program structure contains abundant interactional opportunities and the participants are made prepared to take advantage of such opportunities through prior learner training.

It should be noted that the design and features of the programs under study are markedly different from those of a study abroad program studied by Tanaka and Ellis (2003), who

reported that the Japanese participants made only marginal gains in their English proficiency after 15 weeks. In their program the participants had little need to use English outside the classroom. The present study suggests the importance of designing a short-term study abroad program with ample interactional opportunities and learner training to prepare the participants to make the most of those opportunities if the program is to make a difference in students' proficiency.

Research Question 2: Do students retain the gains that they made in the programs 10 months after their return?

The results suggested that the gains in their English proficiency which the participants made in the programs were largely lost in 10 months after their return. In fact, these results concur with some participants' comments to the effect that the peak of their oral communication skills was at the time of their return, and their oral proficiency started declining.

The results were disappointing in light of a great deal of effort and energy invested in designing and implementing an interactive study abroad program. However, in a more positive light, the results suggest a need for a post-program orientation as depicted in Figure 1. We can make the participants reflect on their language and cultural learning during the study abroad program and then think of various concrete ways and strategies to maintain their proficiency gains made in the programs back in their home country, Japan. Indeed, "use it or lose it." applies and students need to find opportunities to use English in communicative interactions in order to secure their English gains in the longer terms.



Figure 1. Three Components for Implementing an “Effective” Study Abroad Program

Research Question 3: What changes are found in participants’ use of language learning strategies after the program?

The results indicated that the participants employed all of the following four language learning strategies more frequently after the programs: cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. This result can be interpreted as suggesting that with pre-departure preparations including strategy training, short-term abroad programs with ample interactional opportunities have a positive effect on the acquisition of language learning strategies. It should also be noted that the frequency gains in the use of affective and social strategies were larger than those in the use of the other strategies. This may reflect the nature of these particular study abroad programs under study which provided the participants with ample opportunities for face-to-face oral interaction in English as previously explained.

In the present study, unfortunately we did not examine whether the gains in the use of strategies were maintained ten months after their return. Therefore, it is not clear if the participants retained any gains over an extended period of time. It is quite possible that with the change of the environment the participants might have ceased to employ some strategies such as social strategies. This needs to be investigated in future research.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the present study, we conclude that short-term study abroad programs can have a positive impact on participants' oral proficiency as well as their use of strategies if such programs fulfill the following conditions: (1) the programs provide participants with many interactional opportunities in the target language such as those described here, and (2) the participants receive learner training in pre-departure preparations to cultivate readiness to make the most of such opportunities during their stay.

However, this study also suggested that the oral proficiency gains that participants make in such study abroad programs seem to be largely lost over time (after 10 months in the current study). We have suggested a need to offer participants post-program orientations and instruction to help them maintain and further develop the gains that they have made in the programs.

Thus, to have an effective short-term study abroad program we must consider the following three components carefully: (1) Pre-departure learner training, (2) Program design with ample interactional opportunities, and (3) Post-program orientations and instruction. Further studies on each of these components will provide more educational implications for designing and carrying out effective short-term study abroad programs in the future.

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