

Why Study Abroad?

An Analysis of Kobe Kaisei Students' Rationale for Studying Abroad

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Introduction

As teachers, we know that studying abroad can increase our students' proficiency levels, and their motivation. However, students tend to have a different idea of what the study abroad experience offers, and therefore their reasons for going abroad may not always be academic in nature. In this paper, I report the results of the written responses of six third year students from the Department of English and Career Studies (EC). I explore the various reasons that the students decided to study abroad. I will also discuss some of the reactions the students had to their experiences abroad, and the impact that friendship and their relationship with their host families had on the students' attitudes toward their host countries. The effect that the experience had on their attitude toward learning will be discussed as well.

The study revealed that the reasons for studying abroad varied and were not a reflection of the reasons other university students in Japan have given, and that most students had a positive experience abroad, and most developed strong bonds with people in their host countries. In addition, the results show that studying abroad has an effect on students' desire to improve their language skills.

Background

For decades, Japanese colleges and universities have encouraged their students to study abroad (Yonezawa). Last year saw an increase in the number of students who

expressed an interest in studying abroad and most of the students were women ("Interest in study abroad picking up again in Japan"). The appeal of study abroad programs is getting stronger as the job market is getting increasingly more competitive and companies like UNIQLO are adopting policies that promote the use of the English language to do business, and the government is calling for a more globally aware population (Yonezawa). University students who express an interest in going abroad site becoming more competitive in the job market and increasing their awareness of other cultures as reasons for studying abroad ("Interest in study abroad picking up again in Japan"). Countries like Australia, Canada, and the United States have reported an increase of students from Asian countries like Japan and China in recent years. Many of these students are young women ("Interest in study abroad picking up again in Japan").

Companies in Japan have also begun to encourage their employees to learn English and to study abroad in order to effectively communicate with people from other cultures (Yonezawa). The Japanese government has also launched an initiative to foster Japanese who have a strong sense of cultural identity as well as intercultural communication skills (Yonezawa). As Japan continues to compete with China, South Korea, and Indonesia for global customers as well as economic allies, the need for the younger generation to be more globally aware and culturally competent is increasing. So, it can be argued that encouraging our students

to study abroad could give them the competitive edge they need to secure stable and long-term employment, and to contribute to the successful future of Japan.

Studying abroad also helps motivate students to improve their language proficiency skills. It also improves their attitude toward language learning and gives them concrete reasons why English proficiency is important (Tanaka and Ellis). Most students who study abroad have positive experiences, and this strengthens their bond with people in other countries thereby giving them a sense of the global community of which Japan is a part.

Making friends and interacting with members of their host family are some of the most influential experiences for many students who have studied abroad (Wada). These connections tend to last long after the students return to Japan, and some students express a desire to return to that country (Wada).

In this study, six third year EC students completed written responses about their thoughts and opinions concerning their study-abroad experience. Based on the research concerning students' motivations to study abroad, this study had the following research questions:

1. Do Kobe Kaisei students study abroad to increase their language proficiency in order to become more competitive in the job market or to increase their awareness of other cultures?
2. Do Kobe Kaisei students attribute friendships with the locals or other international students to a positive study-abroad experience?

3. Do Kobe Kaisei students feel that their experience increased their motivation to learn English?
4. Do Kobe Kaisei students attribute their experience in the study-abroad program to a change in attitude toward language learning?

Methods

Six third-year students from the Department of English and Career Studies participated in this study. They were given a prompt which asked them to write about their experience abroad specifically concerning any challenges they faced, any exciting or interesting events or experiences, and their feelings about their English language ability at the time of responding to the prompt. Students whose answers were incomplete or needed more information were given an additional set of questions to address gaps in their stories and to obtain a clearer picture of their experience abroad. Students' written responses to the prompt and to the follow-up questions were analyzed for common themes.

Results

The students chose a variety of destinations for their study-abroad programs. One student studied in Colorado; another student studied in Britain, two studied in Australia, and two studied in Canada. The students who studied in Britain, Australia, and Colorado stayed in their host countries for three to eight months. One student studied in Canada in the summer for one month. All of the students studied abroad during the 2013 academic school year.

The results of the study will be discussed in terms of the research questions.

They will be addressed in the following sections: Reasons for Studying Abroad, Friendships and Host Family Relationships; Learner Motivation, and Language Learning Attitude.

Reasons for Studying Abroad

Most of the students wrote that they chose their particular destination and study-abroad program because of the cost, their interest in the country, and what they had heard about the program. The student who studied in Colorado said she chose the program because she believed it would improve her English language proficiency. None of the students mentioned anything about how studying abroad would improve their chances for employment, so that does not seem to be a motivating factor for these students. Most of the students expressed a desire to see historical and natural sites in the country where they would study. None of the students mentioned an interest in interacting with the locals as a reason for studying abroad, so it would appear that for these girls, the reasons for studying abroad are different from those of other university students in Japan.

Friendships and Host Family Relationships

All of the students mentioned that making friends with other international students, fellow Japanese students, or the locals enhanced their study-abroad experience. Five out of six students stayed with host families, and they all mentioned that their ability to bond with their host family influenced their feelings about the experience. All but one of the students who stayed with host families remarked how kind

and helpful they were and how they hoped to return to the country someday to visit their host family again.

Most of the students befriended other international students. One student, who stayed in Canada, became great friends with her fellow host student, a Chinese girl who was staying with her host family at the time. Another student made friends with students from South Korea, China, Brazil, and France. The student who stayed in Britain made friends with other Japanese students, and was surprised how her fellow study-abroad students strived to speak English despite the fact that they were all Japanese. This impressed the student and it influenced her attitude toward language learning and using English.

Overall, the students seem to have similar experiences concerning friendships and host family relationships as other students in universities in Japan. It would appear that making friends and having a close relationship with one's host family can have a great impact on one's experience studying abroad.

Learner Motivation

All of the students expressed a need to increase their English language ability as a result of studying abroad. One student, who studied English in Canada for five months, said that she was shocked when her placement test resulted in her being placed in the first of six proficiency levels. This motivated her to work hard and within a month she progressed to the second level. Another student said that being around other Asian students whose proficiency levels were much higher than hers encouraged her to

concentrate on her studies and improve her skills. The student who studied in Colorado said that the amount of homework and opportunities to produce language in the classroom helped increase her skills and motivated her to put forth more effort than she did when she was studying at Kobe Kaisei before. She said that since she returned, her desire to continue to hone her skills has increased, and she has benefited greatly from her experience studying abroad.

Language Learning Attitude

All of the students expressed a change in their attitude toward language learning. Many said that before they went abroad, they did not put much effort into increasing their language skills, but that after studying abroad they had become more aware of the necessity to improve their language learning ability. The reasons for this change are varied.

The student who studied abroad in Britain was influenced by the attitudes of her fellow students. She said that she was surprised by their motivation to volunteer answers in class. She was inspired by them to adopt this practice in her own study habits. She expressed concern about her proficiency level decreasing since returning, and indicated a desire to create opportunities to speak English with people from other countries and to learn about different cultures as well. Another student was motivated by her desire to be better than she was when she began the program. She also felt more motivated to study on her own because she was in touch with her friends in Canada and needed to use English to correspond with them. Other students

expressed a change in their attitude toward language learning concerning their confidence in their ability. Now, many of the students have increased confidence in their ability to listen to and communicate in English. Their experience abroad has demonstrated to them that they can get along in English. The student who studied in Colorado wrote that she is now confident about expressing her opinion, and wants to do so as much as possible in the future.

As with many university students in Japan who have studied abroad, the language learning attitudes of the students in this study have been positively influenced by their experience studying abroad whether it be from their need to improve their course level, or a desire to emulate the study habits and attitudes of their fellow language learners. It would appear that studying abroad is beneficial for creating positive attitudes toward language learning.

Discussion

For the most part, the students in this study had positive opinions about studying abroad. Two of the respondents wrote that they would definitely go back to their host countries, and five out of six of the students said that they enjoyed the experience. The student that did not enjoy the experience, wrote that she benefited from the experience nevertheless. So it can be argued that for these students, studying abroad was beneficial.

Making friends, a good relationship with their host families, and interacting with other international students, were some of the most influential aspects of their study abroad experience. This information could be

helpful when discussing the benefits of studying abroad with first and second year students who might want to go abroad during their time at Kobe Kaisei. It is also a good idea to let the students know that they will come into contact with many international students, but that opportunities to interact with locals outside of one's host family may be scarce.

Students who study abroad have many opportunities to learn about themselves, and to teach others about Japan and its culture. They have a chance to make lasting connections with people in countries like Australia, Canada, and Great Britain. Through these relationships, the students can connect Japan to their global partners, and strengthen the ties between Japan and other countries. Students who are interested in or planning to study abroad can look forward to making friends with their fellow international students.

This study offers insight into the motivations behind some students' decisions to study abroad. However, because the study was conducted after the study-abroad experience, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the experience had an impact on the students' attitude toward learning. A study that includes the students' attitudes before, during, and after studying abroad would probably yield more conclusive results. It might also be more effective if more students were involved in the study. A study that followed the students who studied abroad from first year to graduation would also demonstrate how long the effects of studying abroad last.

References:

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