

Evaluating the Benefits of Short-term Study Abroad Experiences: Students' Journals & Questionnaires

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日本の大学の多くには海外大学との提携関係があり、それには交換留学プログラム、研究交流、夏季集中語学プログラムが含まれる。日本の「グローバル化」への対応のひとつとして多くの大学がこれらの推進に取り組んできた。しかしほとんどの努力は、大学間の提携関係に集中し、プログラムの生産性、学生に有益であるか否かはしばしば看過されがちである¹。実際、これら提供するプログラムの有効性を評価することで、基準を決定することは困難であろう。本論文の研究は、2015年夏に静岡文化芸術大学による提供で行われた2つの夏期集中英語プログラムの有効性を評価するため、3つの評価基準を使用した。出発前のアンケート、日々を振り返る日誌²、帰国後のアンケートである。結果として、2つのプログラムの効果の間に有意な差は見られなかった。どちらに参加した学生も自らの海外経験を有意義と考えていることが示された。

Many, if not most, universities in Japan have partner relationships such as study abroad programs, research exchanges and summer intensive language programs with universities overseas. However, oftentimes little effort is devoted to determining if these relationships and programs are productive and benefit students. The research in this paper uses three assessment measures, pre-departure questionnaires, reflective journals and post-return questionnaires, to attempt to gauge the effectiveness of two summer intensive English programs on offer by Shizuoka University of Art and Culture in the summer of 2015. Results indicated that participating students enjoyed their experience abroad and there was not a significant difference between the two programs.

1.1 Introduction

Shizuoka University of Art and Culture's (hereinafter "SUAC") relatively small size and lack of national name recognition make it something of a challenge to attract an ever-shrinking number of potential students. Like many universities in Japan, SUAC attempts to interest potential students by featuring short-term intensive and study abroad opportunities at overseas partner universities in marketing materials. This is part of an implicit strategy to promote itself as a provincial university strong in foreign languages, especially English and Chinese. However, the question arises: How effective and useful are these short-term intensive and study abroad programs? The purpose of the research outlined in this paper is to determine how beneficial to students the two intensive English language programs on offer in the summer of 2015 actually were.

1.2 Background

Anecdotal reports suggest that previous study abroad programs that SUAC students have been involved with have been largely enjoyable. However, the researchers have long wondered

if they have been valuable in terms of actual language improvements.

For various reasons, the programs at SUAC's overseas partner universities have become less popular with students. SUAC is therefore working to forge new relationships and offer summer (and spring) intensive English programs as a way to offer students a greater quality and variety of both short and long-term study abroad options.

An additional impetus for expanding official overseas options for students is that a new curriculum was established at SUAC in 2015. One aspect of this is that students are now able to earn up to two graduation credits for short-term study abroad. This has had the intended result; an increase in student interest in short-term intensive language and study abroad programs.

Nine students from the Department of International Culture chose to participate in the short-term intensive English programs on offer in the summer of 2015. Seven of the nine students agreed to assist with this research project. Six of them studied in England at the University of Gloucestershire and one in Canada at the

University of Victoria. Both programs were almost indistinguishable in terms of length, contact hours, and teaching methodology. Because of the limited number of participants, and the fact that only one of the participants in this study went to Canada, the findings in this paper should be seen as illustrative rather than definitive.

1.3 Aims & Research Questions

Among the research questions that this study will attempt to answer are the following:

To what extent do students feel that they benefit from the study abroad programs?

What areas do they perceive the largest improvements to be in?

How do students' pre-conceptions compare with their retrospective comments?

It is hoped that the methodology and results of this study will be of value to teachers and researchers who have the need or desire to assess the effectiveness of either short-term intensive language programs or study abroad programs.

1.4 Literature Review

The purpose of this Literature Review is to survey the most relevant studies on the value and benefits, or lack thereof, of studying abroad. It is also an attempt to survey any studies similar to this one and explain the methodology used. Finally, it is an attempt to establish a theoretical framework for evaluating short-term intensive language and study abroad programs.

Assessing Studying Abroad

Dwyer and Peters carried out a comprehensive survey of more than 3,400 former students who had studied abroad. Interestingly, they studied the long-term effects of studying abroad by surveying people who had studied abroad from 17 to 60 years ago.

The results were overwhelmingly positive, with 96% of all alumni surveyed saying that their study abroad experience had resulted in increased self-confidence, 86% stating that it reinforced their commitment to foreign language study, and 95% considered their experience to have had a lasting

impact on their world view.

Also, 80% said that studying abroad had enhanced their interest in academic study and 94% stated that the experience continues to influence their interactions with people from different cultures. Finally, 62% said that an interest in a career path that they followed after studying abroad had been ignited during their time aboard.

These results powerfully suggest studying abroad, in terms of personal development and positively influencing future life decisions, is a wise investment.

Perhaps more relevant for this study, Du (2013), suggested that, in terms of studying a foreign language abroad, one very important factor played a role in how much students benefited. In his study of students from the United States studying Chinese in China, he found that students who stuck to a pledge to only speak the L2 (Chinese in this case), even during social occasions, experienced significantly better improvements in their language ability and confidence. The possible reasons suggested for this are that students spent more time 'on task' practicing the L2, and that when students spoke their native language, it interfered with the development of their L2 proficiency.

Student Perceptions of Studying Abroad

Douglas, S. R. (2015) conducted a study involving Japanese business students studying in Canada for less than four weeks. He collected qualitative data from students in pre, mid, and post-study abroad essays and questionnaires.

The results showed that students desired interaction with the local English-speakers above all else, but that they were disappointed with the amount of interactions that actually took place during their stay. Years of anecdotal reports from students concur that this is a frequent complaint of Japanese studying abroad.

Other interesting aspects of the data collected, were that students seemed to want to learn educational content that they could not learn in Japan. In students' comments, more emphasis was put on this than on learning language. However, the ambiguity of the term "educational content" make it unclear what exactly is meant by

this.

Finally, in their post-study abroad comments, students expressed disappointment in the lack of organized activities. This was particularly poignant because they had been studying at an out-of-town campus. Again, in the experience of the researchers, this is a common criticism upon return from studying overseas.

Journals

One important aspect of the research described in this paper is the use of reflective journals by students during their time abroad. It was hoped that the reflective journals would foster autonomy, enable students to analyze their learning and overall experience in a new language and cultural environment and allow them to notice and reflect upon their communication successes and failures. Beveridge (1997) describes the use of reflective journals as a way of “encouraging students to think more deeply and teachers to listen more effectively.” It was also hoped that the journals would give the researchers some insight into any extraneous factors, both positive and negative, of both programs. As noted by Spiker (2014) in referencing Hubbs & Brand, “When a student puts a thought or belief in writing they are encouraged to think deeply about this thought or belief and revisit it and possibly challenge it” (Hubbs & Brand, 2010).

Hubbs & Brand (2010) also note “journals for student reflection enhance critical thinking skills and encourage students to achieve a deeper level of understanding of content and context for learning.” One important goal of the reflective journals was to encourage students to reflect on all the new experiences they were having.

Fink (2003) suggests that reflective journal writing, “focuses on the writer’s learning experience itself and attempts to identify the significance and meaning of a given learning experience.” It was also expected that reflective journals would give the researchers a sense of, not only the learning experiences, but also the daily triumphs and struggles students were experiencing in a new environment.

2.1 Methodology

As noted above, three different instruments were used to analyze students perceptions of the

benefits of the two programs in terms of language skills, motivation, confidence, and enjoyment. The first was a pre-departure survey (Appendix 1), which asked students a number of questions about their preparation, goals and expectations for their classes, accommodation and cultural events. A variety of question types were used, including Likert scale-type questions. They were also asked what area of their language ability they expected to improve in the most while abroad, if they thought they may experience any culture shock or difficulties while overseas and what percent of the time they expected to use English.

After completing the pre-departure survey, students were given a notebook to use as a reflective journal while overseas. Students were asked to write in the journal everyday in English. Other than a request to write in English, no instruction or training was given to students on how to write in their journals nor was a word target set.

Finally, students completed a post-return survey (Appendix 2) upon return from their summer overseas. This survey asked students to reflect on their experience, noting if and how it differed from expectations. They were also asked if they were satisfied with the program, in which area they felt they improved the most, if they felt they achieved their goals and to estimate what percent of the time they used English. Finally, they were given an opportunity to share any particularly good or bad experiences they had.

2.2 Results

Surveys

In the pre-departure survey, three of the seven students stated that they had been overseas before. For the other four this summer program was to be their first time outside Japan. All students mentioned that an important goal was to improve their communication skills. A representative comment was a desire “*to enjoy talking in English.*” Another student commented that her goals included “*improving my English communication skill. I want to express my thinking more.*” In response to a Likert scale question about expectations, all students expected to be “somewhat satisfied” with the classroom instruction component of their experience.

Data from the pre-departure and post-return

Program Satisfaction												
	Pre-departure Expectations						Post-return Impression					
	Classroom Instruction	Accommodation	Cultural Events	Location	Amount of English Spoken	Safety	Classroom Instruction	Accommodation	Cultural Events	Location	Amount of English Spoken	Safety
Student 1 (England)	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied	Very satisfied	Very satisfied	Very satisfied	Very satisfied	Very satisfied +	Somewhat satisfied -	Very satisfied	Very satisfied	Very satisfied
Student 2 (England)	Somewhat satisfied	Will be exactly what I expect	Very satisfied	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat satisfied +	Somewhat satisfied -	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Exactly what I expected -
Student 3 (England)	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied -	Somewhat satisfied	Exactly what I expected - -	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Exactly what I expected - -
Student 4 (England)	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Exactly what I expected - -	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat satisfied -	Very satisfied +	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied +
Student 5 (England)	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very satisfied	Will be exactly what I expect	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied -	Somewhat satisfied +	Somewhat satisfied
Student 6 (England)	Will be exactly what I expect	Somewhat dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very satisfied +	Somewhat dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied +	Somewhat satisfied ++	Somewhat satisfied ++
Student 7 (Canada)	Will be exactly what I expect	Somewhat satisfied	Will be exactly what I expect	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied	Very satisfied +	Very satisfied +	Very satisfied ++	Very satisfied	Exactly what I expected -	Very satisfied

Table 1

surveys has been organized in a Program Satisfaction chart (Table 1). This chart visually represents student responses to both surveys. Responses on the post-return survey were coded with a + mark where the response was one category more positive than on the pre-departure survey and a - when the response was one category more negative.

Four of the seven students, including the student in Canada, were very satisfied with the classroom instruction and two found it to be much more satisfying than they expected. One student found the classroom instruction much less satisfying than she expected. Three students described their classes as "somewhat difficult," two as "very difficult" and two as "just right." The student in Canada noted that she was "surprised at the many Japanese" in her school. She also estimated that she spoke English only 40% of the time in Canada. The average response to the same question of the six students studying in England was 58%.

Four of the students in England, who expected to be very satisfied, found the cultural events on offer to be less impressive than expected. Most of the students in England expected to be very satisfied with the location and only one was mildly disappointed. Regarding the amount of English spoken, students in England found that

their expectations were generally met and two of them felt they actually spoke more English than they had expected to. As noted above, the student who went to Canada seems to have been mildly disappointed at the amount of English she actually spoke while in Victoria. Regarding personal safety, a perennial concern for Japanese studying abroad, two of the students in England felt less safe than they expected. This was balanced by two others who felt that England was safer than they thought it would be.

While none of students who went to England mentioned it on their survey, in personal communications some said they were disappointed that there were so many other Japanese at their school, echoing the comment from the student who studied in Canada. In the experience of the researchers, this is another common grievance of Japanese university students. Most Japanese students want frequent opportunities to both meet locals and interact with students of English from other parts of the world. However, the Japanese academic year being out of sync with Europe and North America often results in late summer intensives with many other Japanese university students on the same schedule.

Comparison of pre and post survey data and any differences between the two programs would

undoubtedly be more illuminating if there were more subjects participating in this research. It is hoped that, in future iterations, more students will participate in both the intensive English programs and the research.

Journals

Student reflective journals produced a number of interesting comments such as the following from student one about a stressful situation she encountered. *"I went to go bus center. The clerk spoke English too fast for me, but I could buy. It was difficult to tell her which bus do I want to ride."* The entry is a reflection on a challenging, but ultimately successful interaction. A revealing pair of entries from student two displays both self-reflection in the form of goal setting and, finally, success.

Entry one: *"Tomorrow, I want to speak more English and say my opinion in English."*

Entry two: *"Recently, I could say my opinion positively than first. So I have a little confidence and enjoy taking class more."*

Student two also makes a revealing and perceptive comment about a cultural difference in the education system between Japan and England. *"In Japan, we tend to think that mistake answer is embarrassed for us. But here, people don't care of mistake. Moreover, people ask why is this correct answer or what's mean when they don't understand or mistake."*

Finally, student two turns the fact that her class has many other Japanese students into a source of motivation. *"My class is more many Japanese students than other class so I decided to speak only English when I enter my class."*

Similarly to student one, student three comments on the difficult and stressful time she had trying to buy a bus ticket at the station. *"A woman who works at bus information speaks too fast and difficult to catch, so it was hard."* In one of the last entries in her journal she reflects on her overall experience. *"I thought that I was glad to go to England. It's good experience for me."*

Student four also makes a comment about the irony of traveling halfway around the world only to be surrounded by many Japanese speakers and her motivation to speak only, or at least mostly, in English. *"I want to talk with people who came*

here with me, but most of them tend to talk in Japanese except (student five's name) so I think we have to try to talk in English as much as we can." An interesting British English colloquialism slips into the journal of student four when she notes in one entry that, *"I wanted to sleep more so I had a lie in."* It is unlikely that this student was aware of the expression "have a lie in" before her trip to England.

One journal entry from student five evinces some frustration at the short length of her stay and recognition that one month is, realistically, not long enough to make the type of improvement she would like to. *"My English doesn't change before I came here. I want to stay here a long time."* This is an important recognition, as some seem to think that, just by virtue of going to an English speaking country for a short period of time, their English will dramatically improve.

Student five perhaps wrote the most insightful and reflective journal entries. She happened to be moved from class to class multiple times during her first week and mentioned her frustration with this in her journal. However, things soon change and just a little over a week into her stay, she writes about her satisfaction with the entire program in the following entry. *"I really love this town. And classes are also great. I like the time schedule. I'm very satisfied in this life."* As the program nears its end, she writes about the importance of taking advantage of the remaining opportunities. *"After today's class, I visited my teacher and asked some question. This was good for me. I have to talk to my teacher more before our trip finish."* Finally, her last entry again reflects her overall satisfaction. *"This four weeks were very important for me. The reasons are English, environment and friends. First, classes and teachers were really good."* Perhaps unsurprisingly, both researchers concurred that student five showed perhaps the most improvement upon her return.

Student six reflected on her goals for her trip and her frustration with an experience in one lesson. *"I came there to change my shy character. I tried saying my opinion but I mistook theme's meaning. So I can't discuss with my partner smoothly. I want to improve my English but I don't know what to do."* One of her last entries makes clear what she thinks of her English and her desires. *"My English doesn't change before I came here. I want to stay here a long time."*

Unfortunately, student seven, who studied in Canada, wrote very few entries making it very hard to rely on the reflective journal as a source of revealing data about her experience. One reflection of hers did refer to what she described as cultural differences. *"I saw homeless people collecting money and some people playing the musical instrument. I thought this is one of the Canadian culture."*

The post-return survey showed a very slight discrepancy between student estimates of the amount of time they expected to use English and the percentage of time they actually did use English overseas. The six students studying in England expected to use English 64% of the time. Upon their return, they estimated that they actually used English 58% of the time. The one student who went to Canada expected to use English 50% of the time and estimated that, as was noted above, she actually used English 40% of the time (Table 2).

Percent of Time Using English While Overseas		
	Pre-departure Estimate	Post-return Estimate
Student 1 (England)	50	80
Student 2 (England)	60	35
Student 3 (England)	80	70
Student 4 (England)	85	55
Student 5 (England)	80	55
Student 6 (England)	30	50
England Average Score	64	58
Student 7 (Canada)	50	40

Table 2

2.3 Discussion

The small number of students participating in this research and particularly the fact that only one student who went to Canada participated, limits the researchers' ability to make any definitive statements about the greater effectiveness of one summer intensive English program over another. Even so, the data collected does allow the researchers to state with confidence that all students did have a generally positive experience abroad.

By at least one measure the student in Canada seem to have had a marginally better experience overall. As can be seen on the Program Satisfaction chart (Table 1), she answered she was "very satisfied" on five of the sections on her post-return survey (Classroom Instruction, Accommodation, Cultural Events, Location and Safety) and, overall, registered a +4 on that

survey when compared to her pre-departure survey. The six students who went to England registered just an overall +1 score on the post-return survey when compared to the pre-departure survey. While satisfaction with the quality of classroom instruction did not seem to differ between the two locations, the extra-curricular cultural activities produced an indifferent response from the students at the University of Gloucestershire in England and a higher level of satisfaction from the student who was at the University of Victoria in Canada.

While the researchers did not directly attempt to measure the effect of the study abroad experience on confidence, knowing most of these students well and having many of them in classes has allowed the researchers to note changes in them post-return. Both teachers have independently observed that students three, five and seven all seem to be more confident since their return from their summer overseas. In class all students, particularly students three and five, are more likely to ask questions unprompted, take longer turns when speaking and seem less concerned with minor errors that do not interfere with communication.

Cost is one area in which some students did mention some dissatisfaction in personal communications and in post-return surveys, post-return interviews and reflective journals. As was noted above, the often high cost of university-organized programs can deter students from participating and drive them to organize their own study abroad experiences. As SUAC hopes to expand its program offerings and encourage more students to participate it would be wise to listen to the voices of students complaining of the high costs.

2.4 Conclusion

The road to acquisition of a foreign language is long indeed and the research described in this paper looks at just a small slice of that journey as a small number of students experienced it. The assessment measures used in this study allowed the researchers a glimpse at points in that journey and to see as students awareness, perception and confidence evolved over time.

The research in this paper used pre-departure questionnaires, reflective journals and postreturn questionnaires to attempt to gauge the

effectiveness of two summer intensive English programs. As noted in the Background, the limited sample size makes categorical statements impossible and the findings in this paper should be seen as illustrative rather than definitive. Even so, the researchers can say that all students seemed to enjoy their time overseas and multiple students seemed to gain noticeably in confidence, an important component in foreign language learning. Further research in this area utilizing similar, or expanded assessment measures, and with a larger cohort of students would be one way to offer more definitive answers regarding the effectiveness of overseas intensive English programs.

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Summer 2015 Intensive English Study Pre-departure Questionnaire

Name: _____ Student Number: _____

Question 1: Have you been overseas before?

If you answered "yes", where, when and for how long?

Question 2: What are your goals for this summer intensive English experience?

Question 3: Estimate how satisfied you expect to be with the following during your summer intensive English experience. Circle one of the choices.

classroom instruction:

Very dissatisfied Somewhat dissatisfied It will be exactly what I expect Somewhat satisfied satisfied Very satisfied

accommodation:

Very dissatisfied Somewhat dissatisfied It will be exactly what I expect Somewhat satisfied satisfied Very satisfied

cultural events:

Very dissatisfied Somewhat dissatisfied It will be exactly what I expect Somewhat satisfied satisfied Very satisfied

location:

Very dissatisfied Somewhat dissatisfied It will be exactly what I expect Somewhat satisfied satisfied Very satisfied

amount of English spoken:

Very dissatisfied Somewhat dissatisfied It will be exactly what I expect Somewhat satisfied satisfied Very satisfied

safety:

Very dissatisfied Somewhat dissatisfied It will be exactly what I expect Somewhat satisfied satisfied Very satisfied

Question 4: What are your expectations about your language classes?

Question 5: What are your expectations of your teachers?

Question 6: In what area do you expect to improve the most during your time studying abroad? (Rank in order from 1 to 4)

_____ speaking _____ listening _____ reading _____ writing

Question 7: What percent of your time abroad do you expect to speak in English?

Question 8: Do you expect to have many communication opportunities with people in everyday life (outside of the classroom)?

Question 9: How difficult do you expect your courses to be?

Very easy Somewhat easy Somewhat difficult Very difficult

Question 10: How supportive is your family of your desire to study abroad for the summer in an English-speaking country?

Very unsupportive Somewhat supportive Somewhat unsupportive Very unsupportive

Question 11: What do you expect to be the best part of your summer intensive English experience?

Question 12: Do you think you may be disappointed about any part of your summer study abroad experience?

Question 13: Do you expect your perspective will change as a result of studying abroad?

Question 14: Do you expect you will experience "culture shock"? If so, please give an example.

Question 15: How are you preparing specifically for your summer study abroad experience?

Appendix 1

Summer 2015 Intensive English Study Post-return Questionnaire

Name:

Student Number:

Question 1: Do you think you achieved the goals you had for your summer intensive English experience?

Question 2: How satisfied were you with the following during your summer intensive English experience? Circle one of the choices.

classroom instruction:

Very dissatisfied	Somewhat <u>dissatisfied</u>	Exactly what I expected	Somewhat satisfied	Very <u>satisfied</u>
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Very dissatisfied	Somewhat <u>dissatisfied</u>	Exactly what I expected	Somewhat satisfied	Very <u>satisfied</u>
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cultural events:

Very dissatisfied	Somewhat <u>dissatisfied</u>	Exactly what I expected	Somewhat satisfied	Very <u>satisfied</u>
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location:

Very dissatisfied	Somewhat <u>dissatisfied</u>	Exactly what I expected	Somewhat satisfied	Very <u>satisfied</u>
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amount of English spoken:

Very dissatisfied	Somewhat <u>dissatisfied</u>	Exactly what I expected	Somewhat satisfied	Very <u>satisfied</u>
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safety:

Very dissatisfied	Somewhat <u>dissatisfied</u>	Exactly what I expected	Somewhat satisfied	Very <u>satisfied</u>
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Question 3: Did your language classes meet your expectations?

Question 4: Did your teachers meet your expectations?

Question 5: In what area do you think you improved the most during your time studying abroad? (Rank in order from 1 to 4)

_____ speaking _____ listening _____ reading _____ writing

Question 6: What percent of your time do you estimate you spoke in English?

Question 7: Did you have many communication opportunities with people in everyday life (outside of the classroom)?

Question 8: How difficult were your courses?

Very easy Somewhat easy Somewhat difficult Very difficult

Question 9: What was the best part of your summer intensive English experience?

Question 10: Did you have any disappointing or bad experiences while overseas?

Question 11: Did your perspective change as a result of studying abroad?

Question 12: Did you experience any examples of "culture shock"? If so, please explain.

Question 13: Do you think you prepared well-enough for your summer intensive English experience?

Question 14: Would you recommend other students participate in the summer intensive English experience where you did?

Question 15: Is there any other information that you wish to share about your summer intensive English experience? 率直に教えて下さい。なんでもオッケーです。

Appendix 2

