

Increasing Participation in Study Abroad Programs
from Lower-Level English Students

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Abstract

Most research into study abroad is conducted with students who are planning to or have already participated in a program. This paper, however, diverges by discussing students' attitudes before a decision about whether to study abroad has been made. A questionnaire was administered to 174 first-year students who were classified as having low English proficiency and were studying in mandatory English classes. The results indicate that over 40 percent were not interested in studying abroad. When asked when they would go if they were to participate, the majority believed they would most likely go during their second year of university. When queried about location, the overwhelming response was the United States, followed by Australia and the United Kingdom. The locations were not statistically different than those of a previous study with advanced-level students who had not made a decision whether to study abroad. The similarities in responses suggest that choice of location is not related to English ability. The lower-proficiency students, however, showed more interest in shorter programs than their advanced counterparts. The paper concludes with a discussion about the need for a new, shorter program that will attract a greater number of low-level English learners to study abroad.

国外研修をふくむ学習プログラムについては、多くの研究がある。一方、これらの研究の大部分が、国外研修を体験した学生のみを対象にしている。本研究は、国外研修に参加を決める前の段階にある学生を対象にする。大学の初年次教育において必修科目である英語教育で、英語力の下位グループに分類された174人の初年次生を対象にアンケート調査をおこなった。調査の結果は英語力下位グループのうち実に40%以上が国外研修には関心をもっていないことを示すものとなった。国外研修に参加をすると仮定した場合に、大学教育のいつの段階で参加することを検討するかについて質問した結果、多くの学生が2回生で参加することを望むことが示された。国外研修先としては、アメリカ合衆国を上げる学生が圧倒的多数であり、続いてオーストラリアとイギリスとを研修先として希望する学生が多かった。国外研修において学生が希望する国については、英語力の高いグループを対象にした前回の調査との間に差が見られず、学生の英語力と学生の国外研修先についての選択との間に相関がないことが明らかとなった。一方で、英語力の低いグループは短期間の国外研修プログラムを希望する傾向をより顕著に示した。この結果から、本研究では短期間の国外研修プログラムを選択肢として提示することの有意性を指摘する。

I . Introduction

There is a tendency to summarily classify Japanese tertiary students as “demotivated” (e.g., Burden, 2002; Falout & Maruyama, 2004; McVeigh, 2001). This lack of motivation is sometimes attributed to the fact that students are “worn down by a lack of perceived progress manifesting itself in a majority of students regarding themselves as beginners” (Burden, 2002, Conclusion). Even the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has admitted that after six years of second language (L2) studies, high school graduates generally lack sufficient L2 ability to participate in conversations and clearly exchange ideas (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2003). Research into differences between Japanese university freshmen with lower English proficiency and higher English proficiency has suggested that lower-ability students lack confidence and have poor attitudes toward English. They have also been found to be twice as likely as higher-ability students to dislike studying English (Falout & Maruyama, 2004). Based on previous research and widely accepted generalizations, students with lower English language ability have traditionally been seen as uninterested in study abroad. This has not, however, been substantiated with quantitative data that also explores reasons for participation or non-participation.

Menking (2010b) explored the opinions of 180 Shimane University students with advanced English ability. The results indicated that almost half of the students expected to participate in a study abroad program before graduating from university. Because the study was limited to higher-proficiency students, the current study was undertaken to explore the opinions of students who were taking a mandatory English course and had been classified as having the lowest level of English among the first-year university students.

II . Current Study: Methodology and Subjects

Menking (2010b) administered a questionnaire written in English but with enough Japanese translation to ensure students understood the meaning. The survey instrument was given to all of the first-year students enrolled in the advanced level of a mandatory English course. The questionnaire explored students' opinions about study abroad. The questionnaire had three parts: part one requesting demographic data, part two surveying opinions about participation in a study abroad program from an ideal point of view, and part three asking students to think realistically about such things as their class schedules, money, and club commitments and indicate their realistic intentions.

Menking's questionnaire was adopted for the lower-level English students in the current study. To reduce language anxiety and eliminate the possibility of misunderstanding, the questionnaire was written in Japanese with no English. The modified questionnaire was administered to 174 first-year students (136 male, 36 female, 2 no response to this

item) enrolled in the lowest level of a first-year mandatory English course. All students enrolled at this level were surveyed.

The timing of administration, a few weeks after the students had been informed about the next university-wide English study abroad program in the United States, mirrors Menking (2010b). Administering the questionnaire after the students had received the two-page handout about the next three-week program assures a degree of certainty that the students were at least aware of some of the study abroad options that exist at the university. In addition, it is possible that students who were curious about studying abroad may have begun to think about the topic, perhaps allowing for more thoughtful answers than if the questionnaire had been administered without students being cognizant of the types of programs that are currently available.

Of the 174 students who completed the questionnaire, 6 (3.45 percent) were studying in the Faculty of Law and Literature, 22 (12.64 percent) were in the Faculty of Education, 48 (27.59 percent) studied in the Faculty of Life and Environmental Science, 96 (55.17 percent) belonged to the Interdisciplinary Faculty of Science and Engineering, and 2 (1.15 percent) did not complete this questionnaire item. These results contrast with Menking (2010b), in which 46.67 percent of the students were in the Faculty of Law and Literature and 17.22-18.33 percent were in each of the other three faculties. These differences, however, reflect the schism in enrollment in mandatory English classes at the advanced and beginning levels of English ability. In both studies, the questionnaire was administered to the entire population of students enrolled in the mandatory English courses at those levels, and therefore, the results are representative of the Shimane University students at these English ability levels during their first year of tertiary education.

III. Results

1. "Ideally" I would participate.

In part two of the questionnaire, students indicated whether they would like to (ideally) participate in four different study abroad programs: 1) a ten-day homestay program to the United States, 2) a ten-day homestay program to Australia, 3) a six-week homestay in the United States featuring English and cultural instruction, and 4) an eight-week homestay in the United States featuring English and cultural instruction. Since one year had passed since Menking's (2010b) administration, a sample of 32 advanced-ability English students was asked to complete the same questionnaire. The results were then compared to Menking (2010b). No statistically significant differences were found, increasing assurance that Menking (2010b) and the current study's results can be compared without concerns that there have been shifts in students' opinions because of economic, political, and social factors.

Unlike the overwhelmingly positive response of the advanced-level students to participation (82.22 percent interest; Menking, 2010b, p. 18), the response in the current study was more muted. The opinions of the beginning English students were almost evenly divided, with 78 students (44.83 percent) not attracted to any of the four programs and 96 students (55.17 percent) intrigued by one or more of the programs. The 10-day programs to the United States and Australia were the most popular, with 75.00 percent of the 96 students selecting each program. The six- and eight-week programs were not as popular, being selected by 28.13 percent and 30.21 percent of the students, respectively.

Individual differences were apparent in the number of programs selected. Approximately one-third (37 students; 38.54 percent) of the 96 students who were interested in study abroad selected one program. The two 10-day programs were the most popular (each with 37.84 percent of the students selecting one program), followed by the eight-week (16.21 percent) and then the six-week (8.11 percent) programs. Another one-third (36.46 percent) of the students who were ideally interested in studying abroad selected two programs, with the overwhelming majority (94.29 percent) selecting both of the 10-day programs. Only 3.13 percent of the 96 students marked three programs, while 21.88 percent chose all four programs.

Menking (2010b) noted that among the advanced students, the Faculty of Education students were the most intrigued by study abroad, with 90.62 percent expressing an interest in one or more of the four programs. In the current study, however, the Education majors, as with students from the other Faculties, demonstrated less interest in study abroad. The lower-level Education students selected one (18.18 percent), two (27.27 percent), three (4.55 percent), and four (9.09 percent) programs, but 40.91 percent indicated they were not attracted to any of the four programs. Participation in a homestay program from an ideal perspective was a statistically significant difference between the beginning and advanced English learners using a one-way chi square test (29.58, $df=1$, $p<.001$).

2. Timing of Participation

Eighty-eight students included details about when they thought they might go on a study abroad program if they were going to participate. Eleven of these students (12.50 percent) mentioned two or more school years, suggesting they either anticipate participating twice or are not certain about the best time to take part in a program. As Table 1 demonstrates, the majority believed they will study abroad during their sophomore year of university. This is not surprising when one considers two realities. First, with the current job market remaining bleak, students begin searching for post-graduation employment during their third year at university. Even then, students may find themselves without permanent employment after graduation (Fukue, 2010), so students can rarely afford to go abroad during their junior or senior years. Second, Menking (2010a) found cost to be prohibitively restrictive for participating in study abroad programs. For most first-year students, the programs are an investment that they are ill-prepared to make

because they have not had the time or opportunity to save the necessary funds.

Academic status	Number of students (n=88)	Percent response
First-year	9	10.23
Second-year	47	53.41
Third-year	12	13.64
Fourth-year	5	5.68
Two or three years provided; second-year included	10	11.36
Two years provided; second-year not included	1	1.14
No year specified	4	4.55

Table 1. Academic status students believe they will be if they study abroad.

Note: Sums to 100.01 percent due to rounding.

3. Location

On the questionnaire, students were asked to write the country or countries where they would study if they were to go abroad. While 27 students gave one country, 54 provided two, 1 student wrote four countries, and 6 students did not specify the location; this resulted in 139 responses. It is unclear whether students included information about two or more programs because they intend to go twice or are uncertain about which area of the world they would like to visit. Further research is necessary to explore this vital issue, which is particularly pertinent if the university is going to consider expanding the number of study abroad options by creating new programs.

As Table 2 demonstrates, students provided 15 different countries or regions to which they would travel if they were going to study abroad. Menking (2010b) found the United States to be twice as popular as the second most often mentioned country. In the current study, almost two-thirds of the students would study in the United States, further validating Menking's findings and again demonstrating the continued popularity of travel to and study in the United States.

Country	Number of students (n=88)	Percent response
United States	57	64.77
Australia	35	39.77
United Kingdom	19	21.59
Canada	10	11.36
China	6	6.82
Germany	2	2.27
Italy	2	2.27
Sweden, New Zealand, Switzerland, Poland, India, Korea	1 each	1.14 each
Europe, Northern Europe	1 each	1.14 each

Table 2. Countries students would study in.

When the Japanese first-year lower-level English students provided two or more countries, there were some intriguing pairings. For example, three students included the United States and China. There were also unique pairings, including Australia and India, Australia and China, South Korea and the United States, Australia and Sweden, and the United States and Switzerland. Students' choice of two countries on different continents and with different cultures and languages suggests these students may be considering two trips, although further research is necessary to validate this thesis. In contrast to these sets of countries, the pairings of Australia and the United States (21 students), the United States and the United Kingdom (13 students), the United States and Canada (5 students), and Australia and Canada (2 students) provide less insight into students' opinions. For example, although the two countries are often in different regions of the world, for example Australia and the United Kingdom (3 students) and the United Kingdom and New Zealand (1 student), the two countries are both in Kachru's (e.g., 1992, 2005) Inner Circle of countries, countries where English is spoken as a native language. Therefore, it is possible that the students would like to study in either one of the countries or intend to study in both. As a result, further investigation is necessary.

As the top four entries in Table 2 demonstrate, the draw of English-speaking countries remains unmistakable. Yano (2008, p. 139) emphasized the Japanese "adoration of Western culture" and the desire to learn "native-speaker English." This mentality is evident in students' choices for study abroad locations. These choices are also not surprising given the national government's emphasis on English education. Furthermore, according to the Institute of International Education (2010a), five of the top ten destinations for Japanese students who are studying abroad are English-speaking countries (i.e., the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada). This contrasts with the top five countries that send students to Japan: China, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Malaysia (Japan Student Services Organization, 2009). The results should not, however, be over-interpreted since the questionnaire in the current study referred to study abroad but was administered during English classes. In addition, the "ideal" programs in the second part of the questionnaire were all in native English-speaking countries, raising the possibility that students' lack of interest in Asian programs may, at least in part, be attributable to the survey instrument.

Although more countries were mentioned in the current study, the differences between the advanced and lower-level English students' choices of countries were not statistically significant, even at $p < .10$ (6.562, $df=6$). This suggests that students find specific countries attractive due to factors other than their current second language ability.

4. Length of Program

On the questionnaire, students were asked to provide the length of the program(s) they would choose if they were going to study abroad. Two students provided inconclusive responses (i.e., one, two); these responses were removed. Some students did not provide a desired length of program, resulting in statistics for 74 students. As Table 3

demonstrates, students tended to favor short programs, with over half of the students selecting a program length of two weeks or less. Hulstrand (2006) noted that short-term programs, including programs of just one week, are ideal for students who are not ready emotionally or linguistically, those who have limited financial resources, and students with other responsibilities. Menking (2010a) found lack of financial resources to be a major obstacle to participation, so the selection of these shorter programs may be because they are more affordable. It is theorized that shorter programs may allow more Shimane University students to participate or give students the opportunity to participate in two programs, but further research is necessary to quantify these possibilities.

Length of program	Percent response (n=74)
“1 week” or a number of days	21.62
“10 days,” “2 weeks”	40.54
“3 weeks”	4.05
“4 weeks” or “1 month”	21.62
“2 months”	1.35
“a year”	2.70
Other responses (given once or twice each)	8.11

Table 3. Students' desired program length.

Note: Sums to 99.99 percent due to rounding.

A cross-sectional examination of length of program with the three most popular destinations demonstrates the remarkable similarity of students' opinions for the shortest and one-month programs to Australia and the United States (Table 4). Menking (2010b) concluded that students differentiate three-week and four-week programs, with them favoring the longer duration. Tables 3 and 4 provide additional evidence that three-week programs to all locations are no longer popular with students. As a result, the university should re-examine the current official programs and consider shortening them to less than two weeks or lengthening them to a month.

Duration	Australia (n=33)	U.K. (n=17)	U.S. (n=54)
Up to 2 weeks	63.64%	41.18%	62.96%
2-3 weeks	0	5.88%	1.85%
3 weeks	6.06%	0	1.85%
4 weeks – 1 month	24.24%	35.29%	22.22%
1 month – 6 months	3.03%	11.76%	7.41%
1 year	3.03%	5.88%	3.70%

Table 4. Cross-sectional examination of location and length of program.

Note. Responses that could not be accurately classified (e.g., *weeks*) were removed. U.K. and U.S. columns sum to 99.99 percent due to rounding.

The English questionnaire in Menking (2010b) allowed for more certainty about future participation than the questionnaire instrument in the current study, which only specified *if you were going to participate*. This difference in nuance is a caveat of the following discussion. In Menking (2010b), the advanced-level students' most common response was *4 weeks, 1 month*. Furthermore, the students in that study provided program lengths such as *months, 3 months, and 6 months*, which were absent in the current data. These examples illustrate the differences between the advanced and lower-level students' responses, and the differences were statistically significant at $p < .005$ (25.00, $df=8$).

IV. Necessity of Program Revision

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT] (Cabinet Office, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT] and other Ministries, 2009) states, "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." Shimane University's Charter mirrors this goal by aiming to "foster the development of individuals with initiative who possess a high degree of expertise and human compassion" (Shimane University, n.d., p. 3). It is essential for Japanese universities to market themselves as strong contenders in the international arena if they are going to remain competitive in an era where college enrollments are rapidly decreasing (e.g., Gilmour, 2007; McNeill, 2008). As Shimane University considers the best way to raise the university's international image and at the same time foster students' independent development, the results of the current study may prove informative.

1. Shorter Program

The study demonstrated the students' desire for shorter study abroad programs. Students with lower English language ability are not attracted to study abroad, but if they were going to go overseas, shorter programs than those currently offered would appeal to them. Chemist and Nobel Prize laureate Akira Suzuki has been vocal in his support of study abroad, noting that it allows students to discover a whole new world (Fukada, 2010). The Science Council of Japan has further emphasized the importance of studying abroad, noting, "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 students in the current study, many of whom will be Japan's future scientists, need international sensitivity and communication skills just as much as students with higher English proficiency. There is, therefore, a need to follow international trends and create a shorter program (e.g., 1-2 weeks), one that will better meet the students' perceived needs and interests and thereby entice them

to study abroad.

Universities around the world have become innovative in their designs of study abroad programs, and the United States is no exception. In fact, because of the dramatic rise in the number of students participating in short-term programs, the overall number of U.S. students studying abroad has been increasing. To achieve this, American universities have incorporated short-term overseas study components into many regular courses. This could be mimicked at Shimane University. In the United States, there has also been more collaboration among Faculties. For example, one program combined a group of students from mechanical engineering, communications students, and French language majors in a service learning project in Mali in West Africa (Hulstrand, 2006). Kathleen Sideli, chair of the NAFSA Association of International Educator's Section on U.S. Students Abroad Data Collection Committee from 1998-2002, noted that the population for these new short-term programs is not the same as the group of students desiring longer programs. Sideli concluded that the increase in the number and diversity of programs available has resulted in "more and different students studying abroad, who wouldn't have studied abroad before" (as quoted in Hulstrand, 2006, p. 51). This suggests more program options would not inhibit participation in the existing programs but would, instead, offer other alternatives, thereby increasing the total number of Shimane University students studying abroad.

Although traditional study abroad programs tend to focus on language acquisition, significant linguistic gains on a program of less than two weeks would be extraordinary. Research has, however, demonstrated the wide range of non-linguistic benefits of study abroad, including the development of independence and a deeper concern for international affairs (e.g., Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Hadis, 2005) and an examination of previously held beliefs and stereotypes (e.g., Menking, 2004). In addition, Sideli (as quoted in Hulstrand, 2006) noted that the long-term impact of a program has more to do with students' reflections on their experiences rather than the length of the program, leading Hulstrand to conclude, "some of the most important things that can be learned on education abroad programs can happen in a surprisingly short period of time" (Hulstrand, 2006, p. 52). As a result, new, shorter programs at Shimane University should include opportunities for students to analyze their experiences.

When faculty and students travel together, there is a type of intellectual engagement (Hulstrand, 2006) that is missing from commercially available programs. In addition to providing guided reflection, short-term faculty-led programs have another important advantage. Japanese and Shimane University students who have participated in commercial study abroad programs and tours regularly discuss the problems they encountered. These difficulties, however, are rarely included in the discussions of students who have returned from university-sponsored and faculty-led programs. When the university,

Faculties, and faculty members lead programs, students can “travel with a degree of confidence that may be missing when they must search for and participate in programs operated by businesses” (Menking, 2010b, p. 20). This further emphasizes the importance of creating a shorter study abroad program so students have a better, and more academic, alternative to private, for-profit trips. As the previous discussion demonstrated, an additional program would also accentuate, rather than detract from, the current study abroad offerings.

2. Additional Location

The current study did not find statistically significant differences in the opinions of beginning and advanced-level students when they considered where they would like to study. This suggests students are attracted to countries in spite of, not because of, their second language abilities. This study once again demonstrated the overwhelming appeal of the United States, followed by Australia, and then Great Britain. It also reinforces Menking's (2010b) observation that students are not interested in Canada. These views may not be surprising when one considers national statistics that indicate that two-thirds of the Japanese students who study abroad go to the United States, with the remainder “largely based in four other countries: Australia, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Institute for Statistics, 2009, p. 41).

While Shimane University currently has programs in the United States, France, and Germany, students do not have the opportunity to study in the United Kingdom or Australia. However, the continued popularity of the unofficial, faculty member-led *London Tour*, which took Shimane University students to London during both the spring and winter breaks in 2010, reinforces the appeal of Great Britain. Equally important, Japan (e.g., Science Council of Japan, 2005) continues to emphasize its relationship to and importance as a leader in Asia, and Shimane University's Strategy for International Exchange emphasizes the “coalition with Asia” (Shimane University, n.d., p. 4). Considering its popularity with students of both lower and advanced English proficiency and its importance to the university and Japan, Shimane University should consider the addition of a study abroad program in Australia.

V. Conclusion

This study of lower-level English ability, first-year tertiary students indicates that over 40 percent were not interested in studying abroad. When asked about program choice if they were to participate, students indicated they were more interested in shorter programs than their advanced counterparts and would go during their second year of university. The majority asserted that they would most likely go to the United States, but

Australia was also popular, with almost 40 percent of the students choosing it. The responses to location, however, did not reflect a statistically significant difference between the lower-proficiency and advanced-level students, suggesting the choice is not related to perceived English ability.

The results suggest that the university should consider creating a shorter study abroad program to the United States or Australia. Creating a program in Australia would further emphasize the university's desire to become a larger inter-Asian institution while at the same time meeting students' perceived needs and interests.

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