

Supporting the Learning of Study Abroad Students

—留学生の学習サポート—

by

Gareth HUMPHREYS*

Abstract

Study abroad is perceived as important by many stakeholders in Japanese university settings. This perception is based on widely held beliefs that it provides linguistic, intercultural and personal benefits for those taking part. Short-term programmes are increasingly selected given the relative ease of organisation and the short time requirements. They are particularly relevant in settings like Sojo University to provide non-language major students with practical international experiences to use English and to support intercultural and personal developments. However, participation in these programmes does not automatically lead to these developments. Students may find themselves in international settings without sufficient learning skills to maximise available learning opportunities that experiences abroad may provide. Pre-departure training incorporating independent tasks for these students may support more learning abroad. In the Sojo International Learning Center (SILC), varying levels of independent learning among pre- and post-study abroad students can be observed. While some students take advantage of the self-access learning centre (SALC) resources and advice available, the majority do not. Important learning opportunities are, therefore, missed. Pre-departure training and post-study abroad learning support may help address these issues. To address these challenges, an e-learning independent learning course has been proposed. The course presents content through Moodle tasks and is supplemented with discussions and SALC engagement. This may be a particularly useful and relevant approach to promote independent learning skills and intercultural learning for study abroad students.

Key Words : study abroad, e-learning, intercultural communication

1. Introduction

There is increasing perception of the value of study abroad in university courses in Japan (Eades, Goodman, & Hada, 2005). Many stakeholders perceive it is an opportunity to improve employability on graduation through the development of English communication skills,

personal skills, and intercultural competencies (Hadis, 2005; Kitsantas, 2004).

To support these developments, universities encourage short-term programme participation through numerous programmes in diverse locations, including countries where English is not widely spoken as a first language. However, it has been demonstrated that exposing students to individuals from cultures on study abroad programmes without

* Lecturer, Sojo International Learning Center

prior intercultural training may not lead to the development of more open mindsets (Paige & Vande Berg, 2012) and that intercultural developments are not assured following intercultural exchanges (Baker, 2017, p. 438).

Further, the absence of post-sojourn support may result in returnees unable to identify, process and explain any personal developments from their experiences; as a result, important learning occurring on a sojourn remains 'unacknowledged and unused' (Messelink, Van Maele, & Spencer-Oatey, 2015). As a product of this, students may rely on essentialist and surface level cultural observations when providing feedback on their experiences rather than reference to more meaningful intercultural learning. This is an important incentive for study abroad intercultural training.

This review article argues that the benefits of short-term study abroad programmes for Japanese students are considerable as long as such programmes are accompanied by appropriate intercultural training and teacher support, both in the lead up and on return. Firstly, it provides a contextualisation of short-term study abroad before a brief discussion of common assumptions. This provides a foundation for the argument presented. Features of study abroad support are then explored. There follows an outline of useful content, including intercultural themes, for such courses before the paper ends with a presentation of a case example of an e-learning independent intercultural awareness course available through the SILC.

2. Contextualising study abroad

In Japanese higher education, study abroad promotion tends to be framed in an assumption that it leads to linguistic, intercultural and individual skills and benefits. Short-term or micro-term programmes are increasingly promoted and may be more affordable, and they can appeal to a greater

number of participants since they may not require significant preparation or language proficiency (Engle & Engle, 2003).

These programmes may involve intensive language learning courses, educational or cultural tours, or they may be research-based trips. Destinations are not limited to locations where English is the dominant language and participants may study alongside students from other countries. Students may also study in intact groups on tailored courses with classmates from their home universities. Short-term programmes may not always allow extensive intercultural experiences but students on such programmes often have intercultural experiences which they perceive as personally meaningful. As such, these experiences should be considered potentially important sources of learning.

3. Challenging assumptions about study abroad

The common assumption that study abroad leads implicitly to positive developmental learning is oversimplified (Kubota, 2016). It is not guaranteed that gains will occur through periods spent abroad. Assumptions that students will become more independent, confident or interculturally aware may be challenged if an experience differs from a student's expectations. This may be particularly true if expectations of what can be achieved are unrealistic (Kinging, 2009). Individuals may also discover that they have reinforced stereotypes towards individuals of different background (Allen, Dristas, & Mills, 2007).

Furthermore, the organisation of programmes may be a limitation when students are sheltered while abroad by keeping a group intact on 'island' programmes (Engle & Engle, 2003). These sorts of programmes are likely to provide few opportunities for interaction with individuals from outside the

group. This may also result in holiday mentality throughout the sojourn.

It is further problematic that many short programmes involve sharing essentialised aspects of culture in ways which can be easily consumed by visitors (Burns, 2001). Finally, there is a belief that international study experience enhances 'global' career opportunities, but such experiences usually take place in a single location, which perhaps should not be considered 'global' (Kubota, 2016).

Individuals involved in the organisation of programmes, as teachers or administrative staff, may base their initiatives on different and personal interpretations of how best to support the development of the skills associated with study abroad (Whitsted & Wright, 2011). They may not take a research-based approach to their initiatives. From this, there is a risk that programmes or initiatives may be implemented or established without an understanding of how to approach the programme educationally in order for opportunities for skills development to be exploited rather than missed.

Despite the growing popularity of short programmes, too often these are poorly conceived and not integrated within learning in the home institutions (Ingram, 2005). With the range of self-access options available in many Japanese universities, this seems wasteful. It is unfortunate then that in Japanese settings the perspectives of adjunct foreign English language teachers are not typically sought to support these processes (Whitsted & Wright, 2011). Such teacher communities are typically a highly significant group of foreign individuals working in the higher education setting and may, given their experiences of working in Japan, offer potentially rich insights and opportunities (ibid).

4. The importance of pre-departure training

The previous discussion lends strength to the argument that well-designed intercultural courses for study abroad are essential. They provide the means for universities to enhance learning opportunities, as well as helping students establish realistic expectations of what can be achieved. It is now widely supported that these courses can enhance the learning potential of sojourns (Byram & Feng, 2006; Jackson, 2012).

However, it is problematic in Japan that the focus of pre-departure content is often limited to logistical issues such as walkthroughs of itineraries (Jackson, 2012). From this, it seems reasonable that many students are likely to perceive study abroad as a 'touristic package rather than an educational process' (Hockersmith & Newfields, 2016, p. 6).

Where pre-departure courses do exist in Japan, they typically take a lecture-based approach preventing an interactive engagement with learning content in a way that encourages personal reflective processes (Jackson, 2012). Courses developed by educators, taking pedagogic principles as the foundation rather than personal initiatives, may support learning as more interculturally meaningful and personally relevant. As some other universities in Japan recognise the value of expanding this content through their own research-based courses, it would be positive if this leads to influencing other university settings as recognition grows that there are clear ways of enhancing the student experience of study abroad.

5. Post-study abroad components

Post-sojourn support is important to help students process their gained intercultural and linguistic developments and to take advantage of new knowledge and experiences. It is common, however,

for there to be no teacher support and students may quickly 'shoebox' their study abroad experiences after re-immersing in their lives back home (Jackson, 2012, p. 458). An important advantage of post-study abroad support is that it can enable interesting feedback sessions going beyond simple descriptions of the experience, supplemented with essentialist surface level cultural observations. There is a risk that without appropriate support, students may express little more than simplistic comparisons between Japan and the overseas country.

Implementing components through independent guided reflections or face-to-face reorientations can help students process their experience. Such implementations are endorsed in study abroad research for promoting reflection and facilitating development of new goals for further 'self-enhancement' (Jackson, 2012, p. 458). Without these, students may not notice developments they have made. Indeed, students may not realise the extent of their learning if they do not engage in guided reflective processes. There is value in continued teacher support, enabling students to actively talk and reflect upon their experiences from intercultural positions to give them the chance to unpack, identify and build on their international learning.

6. Organisation of learning

In the delivery of pre-study abroad learning content, many courses are lecture-based in which knowledge is presented to students by a teacher. This prevents an interactive engagement with learning content, which affords opportunities for students to experience content rather than ingest it (Jackson, 2012). Courses should 'capitalise' on student excitement about studying abroad with many opportunities for them to share ideas, ask questions, and engage with the content (Hockersmith & Newfields, 2016, p. 9).

Developing openness to intercultural aspects of pre-departure courses through interactive learning content is an important goal. Facilitating processes of post-learning information exchange and self-reflection may support this (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012). Training should, therefore, provide space for this expression. At all stages of a course, students should be encouraged to reflect on learning content in terms of what it means to them and what it may mean to their experiences. This may help students connect content with their study abroad goals.

Utilising task-based approaches to give students the opportunity to actively engage with learning content through e-learning represents an important learning opportunity. The abundance of available online resources increases the potential for e-learning to help develop meaningful learning through topics relevant to study abroad students. This may take place through the Moodle online learning platform. Sojo University students become familiar with Moodle through its extensive and creative use in the SILC curriculum to support class and independent work. E-learning also provides a platform for meaningful reflection following such engagement with content.

This form of independent learning enables students to work through content at their own pace, affording differentiation to support students working at different proficiency levels. Given the complexity of these learning processes, and the complexity of intercultural learning content, students need to be oriented with learning training. There should be extensive scaffolding and content should be accessible, allowing progress to be made at different speeds depending on individual students.

From an organisational perspective, an independent and e-learning course such as this provides flexibility. It addresses the challenge of delivering learning content to students taking part in

different study programmes at different points in the academic year. It means that the course can be taken by students on all academic courses and in all academic years, avoiding any scheduling obstacle.

7. Intercultural themes

The intercultural learning in such training may introduce complex conceptualisations of culture, moving away from cultural associations defined by nationality, and to support more effective intercultural communication in English through the development of the perspective of English as a global language used in diverse ways, beyond its sole association with native-speaker use.

Culture is commonly conceived in language learning through a simplistic cultural view involving the unproblematic handling of cultural knowledge, typically by covering an 'arbitrary array' of facts, customs and traditions (Horibe, 2008, p. 246). Incorporating some recognition of cultural variation in learning may be interesting but it is often the case that this is represented as geographic, temporal and as an 'idealised version of national culture', (Liddicoat, 2007, p. 20.1). In this way, culture is understood as belonging to, and shared by, people in distinct groups in fixed and homogenous constructions, in which cultural meanings are essentialised as learnable knowledge. This is problematic for intercultural interactions since learning in this way does not accommodate variation in individual meaning or perspective.

It is reductionistic to essentialise national traits and cultural characteristics, that is, 'the comparison of differences between one native and one foreign culture seen as stable spaces on the map and permanent in time (Kramersch, 2001). For English language learning, this means developing a view of English beyond connections to the culture of traditional English-dominant countries (Baker, 2009). It is more realistic to adopt an intercultural

approach in which communication is not seen as taking place within stable and homogenous national cultures. Instead, it is based on the recognition that it takes place within a framework of individuals of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and influences, who use language in different ways to express, mediate and interpret culture, in the exchange and co-construction of meaning (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009).

8. A case example

Intercultural themes have been drawn on in the development of an e-learning study abroad preparation course for Sojo University students. The course is designed to help students develop skills through task-based independent learning supported by discussion and reflection opportunities. It is available for students on all academic courses, in all academic years, taking part in various international programmes with different departure dates. This flexibility is a strength of this course; students can engage with tasks at times convenient to them, enabling content provision to be consistent across different trips. The course aims to develop intercultural understanding, promote independent learning and self-awareness, and to expand on learning processes post-study abroad. The teacher-support and group sessions are arranged at convenient times to accommodate different student schedules. The course is of particular use in its demonstration of how complex and relevant themes can be translated in practical ways into meaningful and effective learning. Two versions of the e-learning course are available, with one providing additional scaffolding.

The course comprises eight topics:

- Researching Study Abroad
- Defining Culture
- Intercultural Communication
- Cultural Stereotypes

- The Individual and Culture
- Exploring My Own Culture
- English as a Global Language
- Intercultural Awareness

The eight units are presented through interactive content on Moodle with individual tasks providing the foundation for learning. The content includes video and audio clips, links to web content, graphic illustrations, and various textual items. The Moodle tasks may take up to 90 minutes to complete. Following content, students take a mini-quiz based on the completed learning unit to enable the teacher to check understanding. This leads to discussion board tasks, self-reflective writing tasks, and SALC speaking tasks. Within these topics, students are required to consider content in relation to their own perspectives, and to reflect on content in terms of what it means for their study abroad expectations, and later experiences.

The independent learning is supported through one-to-one tutorials, extensive feedback, and availability of teachers through office visits and email. There are also teacher-fronted group discussion classes in which content from the learning units is revisited. The teacher-fronted classes at the post-sojourn stage are designed to help students unpack their experiences through reflective processes. This leads to post-sojourn poster-making with teacher support and poster presentation sessions, displayed in the SILC's Event Hall space, at which all SILC students are invited to attend. This is likely to be of particular interest to prospective study abroad students. It is also proposed to replace the current post-sojourn feedback sessions in which it may be difficult for these students to interact with alumni. Furthermore, the experiences recounted in those presentations tend to offer little more than explanations of factual information and basic level cultural observations, rather than representations of a deeper intercultural experiences from a sojourn.

9. Conclusion

I have attempted to provide a realistic contextualisation of short-term programmes through a critical presentation of assumptions that sojourns automatically lead to positive developmental experiences. I argue that it is not guaranteed students will develop intercultural or personally from an exchange. Therefore, it is necessary to find ways to help students have successful experiences abroad through appropriate support, evaluation, and reflection (Baker, 2017).

The course I have presented here pulls together intercultural themes relating to study abroad, to help students reflect on their own cultural perspectives as well as to develop skills for intercultural communication. It aims to help them go deeper in their reflections than representations of simplistic cultural understandings. While there may be use and interest in looking at this type of content in the pre-sojourn period, it may be problematic for intercultural communication since individuals become seen as representatives of their nationalities, and individual differences among people encountered abroad may not be seen.

Further, many study abroad programmes are multilingual and multicultural contexts in which students interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Learning about every aspect of these varied cultures, even at the national level, is not realistic since it cannot be predicted with which nationalities the intercultural communication will take place. Challenging learners with content relating to these complex issues is highly relevant for study abroad students. Including the content described here through which independent and reflective learning skills can be developed, with teacher support, is likely to enhance the learning and developmental potential of the short-term study abroad programmes offered at Sojo.

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