

FINE TUNING OF A STUDY ABROAD COURSE FOR JAPANESE EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

The study abroad (SA) program of the Hokusei University Junior College English Department has been a vital part of the curriculum for more than 25 years. First year students spend their second semester, about four months, studying EFL courses at various colleges or universities throughout the world. Classes held prior to departure have to deal with many issues, from the mundane (i.e., school and visa applications, airline tickets, etc.) to cultural comparisons and learning goals. As with any course, how to utilize class time is of utmost importance. Thus, studies to discern which class activities were effective for best preparing departing SA students were undertaken. Students, upon completion of their EFL classes at their SA schools, answered surveys and then were interviewed. Students were mostly positive about interactions with previous SA students, and somewhat surprisingly, it seems that the very unimaginative act of filling out applications (e.g., course, home stay, or visa) was a useful task. These and other results are discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Study abroad, peer support, assessment, instruction, English as a Foreign Language

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1. Introduction

There are many benefits gained by participating in study abroad (SA) programs. The most obvious is of course that second language acquisition (SLA) of the target language (TL) can, and should, occur during daily activities and is not limited to just the classroom (Pellegrino, 1998; Isabelli & Nishida, 2005; Shively, 2013). However, not all students utilize their immersive environment and its subsequent TL opportunities (Dewey, 2013), and SLA improvement due to SA participation is contested by some studies (Isabelli & Nishida, 2005). The duration of time spent for SA seems to correlate with improved SLA (Shively, 2013; Sasaki, 2011), but short term SA programs of four weeks or less have also been shown to be effective for stimulating SLA as well as increased intercultural awareness (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Anderson, 2006; Jackson, 2006). Motivation (Isabelli, 2006), language learning beliefs (Amuzie & Winke, 2009), and self-efficacy (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2012) have also been shown to benefit from SA. However, individual student's benefits range widely from significant improvement to minimal (Isabelli, 2006; Shively, 2013) and, for intercultural development at least, there are questions about whether the benefits are long lasting (Rexeisen, 2008). A recent finding is that SA is positively correlated to increases in creative thinking (Lee, 2012; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009). These diverse benefits mentioned were long assumed, but the above empirical studies were necessary as having empirical support is always desired above speculation, however well meaning or supposedly intuitive.

The Japanese SA program student numbers have been decreasing since 2004 influenced by worsening economic conditions, but the past three years have seen modest increases (Tanikawa, 2013). Improving upon the modest upswing is a current goal of the education ministry that is aiming for dramatic increases in SA student numbers by 2020 (The Japan Times, 2014; MEXT, 2011). The USA has similar grand plans to greatly increase the number of SA students by 2020 (Institute of International Education, 2014). Each statement uses such buzzwords such as internationalization, globalization and intercultural awareness as well as economic competitiveness to support their actions, though such claims are questioned as not being clearly defined (Long, 2012) and can be exaggerated (Salisbury, 2012).

The goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of what in class activities merit teaching SA students before they leave for their SA destinations. Some activities that did and did not merit in-class time and should be deleted from the course, as well as some to be continued, are discussed elsewhere (Maune, 2014).

2. Methods

Upon completion of their EFL courses abroad, first year students of the 2013 and 2014 academic years took an online survey in which they were asked to rank the effectiveness of various in class activities during the first semester SA preparatory course as well how satisfied they were with various aspects of their SA experience (Maune, 2015). Participation in the survey in academic year 2013 was on a volunteer basis, but of the 24 students who participated in SA, 20 completed the survey as in 2014, the survey was required. Following the survey, students met with the SA coordinator for short, no more than 15 minutes, semi-structured interviews. Most students took the survey after returning to Japan following their SA, but the SA students who had extended their time abroad (e.g. to take more EFL classes, or to travel) took the survey while still abroad.

2.1. Study Abroad Program

The SA program of the Hokusei University Junior College English Department has been a vital part of the curriculum for almost 30 years. Students spend their first semester taking a normal first semester course load that includes standard EFL courses as well as the one semester preparatory SA course. There are no requirements for participation in the program, save financial considerations. However, each year, one or two students are not allowed to participate in SA program based on their study habits exhibited during the first month of the preparatory course (i.e., they were unable to complete simple assignments on time, failed to meet a deadline for a document, or did not meet the strict attendance policy)

The general trend in Japan for SA students has seen decreasing numbers, but in our program the numbers have been increasing significantly in the past four years. In 2014, one quarter of the 126 students who enrolled in the department participated in the SA program. SA students spend the second semester, about four months, studying EFL courses in a college or university program abroad. Upon completion of the program, they return to take their second year courses. They receive credit for their SA courses which allows them to graduate within the normal two year time frame.

2.2. Study Abroad Course Pre-departure Preparation

The first step is for students to choose a school at which to study. Currently, there are eight schools to choose from in five countries (Canada, Malaysia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and USA). Students read reports written by and talk with the previous year's SA students to gain information about which school to choose, but students overwhelmingly make their decision based on total cost (Maune, 2014). There is a limit of five to seven students per

school, which means some students will have to attend their second choice SA school. After the SA schools are decided, students must fill out all the necessary paperwork and pay for tuition, airfare, and health insurance. This ends the paper chase phase of the course.

Students then concentrate on home stay etiquette, cultural issues, and, perhaps most importantly, how to solve problems they may encounter. Many examples of problems that have occurred in the past are discussed, and questions, of which there may be many, are discussed. Students practice writing emails to the SA coordinator about various made up problems, and they are told that such emails can be written in Japanese. This is done in an attempt to shore up their communication skills, and also to reinforce that having problems is nothing to be ashamed of. It is also done in order to impress that contact with the SA coordinator is the first line of communication. Too often students have contacted parents who then contact the Hokusei administration who then contact the coordinator which is not a desirable course for information flow. The idea is that students should get used to discussing any problem with the SA coordinator first before consulting with their parents. This "coordinator first" message is stated often throughout the SA classes.

Students are required to attend "English Lunch" once a week in order to work on their everyday conversation with either a teacher or an international conversation tutor (Maune, 2008). The conversation tutors are closer in age to the students, and are from a variety of countries that currently includes Czechoslovakia, Italy, New Zealand, Poland, The Philippines, and Vietnam. The purpose of this is to try to help the students become more comfortable speaking English outside of the classroom, and encounter English as a world or global language (Acar, 2006). The EFL classes they will attend while abroad will be made up of students from a wide variety of countries.

2.3. During the Study Abroad Period

Students are required to send weekly emails to the teacher, but the content is not important. Students are specifically told that they can simply write "I am OK", or as much as they wish. Implementing this simple requirement has been very successful in that the coordinator can deal directly with the student to solve problems as opposed to dealing with parents or administration which had been a source of unnecessary stress.

2.4. Upon Return To Japan

Students are required to write a report of their SA experience with the intended purpose of helping future SA students better prepare for and have a more rewarding SA experience. They were also requested to complete an online survey, and then to meet with the SA

coordinator for a semi-structured interview. The interview was required, while the survey was not, despite that 20 of 24 students of the 2014 cohort completed the survey. Students who extended their SA could submit their reports and take the survey while still abroad.

3. Discussion

It is normal for teachers to fine tune their courses for a variety of reasons; in the case of the SA preparatory course, increasing student satisfaction with their time abroad is the main concern, though reducing stress for the coordinator is also quite important. Student feedback is usually taken care of in the form of required yearly evaluations of all courses upon their completion. However, at this university the SA preparatory course has never been part of the required evaluations, perhaps as it is considered a special program outside the norm. Thus, student feedback was obtained mainly through students' reports written near or upon completion of their SA program, but, the concern was that students chose what they wanted to write about. Hence, they tended to write about positive and somewhat banal personal experiences while avoiding contentious issues. However, a few students did use the reports to vent their grievances. Such negative comments were very helpful for addressing issues that had been previously unknown to the coordinator. Matters related to the administrative aspect of the program provided insights into some of the aspects of the program, but left huge gaps of knowledge available only to students. That led to the use of the reports as a conduit for students to highlight specific issues, both positive and negative, with the unstated goal to better educate the coordinator as to the actual experiences of the SA students.

Following the new instructions to SA students in 2010, reports detailed more trying experiences, and often, more importantly, how such situations were overcome. Their concerns mirrored those discussed by others regarding SA students (LaBrack, 1993). Some reports were very well written and contained information that would obviously benefit future SA students before their departures. Thus, the idea of SA student reports as a kind of peer support came about somewhat serendipitously. Reports, with all personal details removed and the author's permission to use in class, were then incorporated into SA pre-departure preparation. The response to reading the reports in class was very positive. Thus, in 2011, as part of the SA program evaluation requirements, a final report was included where participating students knew that their reports might be read by future students. Selected examples of useful reports for each SA institution were made available to new SA students. A few examples of sections of reports that were not helpful were also read by all students to illustrate what to avoid when writing their reports.

These reports became an integral resource for the fine tuning of the SA program preparation and provided a student centered take on the SA program that the coordinator was not privy to. This highlighted the lack of information that, in turn, led to exit surveys and interviews in order to gain more information useful to either the coordinator or students. In this case, the students themselves were then viewed as a valuable resource for SA preparation.

The first attempt to utilize previous SA students as a resource was to make them available to current SA students via email. This was very well received by the students, but it was shown, via survey and interviews, that actually only a small number of SA students were gaining the information and then sharing it with their classmates as most of the students were not willing to email a stranger. Thus, bringing the second year students into the class itself for a face-to-face session was tried for the first time in 2014 and was found to be very successful. Students were much less apprehensive about contacting their seniors after the face-to-face session. Utilizing prior students in retrospect, seems obvious, but it had not been done for the first 20 years of this SA program. The gradual evolution of the reports, to digital contact, to face-to-face meetings would have been attempted without student feedback to ascertain what students deemed valuable.

The interview feedback from the 2013 class is the reason that the filling out various forms was not made easier, but rather left as is for 2014. In 2014, the dynamics of how students filled out their forms were unobtrusively observed to see if any benefits of the activity could be detected. It appeared that students developed effective teamwork skills in their working groups (i.e., students applying to the same SA school). Filling out applications is inarguably tedious, but a necessity. However, for the students, the desire to attain the goal of the SA program instilled a sense of group identity and fostered friendship. This would not have happened if they all had completed the forms individually by following instructions online in Japanese (such an online system was tentatively in the works). While filling out their forms, students were also told to raise any questions first within their groups before consulting with the teacher. Albeit simple, it was found to be necessary as many students are passive and expect near complete guidance. In a way, this worked out as the first step to instill self-sufficiency or self-efficacy (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). It is also possible that filling out the applications is a kind of achievement goal that students need to, and know they will, complete and cannot avoid (Ames & Archer, 1988; Elliot & Church, 1997).

In this task of form filling, one possible improvement would be to require all students to be responsible for filling up specific parts of each form. This would allow, or force, all students to take turns teaching their groups to fill in the blanks. This could be considered valid

teaching tools to increase confidence and motivation, not just time consuming dull tasks to be rushed through.

A common problem mentioned during return interviews was that communicating in English was frustrating and limiting. They felt that more English ability would have enhanced their SA experience, even though they were quite satisfied with their SA experiences (6.3 on a 7 point Likert scale for 2013 students). The reasons for participating in the SA program vary greatly, with many students saying they wanted to improve their English, experience a foreign culture, make foreign friends, travel or just get out of Japan. If students can identify that improving their English prior to departure will allow them to more effectively satisfy whatever goal they have set, this supports the contention that they should be more intrinsically motivated to study English. Therefore, during the early phases of the SA preparatory course, the coordinator as well as SA peer supporters should discuss the positive influence of English language proficiency in achieving their SA goals while challenging students to visualize a positive image of their future international self. Students who have internationalized attitudes or postures and envision their future selves positively in such situations have been shown to be more motivated (Aubrey, 2014). It is possible that the SA peer supporters are seen as positive role models which could help with students' self concepts.

Students were enthusiastic about coming to class as peer supporters or mentors to talk with new SA students (6.2 on a 7 point Likert scale). During interviews, students stressed that they really appreciated talking with the previous SA students, and they would like to do the same for future SA students. In the future, this attitude of responsibility for the success of the SA program will be further developed.

4. Conclusion

For the majority of the students involved in the SA program, it will be their first time abroad and every student would be anxious about how they will handle living in a foreign culture, let alone home stay or roommate angst. It will also be a major life event for them which they will look back as a life changing experience throughout their lives. Although the goal of the program is to enhance TL acquisition, there are deeper peripheral consequences at stake, in terms of psychological and intercultural development of these students. It is no wonder then that pre-departure students would appreciate advice from their peers and want to pay it forward in order to assist those that will participate in future SA programs. Hence, the fine tuning of the preparatory aspects of this program is not a luxury but a necessity to do justice to the goals of not only language acquisition but the holistic development of the young people involved.

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