



# Improving the Effectiveness of Short-Term Overseas Study Programmes

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# Improving the Effectiveness of Short-Term Overseas Study Programmes

Alan Jackson

## 1. Introduction

Short-term study abroad programmes for the purpose of studying English and experiencing life in an English-speaking culture are now widely offered by schools, colleges and universities in Japan and are popular with students and their parents. To quote Blanche's (2002) survey of the higher education sector:

“from Hokkaido to Okinawa, studying abroad has long been an important component of English education. At least 350 out of 600 or so Japanese institutions of higher learning send young people to Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, or the United States on a regular basis in February-March or July-August. A significant number of high schools, language schools, and travel agencies do likewise. All of this involves an estimated student population of well over 10,000 each year. Yet few Japanese seem to know what to look for when trying to assess the quality of a short study-abroad program, and even fewer seem to have any idea how much it should cost.”

While this paper will make no attempt to explore the financial aspects of such programmes, it will try to investigate what the word “programme quality” might entail, and will then proceed to offer suggestions as to how programme “value” might be enhanced. Specifically, it will address the following questions:

- # What is known about the benefits of short-term English study abroad programmes?
- # What programme elements appear to add value?
- # What kind of programme preparation and follow-up might be useful?
- # What insights can the literature of “experiential learning” offer?
- # How can study abroad be successfully integrated into the year-round English curriculum?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Benefits of Short-Term Study Abroad Programs**

Short-term study abroad programmes are generally viewed as valuable in that they provide opportunities for informal learning of the type unobtainable in the classroom. However, not all such programmes are equally effective and Ellis (1994) rightly warns that it is not only the quantity but the quality of informal contact that affects language acquisition. Moreover, what constitutes an appropriate programme may differ with the proficiency level of the learners.

Articles by Freed (1995) and Coleman (1997) have summarized the effects of short-term study abroad, as follows:

1. There is generally little change in the accuracy and complexity of learner language production.
2. There can be significant gains in fluency and overall oral proficiency, with lesser gains on tests of grammar, vocabulary, listening and reading.
3. Gains in test scores tend to occur at the lower end of the proficiency scale.

4. Pre-/post-programme variation in learner test scores exhibit a great deal of individual variation.

The existence of wide individual variation in score gains suggests that the key determinant of success on study abroad programmes is likely to be the attitude/motivation/personality of the individual learner, though there is little more than anecdotal evidence to substantiate this. What has been confirmed, however, is that such programmes do succeed in generating enduring benefits in terms of affective factors. Geis and Fukushima (1997), for example, found that junior college students who participated in a 6-week course in the US came back to Japan with increased motivation and a greater willingness, and therefore ability, to speak freely in English class. It seemed that participants not only got a sense of achievement from accomplishing real-life communication tasks in English, but also gained both an appreciation of their weaknesses in authentic communicative situations and the determination to overcome them.

The study conducted by Tanaka and Ellis (2003) proceeded from a recognition of the potential effects of beliefs about language learning on learning outcomes, and sought to measure how the experience of learning a language in a different environment, i. e. in a native-speaker environment, affected attitude and motivation. Their hypothesis was that “the relationship between beliefs, behaviours, and learning outcomes (was) an interactive and dynamic one” and that learning in a new environment abroad would “lead to learners modifying their existing beliefs or forming new ones.” Specifically, they were interested in two kinds of learner belief: belief about the self as language learner and belief about appropriate learning/teaching methods, analytic or experiential. Their

study of Japanese university students spending 15 weeks in the US used beliefs questionnaires comprising statements corresponding to three factors: experiential, analytic and self-efficacy/confidence, plus TOEFL tests. Their results showed that, indeed, there were significant changes in students' beliefs about language learning; students completing the programme found themselves able to speak English without getting nervous (= were more confident), felt it less necessary to worry about mistakes, and were satisfied they were making progress. Interestingly, beliefs about the value of both experiential and analytical learning strengthened - a finding that confirmed the Geis and Fukushima (1997) study. Again, it seems that students were both encouraged by their experience of communicative success in informal settings and also apprised of the need for greater accuracy in their production by witnessing confusion caused by error.

As for proficiency changes, their results showed an average TOEFL gain of only 18 points, from 427 to 445, which was probably attributable to the nature of the programme; the group was homogeneous, talked a good deal of Japanese outside class and did not have homestay. As the authors also mention, even when positive change in learner beliefs is effected by a programme, it may still be difficult to obtain measurable proficiency gains in short programmes as the changes may not translate into changed learning behaviour and strategies very soon. (Regarding proficiency gains on short study-abroad programmes, Swinton (1983) investigated a group of students in a better situation and reported gains of 50 points over 15 weeks. More informally, this author's survey of university EFL students engaged in foundation or pre-session courses suggests that a gain of 10 to 15 points per month, similar to that found by Swinton is achievable by students who have homestay and

enrol in multilingual classes, though a proportionate gain is hard to capture in more common, but shorter, 4-week homestay programmes.)

Another study of outcomes of a 3-week overseas study programme conducted by Naruto University of Education (Itou 2003) seems to confirm the findings of Tanaka and Ellis. Comparing pre- and post- self-evaluations of English ability, students reported both increased English proficiency and considerable attitudinal gains; participants became less concerned about spoken errors, no longer felt so puzzled when addressed in English, and generally gained in confidence.

Research carried out by Bodycott and Crew (2000) into the results of a 6-week immersion programme for 2<sup>nd</sup>-year Hong Kong TESL students in the UK prompted the following conclusion:

“Though it’s hard to measure language proficiency gains from short-term overseas study programmes, the gains do exist, are long-term and include enhanced personal skills and attitudes.”

They were at pains to stress the value of homestay and that the long-term attitude change effected by such programmes can be profound and enduring. The students who participated in the programme claimed increased confidence, a change in attitude towards taking risks and a diminution in their tendency to worry excessively about making mistakes. They concluded that the value of overseas programmes lay not so much in immediate language gains but in improvements in self-confidence, self-esteem, life-long learning skills, motivation and enthusiasm.

## **2.2 Programme Components: Beneficial and Otherwise**

If we look in detail at what makes for successful short-term overseas study programmes, we find the following:

2.2.1 Beneficial elements, as reported by Drake (1997), Blanche (2002) and Itou (2003), appear to include the following:

1. Integration of students into the L2 university community and/or multilingual class community to prevent participants retreating into isolated groups communicating largely in L1.
2. Involvement in real world language-use tasks such as interviews, telephone conversations, community-based project work etc. with native-speakers in the university or local area.
3. Formal classwork closely related to out-of-class activities.
4. Single homestay or, sometimes even better, homestay with students of different nationalities, and preferably in a family setting rather than with a single person.
5. Alternatively, shared dorm room or student flats with native speakers and/or different nationality students.
6. Use of native-speaker conversation partners and residential assistants who organize activities with English speakers, or at least non-Japanese students, of the same age.
7. Study tour groups limited to no more than 17 to 20 participants, assigned to classes according to ability, and without “chaperones”, who tend to encourage dependence and Japanese-language use, in close attendance.
8. Thorough pre-course preparation before students go abroad.
9. Clear well-defined study focus and objectives, not a collection of unrelated activities.

In addition, Pilcher (2004) makes the following specific suggestions to enhance communication with Japanese students and improve their classroom performance:

10. It may be useful to introduce a mentoring scheme as teachers in Japan generally get to know their students individually and a good deal of emphasis is placed upon this relationship. Such a scheme would allow teachers to speak to students individually outside class to get to know them, and allow students to really express their ideas and opinions about classes and other aspects of the programme. Alternatively, diaries or journals can be used to provide for such personal communication.
11. Roleplay and drama activities may be very useful in helping to improve confidence and overcome shyness in speaking English.

2.2.2 Unproductive programme components, as reported by Itou (2003), Bodycott and Crew (2000) and Blanche (2002), include the following:

1. Students should not be overburdened with activities, excursions or homework as they need time both to relax and seek out opportunities for informal language use.
2. If possible, homestay should be provided throughout the programme as switching from dormitory to homestay adds to the difficulty of socializing into one environment and thereby reaping the benefits from it.

2.2.3 An aspect of overseas study programmes not yet addressed in the literature is whether or not there is a proficiency level below which homestay programmes lose their effectiveness. Failure to get something out of study abroad because of inability to communicate with the host family may be very dispiriting for participants. An informal survey of



programme follow-up questionnaires (conducted by the present author) gave the following results, which are certainly suggestive:

Number of study tours: 3 (Adelaide 2002, Perth 2002, Delaware 2003) /

Total participants: 50

	Highest 1/3 of students (according to grade awarded for programme performance)	Lowest 1/3 of students (according to grade awarded for programme performance)
Overall satisfaction with study tour (-2 ~ +2)	1.61	1.29
Satisfaction with homestay (-2 ~ +2)	1.61	1.47

## 2.3 Programme Preparation and Follow-Up

Students returning from summer programmes abroad frequently mention aspects of pre-departure preparation that, in hindsight, appear to stand in need of improvement. Similarly, teachers who have accompanied study groups abroad often feel that the positive energy generated towards foreign language and cross-cultural study by such programmes tends to be dissipated in the absence of any follow-up. In the following two sections, these aspects of study abroad programmes are discussed in turn.

### 2.3.1 Preparation:

Bodycott and Crew (2000) view preparation as important mostly to lower anxiety and enhance coping skills. In the group described in their study most anxiety seemed to concern homestay, though there were also worries about travel, racial discrimination, climate, and food/eating habits. They feel that this anxiety could be reduced by the provision of

clear honest information about what to expect when abroad alongside repeated encouragement for participants to be open to foreign cultures and new ways of thinking, and be positive about cross-cultural encounters. They also suggest that participants be encouraged to be communicative, about all manner of things but especially problems, with teachers, homestay families and fellow group members.

Geis and Fukushima (1997) suggest a whole programme of orientation sessions and individual meetings to allay student concerns, practical workshops about visas, accommodation, travel and safety, and roleplay practice of interactions in likely communicative situations. For students enrolling in multinational classes, they feel some advice on and practical training in classroom language, turn taking strategies and expressing/responding to opinions might be useful.

Pilcher (2003) considers a different aspect of study tour preparation, that of helping the receiving teachers become more aware of the particular needs of Japanese students. He suggests having teaching staff or others with experience of Japan teach colleagues about differences in learning cultures, expectations with regard to class dynamics, and common Japanese-speaker errors. (On the other hand, others have pointed out that such awareness-raising for teachers of Japanese students may only serve to reinforce stereotypes. There is a lot to be said for teachers getting on with their teaching as they normally would and requiring students to confront any resultant culture shock in the classroom as best they can.)

### 2.3.2 Follow-up

I have found no references in the literature regarding study-abroad

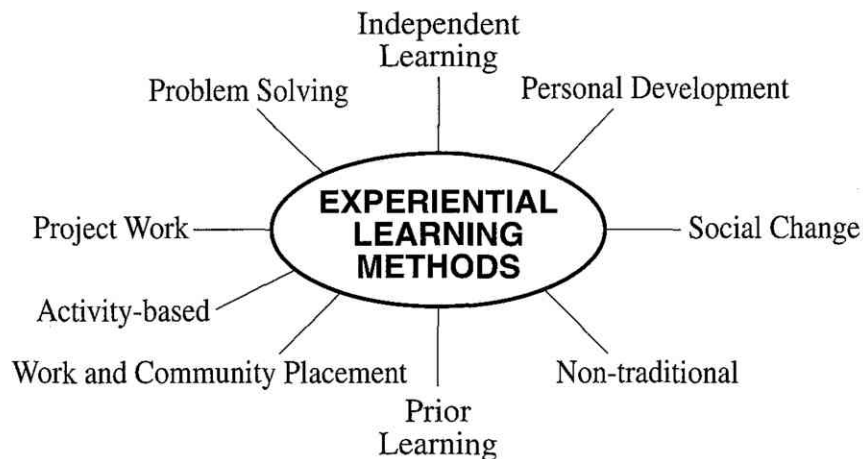
programme follow-up, other than attempts to smooth the returnee cultural adjustment process, which is clearly only relevant for those spending a considerable period overseas. Surely, however, there is potential to leverage the gains derived from overseas experience into something more significant and enduring by providing follow-up activity on return to Japan. Such activity/instruction should perhaps be provided fairly soon after return so as to “strike while the iron’s hot” and take full advantage of the group energy generated by spending time together overseas. The return to Japan ought to trigger in the participants a process of reflection about themselves, their own and foreign cultures, and the process of language learning. In short, study abroad will have opened doors and follow-up activities can offer a chance to go through them and explore.

### **3. Experiential Learning and Development**

#### **3.1 A Rationale**

Short-term immersion programmes abroad offer learners extensive hands-on experience of authentic language use and cross-cultural encounter. They fulfill the Confucian requirements for effective learning—“Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand.” In short, they afford learners a substantial opportunity to benefit from “experiential learning”.

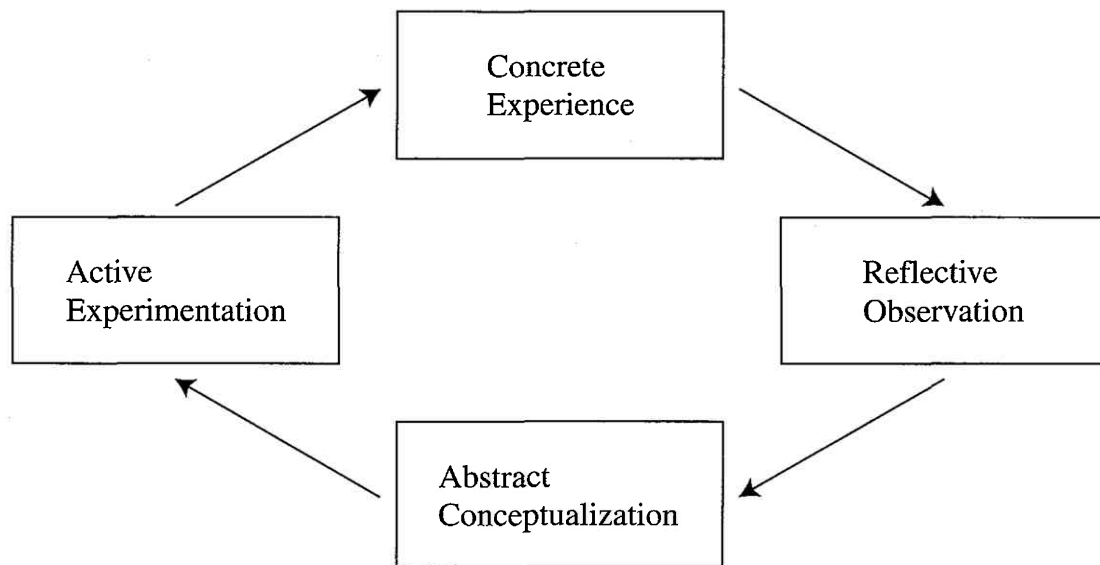
A broad range of educational activities can be viewed as falling under the rubric “experiential learning”, as this chart from Henry (1989) illustrates:



What these activities share is a process by which the experience of the learner is reflected upon and from which new insights emerge. Kolb (1971) developed the most established model of experiential learning as a process that begins with an experience, is followed by reflection, and then assimilated into a theory that can be tested in new situations. The model is a recurring cycle within which the learner tests and modifies new concepts. The assumption is that we seldom learn from experience unless we assess the experience, assigning our own meaning in terms of our own goals, aims, ambitions and expectations. From these processes come the insights, the discoveries, and understanding. In the words of Wight (1970), "All this is then conceptualized, synthesized and integrated into the individual's system of constructs which he imposes on the world, through which he views, perceives, categorizes, evaluates and seeks experience." Alinsky (1972) expresses much the same point in discussing the way many people react to life as "a series of happenings which pass through their systems undigested." He concludes that "happenings become experiences when they are digested, when they are reflected on, related to general patterns, and synthesized."

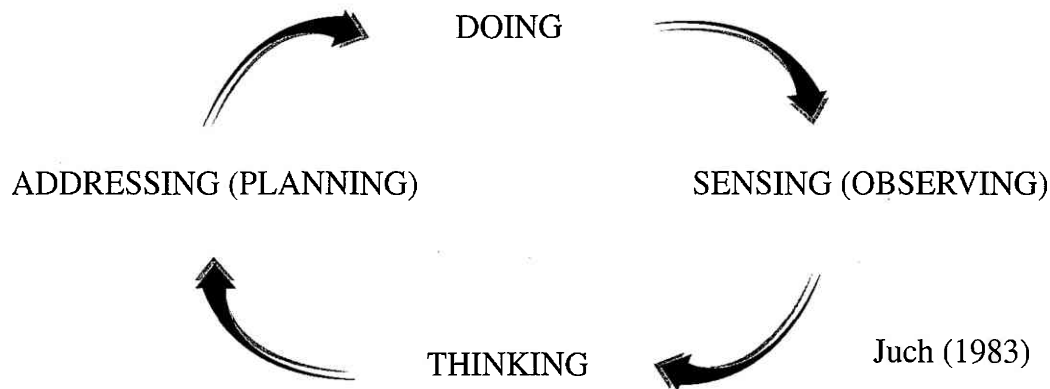
Based on earlier work by the German psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), the Experiential Learning Cycle of Kolb (1984) provides

one of the most useful descriptive models of the adult learning process available.



As the diagram shows, a **Concrete Experience** is followed by **Reflection** on that experience on a personal basis. This may then be followed by the derivation of general rules describing the experience, or the application of known theories to it (**Abstract Conceptualisation**), and hence to the construction of ways of modifying the next occurrence of the experience (**Active Experimentation**), leading in turn to the next **Concrete Experience**. All this may happen in a flash, or over a lengthy period of time, and there may be a “wheels within wheels” process going on at the same time. The important thing is to organise teaching so that each stage of the process is given full value. In some cases this may mean the tutor having to guide the learner round the cycle, asking questions which encourage reflection, conceptualisation and ways of testing ideas.

Juch (1983) provides a comprehensive review of similar 4-stage ‘learning process cycles’ linked to various learning theories, which he has synthesized into the following model:



The four quadrants of the Kolb and Juch models correspond well to fundamental distinctions made by Hudson (1967) - convergent and divergent knowledge - and Piaget - assimilation and accommodation. In terms of style of thinking, convergent knowledge applies facts and principles to a single clearly defined problem to produce a “right” answer. Such thinking is located in the SW quadrant between Abstract Conceptualisation and Active Experimentation. Divergent knowledge on the other hand, is more about creativity and the generation of a number of accounts of experience, such as in literature or history or art. It is generated between Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation in the NE quadrant. Assimilation (or, in more everyday terms, Description) involves fitting particular instances into general categories, and is located in the SE quadrant. Accommodation (or Prescription) is about working from the general principle to the particular application, in the sense of a concern for what you ought to or must do, and takes place in the NW quadrant.

### 3.2 An Experiential Learning Cycle for Study Abroad

The top “macro” level of the “wheels within wheels” structure of a learning cycle can be viewed as comprising three stages: Pre-departure preparation (corresponding to Planning), the study tour itself (Doing and Sensing), and follow-up activities (Sensing and Thinking). In each of

these stages the same areas of knowledge/skill can be addressed to create a coherent and coordinated course of study that maximizes the learning value of the cycle. The following chart presents a “scheme of work” that addresses six areas of content through the three stages of a study abroad programme.

	<b>Practical &amp; cultural info. about travel and destination</b>	<b>Handling cross-cultural contact</b>	<b>Views of self, one's own country</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Language learning</b>	<b>Personal challenge</b>
<b>Preparation</b>	History, Geography, Local area, Customs, Interactions, Home life, Health and safety	Potential problems, Culture shock, Right attitude, Practical strategies, Clear file activities	Images of Japan, Is Japan international?, What does it mean to be Japanese?	In key situations, Language to assist study and interaction	Learning styles, Attitude to experimentation and error	Generate goals, Questions to be answered
<b>Study Tour</b>	Homestay, classwork, extracurricular activities, journal, project, free time					
<b>Follow-up</b>	What did you discover? What was interesting? What surprised you?	What were the pluses and minuses for you? Did you have any problems? How did you handle them?	How have your views changed? What did you discover about yourself and your country?	Could you communicate? Why/why not? Did you find any useful strategies?	Did you make progress? Has your thinking about learning changed?	Did you achieve your goals? Why/why not?

### 3.3 A Syllabus Proposal

A practical way of realizing such a scheme of work within the constraints of a typical junior college/university curriculum might be to offer a once-a-week “Study Abroad” class within the institution-wide General Education or Language Education programme. Such a class might have the following syllabus:

3.3.1 1<sup>st</sup> semester/1 credit/Study Abroad: Preparation for Summer Overseas Study Tour (or 2<sup>nd</sup> semester/1 credit/Study Abroad: Preparation for Spring Overseas Study Tour)

Lesson	1 <sup>st</sup> half	2 <sup>nd</sup> half	Incidental
1	Introduction	Guided reading intro.	Exchange of information and advice, making contacts, etc.
2	Situational dialogue A	Clear file activity A	
3	Situational dialogue B	Clear file activity B	
4	Guided reading feedback I: Student presentations		
5	Situational dialogue C	Language learning and attitude: taking advantage of informal learning opportunities	
6	Situational dialogue D	Clear file activity C	
7	Guided reading feedback II: Student presentations		
8	Situational dialogue E	Clear file activity D	
9	Situational dialogue F	Cross-cultural contact: Culture shock	
10	Practical matters: with previous participants (travel, health, safety, money, dealing with problems, etc)		
11	Situational dialogue G	Cross-cultural contact: Relations with Japan, views of Japan and other country	"
12	Situational dialogue H	Cross-cultural contact: Communication problems	
13	Homestay guidance: with previous participants (attitude, rules, clear file, human relations, etc.)		
14	Setting personal goals	Review and final advice	"

Notes:

- i) Guided reading outside class can be on areas such as history, geography, religion, politics, economy etc. with student presentations in class feedback sessions.
- ii) Situational dialogues with associated cultural background might include:
  - A. Meeting, greeting and leave-taking
  - B. Food and restaurants
  - C. Helping in the house
  - D. When in trouble



E. Shopping and money

F. Classroom language

G. Public transport

H. Tourist information, directions

- iii) Setting personal goals - each student should think about and set personal objectives for the programme and make a public record of their goals.
- iv) Clear file activities - A very practical suggestion to enhance the homestay experience is provided by Roth (1997), who has study tour participants prepare a clear file of resources/information before departure to help homestay conversations go smoothly. Students fill a 20-page A4 clear file with information about the student/Japan on the top half of each page leaving space for information about the host family/host country at the bottom. Study tour participants can work together to produce this material during the preparation course. If homestay families are aware that students have prepared such a file, the pages can be used as scaffolding for conversations making homestay interactions more productive and enjoyable. Suggested topics for such a file are listed in the following table:

A family tree with family information	A brief guide to the student's city with visitor information
A floor plan of the student's house and a map of the local area	Information about hobbies and interests
Menus and recipes from the home country	Maps and brochures of the area around the student's hometown
A chart of the student's school calendar and daily schedule	A dictionary of Japanese things
Information about the student's school with pictures	A "how-to" of various Japanese activities and customs.
Results of a 50-item questionnaire giving a profile of Japanese students' likes, dislikes, experiences etc.	A collection of "orikomi koukoku" (ads inserted in newspapers) showing food, gifts etc. with prices

3.3.2 2<sup>nd</sup> semester/1 credit/Study Abroad: Summer Overseas Study Tour Follow-up (or 1<sup>st</sup> semester/1 credit/Study Abroad: Spring Overseas Study Tour Follow-up)

Lesson	Activity
1	Open feedback session based on evaluation questionnaires
2	DEEC A - Travel
3	DEEC B - Homestay
4	Personal goals                  Essay preparation
5	DEEC C - A place you visited
6	DEEC D - College and classroom
7	Reflections on Language and Language Learning Essay preparation
8	DEEC E - A person you met
9	DEEC F - Local customs
10, 11	Reflections on cultural differences, Japan and the Japanese, Term paper preparation
12	DEEC G - Food and shopping
13	DEEC H - TV and media
14	The future: What next?

Note :

DEEC refers to guided discussion based on short student presentations with the following structure :

- \* Describing (What happened?    What was it like?)
- \* Explaining (Why did it happen?    Why was it like that?)
- \* Evaluating (Was it good, positive, interesting, worthwhile?)
- \* and Concluding (So, what did I learn from that?)

## 4. Conclusion

This paper has summarized what is known about both beneficial and less-beneficial aspects of short-term study abroad programmes in an attempt to suggest how such programmes might usefully be improved. It has also viewed study abroad as a valuable opportunity for “experiential learning” through extensive hands-on authentic language use and cross-cultural encounter. In keeping with our, by now, well-established understanding of what enhances the productivity of experiential learning cycles, the paper concludes with the elaboration of a year-long syllabus comprising preparation for study abroad, the study abroad experience itself, and a programme of follow-up activities. It is hoped that the activities suggested will contribute to the improvement of future study abroad programmes.

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