Going and Coming: Three Study Abroad Programs Based in Japan

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Abstract

This paper looks briefly at three study abroad programs based in Japan with particular attention to how the programs prepare students for study abroad as well as how they prepare students for return to their native country. The programs represent the range of study abroad programs offered in Japan regarding length of stay, degree of preparation, and expectations. Similarities and differences are discussed, and general observations and conclusions about requirements for a study abroad program are offered.

Introduction

Needs assessment is accepted as an integral part of program planning in both English for specific purposes and general language classes. (Richards, 1990) Yet, in the area of preparing students for study abroad many programs suffer from poor peripheral vision or perhaps myopia since until recently "traditional approaches . . . focused almost exclusively on language proficiency" (Richards and Hurley, 1990: 144). This oversight is perhaps not so difficult to understand, since the students are most often said to be preparing for *study* abroad. Of course, the academic part of a students' lives in a foreign country is just that, a part, and ignoring the rest of the students's lives in planning the curricula they will follow in preparation for living abroad, while in the foreign country, and upon returning to the home country is to do them great disservice.

Many, including Trabich (1994), M. G. and Y. Kiji (1994), and Kathleen Kitao (1993) have done considerable research on preparing students for studying English outside Japan. Similarly, the problems of adapting and reentry have been explored by Brislin (1981) Miyamoto (1994), Martin (1986), and Rogers (1991). However, it seems that little of what has been learned has been integrated into programs claiming to prepare students for study abroad, or, in some cases, just sending them. In Japan, TOEFL and TOEIC courses abound, yet courses aiming at preparing the students for life outside the classroom, or more accurately, life beyond the English language examination are much too rare. There is no question that language skills are key to a student's benefit and survival in a foreign country, but the needs of a student (or anyone) looking to spend an extended length of time in a foreign country go much deeper. Hall (1981: vii) correctly states that "culture is communication and that communication is culture" but adds

> It isn't that people "talk" to each other beyond words, but that there is an entire universe of behavior that is unexplored, unexamined, and very much taken for granted. It functions outside conscious awareness and in juxtaposition to words.

The student's world in a foreign country is an incredibly complex one, and one fraught with potential for error, misunderstanding, and difficulty. The classroom is an important part of this world, but any school or institution sending students to a foreign country would be well advised to give due attention to preparing the student for life abroad, as well as for return to the home country. Language is only one of many tools the students must pack for their sojourn if they are to be successful.

In this paper I will look briefly at three study abroad programs based in Japan with particular attention to how the programs prepare students for study abroad as well as how they prepare students for return to their native country. The observation necessarily will be superficial, yet the contrasts will illustrate the range of approaches being taken by various schools. I will conclude with observations of my own in administering a study abroad program and preparing students for study abroad and return to their home country.

Nihon University - Auburn University

The first program to be examined began in 1993 through Nihon University. That year, 19 Nihon University students were sent to Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama to study English for about six weeks. The program was initiated by an Auburn faculty member whose specialty is Japanese technology management. At the time, Auburn University had no ESL program, so the Georgia State University's Applied Linguistics faculty members were recruited to design, develop, and conduct the program. The majority of students participating in the program were majoring in business or closely related fields, such as economics, industrial management, or commerce.

Most striking about Drake's (1998) description of the program's first year is the absence of any mention of student preparation specific to studying and living abroad. To be fair, this is not the focus of his study, yet it is not unfair to assume that whatever preparation was provided for the students, it was not significant to be cited as a factor in either preventing or failing to prevent student problems. There is evidence that the program's designers were not insensitive to the issues facing their students, since there was great attention given to the students' environment both in and out of the classroom while at Auburn. Indeed, within the operative limitations, the six-week course in Auburn was quite sound. However, there is no evidence that the students were given any preparation while still in Japan for study or life abroad. The implications can be seen in the problems the students reported, or more tellingly, did not report.

Yet, a careful look at the experience through the eyes of the students reveals a scenario few would describe as ideal. The students' time was rigidly structured, leaving them almost no opportunity for interaction in the community. Below is an outline of a day described as "typical":

Monday, August 9

07:00 - 9:30	Breakfast
08:00 - 09:00	Speech Clinic for Group 2
09:30 - 11:30	Reading/Writing Class
11:30 - 12:30	Lunch
12:00 - 01:00	Speech Clinic for Group 1
12:30 - 01:30	Study Hall
01:30 - 03:30	Speaking/Listening Class
03:30 - 04:00	Opelika-Auburn Newspaper Interview
04:00 - 06:00	Sporting Activity (Optional)
06:00 - 07:00	Dinner
07:00 - 08:00 (optional)	International Student Discussion Group
08:00 - 10:00	Evening Communication Session (required)
10:00 - 12:00	Individual Study and Free Time

When one accounts for the Japanese cultural need for structure, this schedule may not seem that extreme (Trabich, 1995), but it nevertheless suggests that allowing the students to interact freely in a foreign culture was not a priority of the program. Again, homework assignments, living arrangements, field trips, and other activities were planned to encourage interaction with non-Japanese students, but generally in a very structured environment. Toward the end of the program, students were paired for a weekend homestay with local families, or in some cases, individuals.

The students had positive responses to the homestay and other social activities. Their criticisms of the program included a dissatisfaction with academic lectures and the food. The students felt the lectures were boring and unrelated to their interests.Concerning food, they were not happy with the quality of the cafeteria food and many said that they missed Japanese food. Looking at the students' pre- and post-program test scores (Auburn University's standard G-STEP exam), some students improved, some maintained, and others failed to maintain their initial level. This is not surprising, given the correlation between increased language ability and use of English outside the classroom (Ellis, 1993). No account is given of the students' experience upon re-entry.

The tight structure and limited range of experience of the program may be the best defense for the lack of preparation the students were given. Much of what the students experienced in Auburn might well have been included in a thorough preparatory program. Drake feels the biggest failure involved the academic lectures:

> The academic lectures were not successful; the students reported difficulty and boredom with the content... However, the Nihon students got a feeling of

> the atmosphere and dynamics of an American university classroom. (Drake, 1987: 13)

I submit that this is an example of the kind of situation for which the students could be prepared while still in Japan (Sakamoto and Naotsuka, 1982). Much research has been done regarding organizational and behavioral patterns in the classroom (McDonough and Shaw, 1993), and introducing the students to the "atmosphere" of an American university classroom is not necessarily something that students need to travel abroad to experience, as I will later show.

Likewise, that the students' biggest complaints centered on food and lectures might indicate that very little chance was given to them to encounter the kinds of experiences associated with living abroad (having to function in the L2, learning a new transportation system, communicating with strangers, etc.) (Silva, 1998). While the students were physically 7000 miles from Japan, they were not that far from home after all.

Niigata Women's College - Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

Geis and Fukushima describe quite a different situation at Niigata Women's College (NWC) (Geis and Fukushima, 1997). The Department of English offers a two-credit six-week course (Beginning in July and ending in August) for English majors who study abroad in an approved English program. While many programs qualify, most students choose Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC) because NWC provides a faculty escort to that school. The program is administered by the Center for English as a Second Language (CESL), a unit of the Linguistics Department at SIUC. The program began in 1994, with one student enrolling, and by 1996 twenty-four students were enrolled in the program.

In contrast to Drake, Geis and Fukushima describe the preparation of students headed abroad in the 1996 class in great detail. Students were first given information about the program at orientation at the beginning of the school year, and within the first month, representatives from SIUC visited the school. Students who were interested in the program and their parents attended weekly meetings with faculty where their concerns were addressed. The students were given a realistic view of what to expect, including expected hardships and rewards. Once students committed to the program, meetings and workshops were held covering all aspects of the students' trip: visas, admission applications, housing, transportation, restaurants, hotels, taxis, neighborhood maps, and items to bring with them.

The group was divided into four sub-groups, each with its own leader, with one of these four also serving as the class leader. This structure was applied while in Japan and while in the United States. The large size of this group created some logistic difficulties when they arrived in the small community of Carbondale (transportation from the airport, housing). It also presented the organizers with difficulty in finding adequate interactive opportunities within the community. The size of the group relative to the size of the

community further isolated the visitors and made interaction awkward. In the future, groups will be limited to about fifteen. What is noteworthy is that the organizers of the NWC/SIUC program identified this isolation as a problem. This is in direct contrast to the Nihon University program, in which the student isolation existed by design.

Measurement of students' language skills showed a similar pattern to that of the Nihon University students. The TOEFL exam was administered before and after the six-week course. Some students scored twenty to forty points lower upon completion of the program, while one student showed an increase of seventy points. Personal interviews were also administered, and while improved attitudes were observed by the interviewers, no objective conclusions could be drawn about increases in language ability.

Geis and Fukushima (1997: 20) cite improved student motivation upon returning to Japan as one of the most significant positive results of the program:

> . . . it is felt that the most enduring benefit is the increase in the students' level of motivation . . . the study abroad course has had an extremely positive impact on the ESL classes at NWC, especially in getting generally silent Japanese students to speak freely about everyday topics in pairs and groups. Perhaps a better way to articulate this change in motivation is to describe it in terms of experience and success abroad, reinforcing this with practice in Japan, the role of returning students as models for the students who did not go abroad and exposure to an intensive English language program.

It is quite clear that NWC places a much greater emphasis on preparing the students for their sojourn than did NU, but it must be kept in mind that the expectations of the programs are also quite different. The students enrolled in the NU-Auburn program live in a relatively controlled environment, whereas the NWC-SIUC students live in a much freer environment and needed to be prepared accordingly. Nevertheless, the apparent lack of attention to preparation for going and returning from abroad raises some questions about NU's sensitivity to the needs and welfare of its students.

Kansai Gaigo Semmongakko - Vancouver Community College

The third program to be examined is part of the curriculum at the *Kansai Gaigo Semmongakko* (Kansai College of Business and

Languages)[1] in Osaka, Japan. Students learn of the program through advertising or recruiting before classes begin, and commit to the program before enrollment. While the norm for *semmongakko* curricula is two years, this program requires three years for completion. The first and third year of instruction take place in Japan. During the second year, students spend ten months attending the Vancouver Community College (VCC) in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. The students live with homestay families for the duration of their time abroad. I was on the faculty at *Kansai Gaigo Semmongakko* (KG) for seven years, and director of the program in my last two years there.

Under my direction, the program had four goals. The first was to bring the students' level of English to survival level. While some of the students' skills were adequate, many students enter the program with very low level English language skills. Second, we sought to familiarize the students with the cultural differences they were likely to encounter in classroom, home, and public situations. Third, we helped students develop appropriate survival skills and taught techniques for dealing with "culture shock." Finally, we tried to lay the groundwork for preparing the students for possible difficulties on reentry to Japan.

A typical incoming class at the *semmongakko* consisted of about 130 students (for the entire school), with about 70% of the class choosing English as their major. This number includes about twenty-five study abroad (SA) students, who are required to major in English. As with the NWC class, there is a class leader, though at KGS, the leader and three "sub-leaders" are chosen by the students after about six weeks of class.

All students at the school are required to receive thirty hours of instruction per week for two thirty-week semesters. For English majors eighteen hours of these are English-related courses: conversation, reading, writing, Business English, STEP preparation, etc. For these courses, and for several non-major related courses the Canada-bound students are grouped with the other English majors, and divided by level. For eight of the thirty hours, the SA students take the following courses specific to their study abroad:

Canadian Affairs	two hours per week
Survival Skills	two hours per week
Crossing Cultures	two hours per week
Homestay English	two hours per week

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[1]. A *semmongakko* is a post-secondary vocational school certified by the Japanese Ministry of Education. *Semmongakkos* in Japan fulfill many of the same functions as community colleges in the United States. Graduation requires successful completion of a two-year full-time curriculum.

Thus, the SA students receive 240 hours of instruction directly related to their study abroad experience. Because of the length of time the students in this program spend in Canada contrasted to the students in the other two programs examined (ten months vs. six weeks), the extra preparation effort is not surprising. Additionally, by design the program's intention is to prepare students for living abroad, rather than visiting for a relatively short time.

I was responsible for content selection, and made my choices based on the needs of students living in a foreign country for the first time. I relied heavily on feedback from students who had returned from the year abroad. I also often consulted the former director of the program, people in charge of other study abroad programs, and the faculty of the school in Vancouver. I taught the group two courses, *Survival Skills* and *Crossing Cultures*.

One area that I feel is critical in this program is maximizing contact the SA students had with non-Japanese teachers. To this end, about half of the students' hours of instruction are taught by "native speakers" of English. The reason for this distribution is to help familiarize the students with a full range of western behavior patterns. Interaction between students and teachers outside the class is encouraged, and several student parties are held during the year.

In each of my final two years of involvement with the program, KGS has invited two instructors from VCC to spend about eight hours per week for two weeks with the SA students in Osaka toward the end of their first academic year, about two months before their actual departure. About six hours of this contact was class time and the other hours were spent on individual interviews and other activities. Welcome and *sayonara* parties were organized by the students.

This arrangement proved to be extremely successful for several reasons. First, it gave the SA students a chance for a "dry run" of what they had learned about North American culture with "real" foreigners, that is, not their "regular" teachers who were accustomed to Japanese students and the Japanese academic environment. Second, it gave the VCC instructors a chance to see the students in their Japanese environment, as well as witness the environment itself. The instructors felt that observing other classes, meeting the faculty, and watching the student-teacher interaction in Japan were invaluable to their understanding of the behavior and problems they observed Japanese students experiencing in Vancouver. Finally, it allowed a ready-made bridge for the SA students on their arrival in Canada. They now had two "friends" they could look forward to seeing when they arrived in Canada, rather than get off the plane facing a completely unknown world.

These students did not need to travel to North America to feel the "atmosphere" of an American or Canadian classroom because they were experiencing this atmosphere every week in Japan. Also, the contact with foreign teachers gave the students a chance to *acquire* all manner of cultural information from frequent, formal and informal interaction with their non-Japanese teachers that could never be gotten from a textbook or lecture. As Hall rightly points out:

> Since culture is learned, it also seemed clear that one should be able to teach it. Yet in the past there had been singularly little success in this regard with the important exception of language, one of the dominant threads in all cultures. The answer to this question is rooted in understanding the difference between acquisition and learning. Most of culture is acquired and therefore cannot be taught. (Hall, 1981: 36-37)

I enjoyed the luxury of a close-coupled feedback loop that helped keep the program in tune with the needs of the students, parents, and both schools. Needs analysis was conducted in preparation for and throughout each academic year, and modifications to teaching, operations, or goals made accordingly. Constant feedback from the performance of the second year students in Canada allowed the school to adjust the teaching of the first year students to strengthen apparent weak areas. Also, because of the large financial investment involved on the part of the students' families for the year abroad, the school remained finely tuned to the needs and concerns of students and parents. Surveys were also given to applicants, enrolled students, and students returning from Canada to assess student expectations, needs, and satisfaction.

Language skills content in both the *Homestay English* and *Survival Skills* courses is focused on role-play activities mirroring likely real-life situations the students would encounter, such as meeting the host family at the airport, discussing a problem and seeking a resolution, emergency situations, etc. Survival skill training also utilizes role play and dramatization of problem situations extensively.

The *Crossing Cultures* class covers cultural issues and was taught in seminar type classes, where a video, a reading or a lecture was presented to the students, directing questions were posed, and issues were discussed in pairs and groups. Third year students who lived in Canada in their second year are often invited to join the class to share their experiences.

The students' progress is measured by administering VCC's standard language skills assessment test before and after the ten-month homestay. Without exception, all students show improvement in their langauge ability, some more than others, though this is hardly surprising given the length of time the students spent in Canada.

Problems in a program in which students spend such a long time abroad are necessarily more numerous and potentially more serious. Students occasionally had health problems, accidents, problems with friends, or homesickness. Homestay families were a problem more often than one would have anticipated, and their selection became an issue between VCC's Homestay Office and KGS. However, when problems arose, the Homestay Office was responsive and the students were able to make the necessary changes immediately. The students had been taught to voice their concerns firmly and without hesitation, so the problem of reticence exhibited by

so many Japanese students in unfamiliar situations (Trabich, 1994), was quite effectively averted.

Another phenomenon that may or may not be considered a problem is the student who chooses to remain in Canada at the end of the ten-month period. Ironically, the likelihood of a student remaining abroad increases with the adequacy of the preparation of the student. Thus, the choice of students to continue their studies overseas rather than return to Japan can be interpreted as an indicator that the students were very well prepared for life in the host country. Such an optimistic viewpoint is unlikely to be shared by the home institution forfeiting a final year of tuition money, however. Typically about one or two students each year make such a choice.

Students who returned from Canada for their final year at the *semmongakko* also present challenges. Often, their English ability improves to such a degree that they are easily bored by the level of the classes into which they are placed. This is exacerbated by the casual classroom behavior some students acquired while abroad and which is not accepted well by some Japanese instructors in Japan. Time solves most of these problems, but it is obvious that more needs to be done to help the students prepare for their return home. In the students' last weeks in Vancouver, students participate in several "closure" activities designed jointly by VCC and KGS, including discussion groups and a group video project summarizing their time in Vancouver. As I have stated, more preparation for the return is necessary.

Conclusion

The look at these three programs is hardly basis for widespread recommendations. Yet, despite the small sample group and despite, or possibly because of, the very different goals and approaches taken by each school, several salient observations and tentative conclusions are possible. The three programs fairly represent the range of types of study abroad programs in Japan today. At one end is the almost casual short-term visit conducted by NU and at the other is the much more intensive long-term program offered by KGS.

What is clear is that, as with any program, an exhaustive needs analysis should be the first step in establishing any study abroad program. This need becomes more critical in study abroad programs because the stakes are so high: the potential for both gain and disaster are both much greater. In this respect, the NU program comes up short. While it is unlikely that many of its students will "get in trouble" while at Auburn, much of the potential of the study abroad experience is thwarted by the lack of preparation and by the lack of opportunity to live freely within the foreign culture. While some may argue that six weeks is too short a time for such an experience, I offer the NWC program as an answer to that argument. Thoughtful preparation coupled with efforts to integrate the students as much as possible into the host community during the sojourn reaped proportional benefits. In defense of NU, however, I should add that we do not have a complete account of whatever preparation was given

to the students, and that for the structured experience the students were offered the preparation was adequate.

An area in which all three schools could focus more attention is in the integration of the academic content and cultural experience the students receive in the home country with that which they receive in the host country. The NWC faculty escort is a step in this direction, as is the VCC faculty visit to KGS. There is no impediment to feathering and overlapping the academic content offered by the two schools, which would offer the students a thread of continuity on which to hold amid the many other changes taking place around them. In the case of KGS, this would require little more than the visiting instructors making a conscious effort of introducing the material the students would be using in classes at VCC. Of course, resources may not be available in all programs for instructor visits, which can become quite expensive.

Looking at the three programs, one can see that the length of time the students live abroad magnifies the potential for problems as well as benefit. This is poignantly apparent in the discussion of KGS and the problems of returning students, which is an area to be explored on its own. Much attention is given to preparing students for their life abroad. In the case of KGS, the total is thirty weeks. When one considers the difficulty students face in returning their changed selves to idealized homes that themselves have changed in unexpected ways and degrees, one might be tempted to conclude that an equal amount of effort be spent preparing students for their return to the home country.

Jones's synopsis of the problems encountered by returnees (1997) and Miyamoto's firsthand account of his own return (1994) strikingly illustrate the need for researchers and study abroad organizers to give due attention to the problems of reentry. The potential benefits of studying and living abroad are too great to risk losing by inadequate preparation of the students, whether it be for their departure or their return. Much lip service is paid to "internationalism" in Japan, but if this concept is ever to become a reality, it is these sojourners who will make it so. Giving these students adequate preparation to survive the ordeal of life abroad and to return comfortably needs to be the priority of anyone involved in offering a study abroad program.

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