

Exploring Reluctance to Study Abroad: Students with Low-level English Proficiency

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In 2010, the Nobel Prize in Chemistry was awarded to three scientists originally from Japan, China, and the United States. At the time of the award, these Nobel laureates were working in two different countries and three different universities. Dr. Akira Suzuki, one of these winners, has been vocal in his support of efforts to increase the number of Japanese youth studying abroad (Fukada, 2010). The Science Council of Japan has also emphasized the importance of studying abroad, noting, “We cannot allow promising youth to be boxed into a closed competitive environment early in their lives. Individuals should be encouraged to go out into the wider international society to experience and become aware of the diversity of values and goals out there” (Science Council of Japan, 2005, p. 18).

The call for more participation in study abroad, however, is not limited to those in Japan, nor does it end with scientists. Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary-General, noted that an education exchange facilitated his start in the international arena, and he further emphasized the importance of study abroad programs in advancing tolerance toward and understanding of one another (United Nations, 2001). Former U.S. President Bill Clinton has noted that study abroad enhances knowledge of other cultures and creates goodwill that becomes a nation’s “greatest foreign policy asset” (The Center for Global Education, n.d. a, para. 2). Douglas Daft, the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Coca Cola Company, asserted that understanding other people and their perspectives is essential if one is going to succeed in “our increasingly diverse world” (Institute of International Education, 2010, para. 5). Similarly, commenting on the need for Japanese businesses to have managers who know people around the world and

have learned a foreign language, Dr. David Bach, a noted German business professor, claimed, “I can’t overemphasize the importance of studying abroad” (Aoki, 2010, para. 2). As these national and international scientific, political, business, and education leaders demonstrate, the rewards from studying abroad encompass much more than language growth.

Research into study abroad reinforces the personal stories of leaders such as Annan and further delineates the merits of study abroad. Through their study abroad experiences, learners have been found to develop personally (e.g., Ryan, 2009; Ryan, 2010) and gain an understanding of and appreciation for other cultures. Menking (2004) noted that as students drew their own conclusions through personal experiences, their stereotypes of the host culture decreased and they began to consider, sometimes for the first time, their future path in life. Study abroad also allows students to become more independent and develop a deeper concern for international affairs (e.g., Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Hadis, 2005). In addition to the vast array of non-linguistic benefits, research into study abroad has identified second language gains from studying abroad, including increased motivation, improved fluency and decreased language anxiety (e.g., Allen & Herron, 2003; Fujioka & Agawa, 2007; Menking, 2006; Wood, 2007).

As these international leaders’ personal experiences and research have demonstrated, students who go abroad have the opportunity to grow personally and enhance their future professional competitiveness in the global marketplace. As a result, study abroad should be a popular endeavor for Japanese tertiary students. In spite of these advantages, however, Japan’s outbound mobility ratio is only 1.2 percent (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], Institute for Statistics, 2009, p. 143), lower than China’s 1.9 percent, South Korea’s 3.1 percent, and Hong Kong’s 20.2 percent. Without an understanding of why Japanese students do not participate, the mobility ratio may never increase.

Impetus for Study

In order to discover why students are not more enchanted by the prospect of studying abroad, Menking (2010a) explored obstacles to student participation. Menking found that impediments include financial restrictions and students' lack of confidence in their English abilities. The study, however, was limited to the views of students in the most advanced classes of a mandatory freshman English course. Menking (2010b) emphasized the need for further research with lower-level students. As a result, the current study was designed to explore possible obstacles that limit lower-level English students from participating in study abroad programs. In addition, the study was designed to explore differences between first-year students at the beginning and advanced English levels.

Methodology and Subjects

Menking (2010a) administered a questionnaire to first-year university students in an advanced-level mandatory English course. The survey instrument, written in English with enough Japanese translation to ensure students understood the meaning of each item, explored potential obstacles to participation in a study abroad program. In addition to demographic information, the questionnaire asked students about participation from both ideal and realistic points of view.

The current study utilized the same questionnaire as Menking (2010a). For the current study, the questionnaire was administered to all of the first-year university students enrolled in the lowest level of a mandatory English course. To eliminate possible language anxiety, the questionnaire was written in Japanese with no English.

The questionnaire was completed by 174 first-year students (136 male, 36 female, 2 no response to this item). While 6 students (3.45 percent) who completed the questionnaire were studying in the Faculty of Law and Literature and 22 (12.64 percent) were in the Faculty of Education, 48 (27.59 percent) belonged to the Interdisciplinary Faculty of Life and Environmental Science and

96 (55.17 percent) were in the Faculty of Science and Engineering. Two students (1.15 percent) did not complete this questionnaire item.

In contrast to the current study, almost half of the students in Menking (2010a) were studying in the Faculty of Law and Literature. The variance in the distribution of students among Faculties, a reflection of the difference in enrollment in low-level and advanced-level mandatory English courses, was statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level (103.749, $df = 3$).

Results and Discussion

On the questionnaire, students were asked to think realistically about their ability to participate in a study abroad program and consider factors such as time, classes, and extracurricular activities. Only six students (3.45 percent) indicated they were fairly certain they would participate in a study abroad program. Another 19 students (10.92 percent) said they were not interested in other countries so they had no desire to study abroad. Over half of the students, however, noted that they would like to participate in a study abroad program but one or more obstacles prevented their participation.

The questionnaire explored five potential obstacles to participation. Multiple responses were acceptable; students selected the factors as barriers a total of 324 times, averaging 1.86 hurdles per student.

Biggest Obstacle to Participation

The most often selected reason (58.62 percent) for not participating in a study abroad program was a lack of English ability. Provided as a reason by 102 students and given as the sole reason for non-participation by almost half of them (48.04 percent), it stands out as a major factor in the students' perception that participation is impossible. As these students are classified as having the lowest level of English ability among the first-year students, this result may not be surprising. However, the advanced students also asserted that a deficit in English ability prevented them from participating in a study abroad program (Menking,

2010a), and there is no statistically significant difference between the lower- and advanced-ability students in the frequency of selecting this obstacle, even at $p < .10$ (1.035, $df=1$). In other words, students at the most advanced level were just as likely as those at the lowest level to provide this for a reason to not study abroad. This intriguing finding, that a lack of English ability seems to be a primary reason for students not to study abroad, contradicts the implicit and explicit beliefs held in many other countries around the world. For example, Pellegrino (1998, p. 91) stated matter-of-factly, “students, teachers and researchers alike commonly agree that one of the most effective and efficient means for becoming proficient in a second language is study abroad.”

The results of this portion of the study show that non-participation because of a lack of confidence in one’s English abilities is not limited to students with low-level English. The study points to the fact that rather than becoming an impetus for participation, concerns about language proficiency are actually hampering study abroad participation. This suggests that students may be unaware of studies showing that students who began a three-week study abroad program with lower levels of perceived English ability actually perceived their gains to be greater than the perceived improvement of the students who started the program with a higher self-evaluation of their English ability (Menking, 2006). Further research is necessary to determine whether students are aware of studies such as Menking and the extent to which including this type of information when recruiting students could positively affect participation.

Additional Obstacles to Participation

The second most often selected barrier to participation was a lack of financial resources (47.13 percent). This obstacle was chosen significantly less often (3.431, $p < .10$, $df=1$) by the low-level students than the advanced-level students, 61.67 percent of whom felt financial restrictions were an impediment (Menking, 2010a, p. 70). This is an unexpected difference that should be explored in future studies.

The lower-ability students' third most often selected barrier was a lack of time (36.78 percent). Although there is a general perception that tertiary students in the science disciplines are busier than those majoring in languages and literature, the difference between the beginning and advanced English students was not statistically significant.

The students in the current study selected the necessity of receiving university credit for participation (32.76 percent) three times as often as the least often selected obstacle, a lack of interest in other countries (10.92 percent). While the latter was not a statistically significant difference with the previous study, the difference in the responses of the lower- and advanced-level students in regards to the necessity of receiving university credit was statistically significant at the $p < .025$ level (6.035, $df=1$). This indicates that the lower-level students are less willing than the advanced-level students to participate unless they receive credit and suggests that there may be a need to revise the current study abroad offerings to better meet the credit schema in the science departments, where over 80 percent of the low-level students studied.

Relationship to Enjoyment in Speaking English

The questionnaire asked students to select the response that best represented their opinion about their enjoyment in speaking English. To elicit their general sentiment, the situation in which English would be spoken was not specified. The overwhelming majority (77.33 percent) indicated they do not enjoy speaking English, with 69.19 percent of the students selecting "I do not really enjoy speaking English" and 8.14 percent asserting "I do not enjoy speaking English at all." Only two students (1.16 percent) chose "I really enjoy speaking English," and another 13.37 percent suggested they enjoy speaking English.

The remaining students (8.14 percent) limited their enjoyment to conversations with foreigners. Of these students, three did not want to study abroad. This finding may at first seem surprising since forgoing an overseas program negatively impacts opportunities to communicate with foreigners. However, Lieske

(2007) also found this paradox with students who hedged their enjoyment to conversations with foreigners and yet chose not to take an elective English course with a foreign teacher, thereby limiting their opportunities to interact in English with a foreigner.

Table 1 shows the relationship between enjoyment in speaking English and interest in studying abroad. Although at first glance there may appear to be a positive correlation between enjoyment in speaking English and desire to study abroad, the differences were not statistically significant, even at $p < .10$ (7.292, $df=4$). This indicates that for these low-level students, the motivation to participate in study abroad may be more extrinsic than intrinsic.

Enjoyment	Interested (n=96)	Not Interested (n=78)
Really enjoy; enjoy	20.83%	6.41%
Enjoy, but only with foreigners	7.29%	8.97%
Don't really enjoy	63.54%	74.36%
Don't enjoy at all	7.29%	8.97%
Enjoyment not specified	1.04%	1.28%

Table 1. Relationship between enjoyment and interest in study abroad.

Note: Columns sum to 99.99 percent due to rounding.

Horwitz (1988) noted that attitudes toward language learning that are prevalent in the wider culture must be considered by teachers since students are likely to bring those beliefs into the classroom. Horwitz concluded that negative, widely-held impressions permeate into the subconscious of many students. The Japanese mass media continues to demonstrate general societal frustration with English skills and the blame game flourishes (e.g., Arudou, 2010; Clark, 2009; Dezaki, 2009). It may, therefore, be possible that societal concerns about English ability have influenced students' perceptions, leaving them believing speaking English cannot be enjoyable and concluding that a lack of ability prohibits participation in a study abroad program. Additional research into this premise is necessary.

Additional Study

To further explore reasons for non-participation, students in two of the beginner classes were asked to state, in Japanese, whether they were interested in studying abroad and provide brief reasons for their opinions. Because students were not given choices, their responses may reveal their strongest obstacles, and as such, are informative. While 13 of the 29 students (44.83 percent) indicated an interest in studying abroad, 16 students (55.17 percent) were not interested in participating.

No Interest

Each of the 16 students who indicated they were not interested in participating provided one or more reasons for their decision. Lack of English ability (eight students) topped the list, with comments such as “I’m bad at English, and I’d rather do the things related to my major.” In spite of the fact that low-level students chose it much less frequently than advanced students, financial constraints were given by six students. Interestingly, one student noted, “I don’t have money, and I don’t want to study English so much that I’d pay that much money.” This student’s comment suggests that perhaps the financial restriction could be overcome if the student had more of a desire to go abroad. Another reason several students gave was the desire to go on a “fun” trip rather than to study overseas. Further research must explore why students think studying abroad is not fun.

Perceived Benefits

The 13 students who were interested in study abroad provided statements about why they would like to join a program. These students provided five main reasons why they believed participation would be worthwhile, including:

- the acquisition of language,
- the formation of broader viewpoints,
- the cultivation of knowledge about other countries and cultures,
- the triumph of facing and overcoming new challenges,
- general interest.

The United States Center for Global Education emphasizes the following seven benefits of study abroad (The Center for Global Education, n.d. b):

1. create global awareness for both incoming and outgoing students,
2. promote international security,
3. enhance academic learning,
4. develop leadership skills,
5. advancement of career,
6. personal growth,
7. learning another language.

The Japanese students' insights into the potential gains from participation encompass several of the Center's benefits, suggesting at least some of the low-level students are aware of more than just the linguistic achievement that can result from study abroad. These benefits may need to be communicated to all English learners to help alleviate fears and overcome barriers such as club commitments.

Complexity of Decision

Students' comments on the open-response questionnaire demonstrated the complexity of the decision and the fact that there are often several factors contributing to the decision not to participate. For example, one student asserted, "I don't have confidence in my English, and it seems like even if I went overseas, I wouldn't be able to say anything at all. Also, it seems expensive, and I don't have much time."

This complexity was further demonstrated by four students who perceived benefits but expressed fears that outweighed the potential gains of a sojourn. For example, one student asserted, "It seems like it would be fun to go, and I've often heard that if I go to a foreign country, my way of thinking will change, so I'd like to give it a try. But in reality, going seems scary, so I'm too afraid to give it a try." Another student reflected, "Well, I feel like I'd like to try going, but I don't have that much confidence in my English ability. And, from the point

of view of money and club, I can't be gone so long, so between this year and my third year of university, I don't want to go." These comments suggest that during the recruitment process there is a need to help alleviate students' fears and reinforce the value of study abroad so it will supersede other commitments such as club.

Directions for Future Research

The results of the study suggest four areas in which additional research is necessary. First, although the university endorses study abroad by offering credit for an elective English course, this may not be the course credit that science students need or want. Additional research is necessary to determine how study abroad can be incorporated into the science curriculum to best meet the students' needs both now, through course credit, and in the future, as international professionals.

Second, although the motivations of students who decide to go abroad are discussed in the literature, there is less research exploring students' reasons for rejecting study abroad programs. This study has demonstrated the complexity of the decision, with several factors combining to prohibit participation. Approximately half of the smaller sample of students indicated they are aware of the linguistic and non-linguistic benefits of studying abroad. More research is necessary to discover whether these types of learning were omitted by the other half of the students because they are unaware of them or find them less important than other obstacles that they mentioned. Additional research may also provide insight into whether it is necessary to provide science students, who were the majority of the beginning-level students in the current study, with additional information so they realize that even low-level students can achieve significant linguistic gains during a study abroad program.

Third, enjoyment in speaking English was not found to be a statistically significant difference between students who have and do not have an interest in study abroad. As a result, future studies must continue to explore students' lack of motivation for participating.

Finally, research into students' impressions of study abroad (e.g., "not fun") must be conducted so that the recruitment process can more effectively spark enthusiasm for study abroad, resulting in more Shimane University students, particularly those with lower-level English abilities, participating.

Conclusion

"In an age of globalization and aging population with low birth rate, it is important to develop talented human resources who can work as bridges between Japan and other countries in order to promote mutual understanding" (Cabinet Office, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT] and other Ministries, 2009, p. 13). One way to accomplish these goals is to increase students' exposure to foreign cultures through study abroad.

The current study found that over half of the low-level students did not hold negative attitudes toward study abroad, with 57.47 percent of the students noting that they would like to participate in a study abroad program but one or more obstacles prevented their participation. The results of the open-response study indicate that nearly half of the students were aware of both linguistic and non-linguistic benefits of participating. Interestingly, enjoyment in speaking English does not seem to be correlated to participation for low-level students, suggesting extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation spurs them to study abroad. This is a factor that the university should consider when contemplating new directions for the study abroad programs.

The study demonstrated the complexity of the decision to study abroad, with students citing several factors as reasons for non-participation. A comparison with Menking (2010a) demonstrated no statistically significant differences between the lower- and advanced-ability students in regards to lack of interest in other countries and time constraints. The importance of financial restrictions and a desire to receive credit for participation were different between the lower- and higher-level students. The current study found a lack of confidence in English

ability to be the biggest impediment to participating in a study abroad program. This intriguing finding was true for both the low-level and advanced students, suggesting it is a concern that must be addressed when recruiting students for future study abroad programs.

Dr. Suzuki emphasized that when students study abroad, they gain not only foreign language proficiency but also broader views, both of which are necessary for international competitiveness. Dr. Suzuki noted that when he went abroad, he discovered there is a “world out there that we [Japanese students] do not know” (Fukada, 2010, para. 3). It is important to continue to remove students’ barriers to study abroad and increase the number of Japanese students going overseas. In doing so, more students will be given the opportunity to grow personally and be better prepared to be Japan’s future professionals in the international marketplace.

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