

Study Abroad: Objectives and Potential

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Abstract

This paper provides a brief summary of student expectations, experiences, and evaluations of a 3 week study abroad program. Findings reveal that all students were more than satisfied with the program. The paper then goes on to discuss the role of the study abroad experience in the context of a higher education, and some methods which have the potential to bring an academic focus to the whole experience, not just the language classroom.

Introduction

In August of 2017 19 non-English majors from Nagasaki University departed for a 3-week study abroad program. Upon their return, a small survey was administered concerning their expectations, experiences, and evaluations of the overall program. Unfortunately, there were only 10 respondents. The researcher acknowledges the less than scientific rigor applied to the administering of the survey, and has already undertaken a similar project with this lesson in mind. The small sample size along with the limited scope of the survey may not provide for an adequate overview of the program, let alone for study abroad programs in general. However, this does not mean that the responses collected should not be taken into consideration, or that they may not provide a point from which some useful observations can be made.

The online surveys were administered in both English and Japanese using surveymonkey.com. Students were given the option of responding in English or Japanese, and almost all students chose to answer in Japanese. In addition to basic information regarding gender, year, and major, students were asked to answer 16 questions related to their pre-departure expectations and experiences, their on-site experiences, and how they might improve the program. The following is a very brief summary of some of their responses. For anyone wishing for more detail, the

researcher would welcome any inquiries.

Study Abroad: Pre-Departure

The majority of students decided to participate in the program because they wanted to visit the United States and were particularly interested in the day trips to New York City and Washington D.C. They were also impressed by the explanation of the program during a program introductory session.

Students were asked what their goals and expectations of the program were and most of the answers were variations on improving their English skills, making friends, or learning about American culture. When presented with more detailed goals and asked to rank them, personal growth was the number one goal cited, followed by improving English skills. Improving test scores (TOEIC, TOEFL, etc...) was the least cited goal.

In regards to the pre-departure program provided by the university, students were most impressed with the travel arrangements and the information provided on health and safety. Though marked as satisfactory, the pre-departure aspects rated last were the number of orientations, use of pre-departure information and resources provided, and English language training provided.

Study Abroad: On-site

Students were more than satisfied with the host university, specifically citing the support and helpfulness of the on-site directors and the quality of the classroom instruction. Experiences with host families varied, but overall were satisfactory, especially in terms of their ability to communicate with their host family members.

All students seemed more than satisfied with their overall experience abroad using words like stimulating, meaningful, and fascinating to describe their experiences. They also commented on how they were now more motivated to study English, more interested in foreign places, and felt like they had matured due to their experience. They were able to make friends, converse comfortably in English with a variety of people, experience the culture, and gain a sense of self-confidence. The day trips to NYC and Washington D.C., in class experiences with other second language learners, and just walking around the campus area were all cited as aspects of the experience they enjoyed the most. When asked if there were any aspects they did not like, most cited an occasional inability to understand someone or to be understood due to the speed of the English and the language involved. Two students noted some frustration

with the amount and difficulty of the homework assignments.

Academically and culturally, all students answered that their goals and expectations had been met or exceeded. They cited how fun it was, how much they had learned, what a good environment it was both academically and locally, and how great a cultural and personal experience it was, as reasons they would recommend the program to other students. When asked if there was anything they would change, two students mentioned that the program was too short.

Conclusion

The responses to the survey are a great endorsement for this study abroad program and, probably, for study abroad in general. It is likely the case that most study abroad programs would produce similar responses. In fact, it is likely that, outside of the classroom experience, one might have similar reactions and responses to any travel experience, whether domestic or international. This is in no way a criticism of the students involved or the study abroad program. If anything, it is a criticism of the survey itself. A more rigorous and qualitative approach might have yielded more interesting insights into their experiences. This, however, is not the topic that this paper is concerned with. Instead, it is a focus on what the purpose of a study abroad program is in regards to higher education.

Is it to provide students with an opportunity to study English intensively in an English speaking environment? It does provide them with some intensive language study in a classroom, but it does not require one use the language outside the classroom, particularly in situations where they are travelling as a group. Use and experience with the host language is highly dependent on the willingness of the learner, the quality of their homestay, and the program itself. Is it to provide students with a meaningful cultural experience? Again, it does provide them with an opportunity for this, but it does not require nor guarantee one, and it is also dependent on one's definition of cultural and meaningful.

Study Abroad: Objectives

In recent years the Japanese government has set a series of educational goals and policies designed to promote intercultural awareness and exchange in its education system. At the university level these goals and policies are often seen as related to the foreign language classroom and the study abroad experience. Many universities offer the opportunity to study abroad during the summer and winter breaks, for a 3-week

period. From the government, university administration, and staff point of view, these sojourns are seen as an opportunity for students to focus on improving their language skills through intensive instruction, homestays, and other extracurricular activities. Often, a stated purpose of increasing TOEFL, IELTS or TOEIC scores is made explicit. In addition, these sojourns are also seen as a means for broadening students' horizons, by promoting intercultural awareness. Thus, the stated purposes of the programs are educational in nature, as opposed to one of tourism or business.

Research in the area of study abroad in the last 30 years has consistently produced results that are often inconsistent, and sometimes contradictory (Byram & Feng, 2006; Dufon & Churchill, 2006; Freed, 1995; Kinginger, 2009; Regan, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998). Studies have often focused on oral, aural, and grammatical proficiency and though the majority of them show the relative benefits of a short stay abroad, a great many also reveal those gains to be minor and variable. These findings highlight the unstable, complex, and dynamic nature of the study abroad experience and have led to a realization of the need to account for the whole person and whole context (Atkinson, 2002; Byram et al, 2001; Ingulsrud et al., 2002; Jackson, 2008; Jurasek et al., 1996; Larsen-Freeman, 2011; Lee, 2012; McKeown, 2009; Pelligrino, 1998; Stimpfl, 1996; Tarrant, 2013; Wang, 2010). This has resulted in a number of qualitative studies which further highlight the individual nature of the SA experience. How can academic and educational goals be met and reconciled with the reality of the highly dependent and variable study abroad experience? Before pondering a possible solution to this question, it might be best to stop here, and provide a hypothetical example of a possible day in the life of a student abroad.

Picture a student on their third day of a three week program. They are just starting to get over their jet lag. Their morning class has just finished and they head to the local cafeteria for lunch with some of their fellow sojourners. A brief encounter with a cashier and they are off to a table to discuss with their classmates, in their first language, about the lessons they had that day, the dinner they had the night before, and how tired they are. After lunch, they put on their headphones, listen to some music and walk around campus or the neighborhood until it's time to head back to their homestay. All the while they are texting in their first language with their classmates on the program, messaging with their family and friends at home, and looking at news or entertainment in their first language. After dinner with their homestay family, it is on to their homework while they continue texting friends, family, and classmates, listen to music and play games on their phone, or watch a TV

show in their first language on their tablet.

Depending on the extent and quality of the conversation with their homestay family and the cashier at the cafeteria, they are participating at a linguistic minimum in their local environment and are, potentially, paying a limited amount of attention to their surroundings. Their participation in the linguistic and cultural environment is surface level at best. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. It is the choice of the student, and it is more than likely not the case for most students, if any, but it is possible. The study abroad environment is an entirely different one today than it was just 15 years ago.

Study Abroad: Potential

Without explicit, well defined objectives and purpose, it is possible for a learner to spend just as much time connected virtually to their home country as it is linguistically and culturally in the host country, and most of that time in the host country is spent in classes and on homework. Intensive English study is the one thing they could do in their home country. In terms of the cultural and general education of the student, what are they likely to achieve or experience? Now, it is not possible, nor desirable, to control all aspects of a student's experience abroad. Personal growth, independence, and self-discovery are integral components of the study abroad experience. It does seem, however, that an added academic component, whether it be linguistic or culturally based, with a focus outside of the classroom, or on the classroom itself, would provide for a more immersive and fruitful experience in the host country.

What much of the recent research on study abroad has suggested is the need for a connective line running from pre-departure through to re-entry in order to align and relate the experience to the learner's broader educational experience. To this end, Robert's et. al. (2001) and Jackson (2008), among others, have used modified linguistic ethnographic projects to monitor learners' experiences and to assess individual students in regards to changes in their intercultural competence, personhood, and perceptions of their experience.

In pre-departure classes, learners were trained as amateur ethnographers and required to undertake a small ethnographic project in their home country. Exploring their home communities and making the familiar strange gave learners an insight into their own cultures and language, and provided a starting point from which they could begin to compare it with the culture or language of the host country. In addition, it

sufficiently prepared learners to hit the ground running when they reached their host countries. In the host country, they were required to do an original ethnographic research project of their own choosing. The research project required and motivated students to observe and participate in their local surroundings. Upon return, students were required to write a research paper in their first language or the second language about their project. This provided an opportunity to reflect upon and critically analyze their experiences.

These projects have shed light on the feasibility and positive effects of a linguistic ethnographic project at their respective institutions and within their programs. It must be noted that the learners involved in these projects were at an advanced level and the duration of their stay abroad ranged from five weeks to one semester. A similar project, whether ethnographically related or not, with students of a lower proficiency on a shorter program would certainly require major modifications, but may still be beneficial and desirable.

Kinginger (2009), provides a number of tasks related to interaction, language use, dialects, and identity that students of varying proficiency could do to compare their home country with their host country, culturally and linguistically. If a student is not strong or confident in their English ability, they could focus on the observation and description of a communicative event or interaction in the classroom or in a coffee shop. Students of a higher proficiency could investigate the relationships between language use and age or region through interviews with their host families, students at the host university, or their classmates from other countries. Ideally, they would develop a project of their own, possibly related to their major. These projects could all be done in the homestay, the school, or in the local community.

Conclusion

A 3-week program is very short. By the time students have adjusted to their surroundings and gained some confidence, it is just about time to return home. Pre-departure training and preparation in projects and tasks like those mentioned above motivate and require students to immerse themselves in the local environment upon entry and place the entire experience in an educational context. Learners are culturally and linguistically engaged outside of the classroom. It would require more investment in pre-departure instruction and training and, ideally, a more prominent place in the curriculum, but in the end, a stronger tie to the broader educational goals of a university education would provide a much more meaningful and impactful

experience for the learner to reflect on and analyze critically upon return, both in the short-term and long-term.

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