

## IDEAL PROCESSES FOR STUDYING ABROAD: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

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In recent years, the number of students wanting and going to study abroad has been on the rise. However, there can be a wide range of differences in what the students bring back from their experiences. The purpose of this study is to give an overview and reflect on study abroad initiatives from NIT, Oita College for fourth year internship students going to Singapore Polytechnic. Over three years, various approaches were taken, such as journal writing and pre-departure orientations. An analysis of what helped make the students have a more meaningful study abroad experience will be analyzed. Finally, the results are intended to help enrich the future cohorts from this college, even outside of the internship program.

*Keywords* : study abroad, journals, ethnography, internship, reflection

### 1. INTRODUCTION

With the next summer Olympic games coming to Tokyo in 2020, Japanese youth have started to realize the importance of being active on an international scale. Many have the intention, if not simply interest, in studying abroad to improve their language skills and be immersed in the culture of another country. Even the Ministry of Education (MEXT) has created a scholarship fund, with the help of several corporations, to encourage studying abroad called Tobitate! Japan.

However, just going overseas for a fixed period of time is not a guarantee of acquiring language skills, deepening cultural understanding, nor ensuring a meaningful experience. These troubles have been a source of concern for Kosen instructors who escort students on overseas internships or other programs. Students often encounter culture shock, or feelings of despair when realizing their actual level of ability in English.

So, what are the proper steps in hopefully guaranteeing a process for a life-changing study abroad experience? This study details a three-year observation period of Japanese student groups in Singapore, detailing the various attempts at improving the program, and the effects of the various interventions on the personal growth of the students participating in this intriguing program.

#### (1) Oita Kosen internship program in Singapore

The National Institute of Technology, Oita College (henceforth Oita Kosen) has an internship system set in place for all fourth year students. Students can choose a domestic or overseas internship, with often only a handful willing to challenge themselves overseas. The overseas internship program is possible due to cooperative efforts with Singapore Polytechnic (henceforth SP), in which for several years academic exchanges and internships have taken place between both institutions.

#### (2) Incoming internship program at Oita Kosen

In recent years, a reciprocation of internship activities has begun at Oita Kosen as well, with participants from SP coming in March for a 6-week program. This period is significantly longer than that of Kosen students at SP, and the reasoning is that SP regulations state that internship programs for their students must last at least six weeks in length.

#### (3) Affiliated faculty and staff

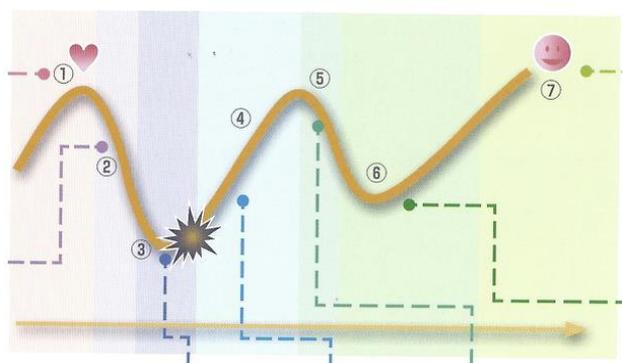
The study was mainly conducted and observed by one English teacher who accompanied the students throughout their internship program, and acted as an interpreter when needed on location. Other Japanese professors and office workers, as well as SP staff worked together for weeks in planning each internship program.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are several studies that have been done over the past few decades on the effects of studying abroad, some including specifics on Japanese students. Creamer (2004) did a study about the expectations of female students in overseas programs and found that they brought “cultural baggage” with them overseas, which affected the levels of immersion in their studies abroad. Ogawa (1998) conducted a study, which showed further gender differences, with female students being more open and having higher aspirations as well. Gender differences could lead to a source of concern for Kosen faculty accompanying students regardless of the low number of female students enrolled.

Another study by Lassegard (2013) detailed how there is a decrease of Japanese students going to study abroad since the mid-2000s with the lack of scholarships or supplementary funding available as the main source of hesitation. It is often thought that students are concerned with delaying their graduation or low level of interest to begin with, but financial reasons were found to be the most affecting. The study also detailed that most students felt that they were not prepared enough in their linguistic abilities before going overseas.

Finally, one of the most concerning was from a study by Segawa (1998) about the effects of culture shock on Japanese students going overseas for study abroad programs. It was shown that students who stayed together and had little individual interaction with locals had greater adaptation problems and even lead to internal conflict between members. This is a very important point to consider when taking Kosen students abroad for such programs.



**Fig.1** Culture Shock Timeline (emotion over time) taken from the “Overseas Study Program Guidebook” created by Toyama Kosen.

## 3. ANNUAL PLANS

The observations were taken over a period of three years, with each year having their own varying forms of provisions implemented with each cohort.

### (1) First year of research (2013)

For the annual summer internship program, it was the first time the researcher accompanied the students overseas. Senior faculty members also accompanied the students and few new provisions were created throughout the program. The most significant was the addition of daily meetings that would be held each night at a set time (curfew).

### (2) Second year of research (2014)

The next year of the internship program began to experiment with further reflective approaches for students to ease the sojourner adaptation process. Students were given journals in which students would recall their day of activities and describe how they changed as individuals and their perspectives of the local culture as well. Journals were conducted entirely in Japanese, for the ease of students to participate in this new form of provision. Also, a pre-departure orientation session with instruction on culture shock and local culture were introduced.

### (3) Third year of research (2015)

In the third and final year of the study, faculty agreed to increase the number of pre-departure orientation sessions, in which a guidebook created by staff at Toyama Kosen was used to prepare students for their studies abroad. Journals implemented the previous year were made to be written entirely in English, as well as exit interviews with each student the night before their departure, to reflect upon their experiences over the program.

## 4. POINTS OF DISCUSSION

### (1) Daily Meetings

The idea of daily meetings was inspired by experiences of the researcher from the study abroad plans of a local university, in which each night the students would have to gather for at least ten minutes and reflect on the days activities and discuss how they are feeling in the new culture. These meetings also doubled as a fixed curfew time for students and were followed without complaints.

Although not all students would share the same

amount of personal information, each student was made to say at least one comment. With not all students on the same page, and varying levels of comfort, an unbalance between the spoken reflections of students was seen. This lead to the implementation of journal writing.

**(2) Journal Writing**

Students were told to keep track of their daily activities in pocket-sized journals that were submitted to the accompanying professors by the end of each daily meeting. It was found that students were able to detail more about their personal feelings and things that were not mentioned previously in meetings on several occasions, which lead to easier group control by accompanying staff.

**a) Writing Journals in Japanese**

In the second year of the study when journals were implemented, students were allowed to write their journals in their native language. English was considered initially, but postponed to ensure that students would make the most of the journal writing process and be able to reflect more clearly.

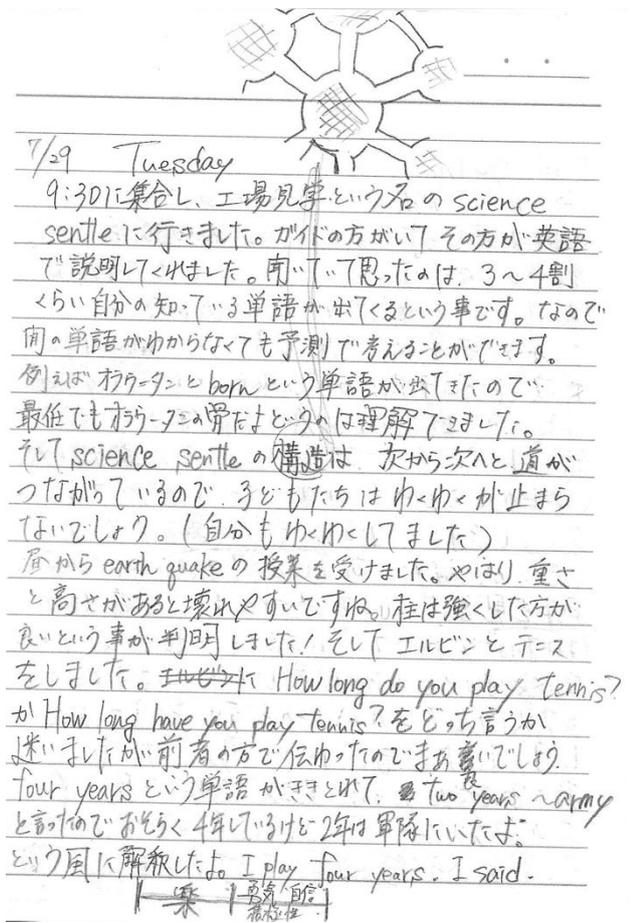


Fig. 2 Journal Entry in Japanese by a student

**b) Writing Journals in English**

In year three of the study, students were encouraged from the beginning to write their journals in English, and add further explanation in Japanese if absolutely necessary. Grammar and spelling mistakes were corrected, and it was found that over time, students were able to write entirely in English with very little need for corrections. Not only were students able to reflect clearly as in the previous year, but also improve written English.

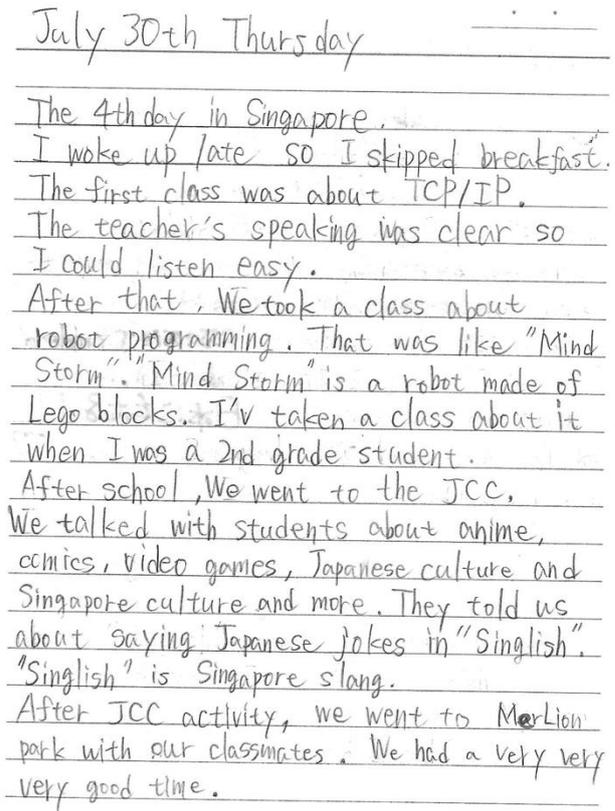


Fig.3 Journal Entry in English by a student

**(3) Pre-Departure Orientation**

After the success of an initial pre-departure orientation session in the second year of research, the third year lead to a more robust and detailed program, which included dealing with culture shock, introducing students to Singaporean culture and traditions before going overseas, as well as giving the students time to prepare for introductions to be done overseas. In previous years, students would stay up late into the night preparing PowerPoint slides to introduce themselves and their department of study at their welcome ceremonies in Singapore, however it was found that by giving students more time to prepare, students were able to present with greater confidence and develop higher quality

materials. The use of an “Overseas Study Guide Book” was also implemented as a suggestion by a former accompanying professor of the internship program, and students were encouraged to write information and research material in advance of their departure, as shown in Fig.4 below.

はじめに.....	1	第 3 章 海外研修プログラム参加にあたっての事前準備	9
第 1 章 なぜ海外研修プログラムに参加するのか？	2	出発までの大まかな流れ/事前準備7ヶ条.....	9
1-1 海外研修プログラムで何を学ぶのか？	2	2-1 ①【コミュニケーション編】事前研究シート～現地(国)について～.....	10
コラム1「海外研修プログラムに行くことで起こる変化・成長」	3	2-2 ②【コミュニケーション編】事前研究シート～受け入れ先について～.....	11
2-1 ① 海外研修プログラムに参加する意味を考えよう！	5	3-1 【コミュニケーション編】コミュニケーションの基本.....	12
第 2 章 海外で経験する「学ぶ」「働く」	6	2-2 ② 「これ一枚で自分が隠れる」自己紹介シート.....	13
2-1 海外で「学ぶ」意味とは？	6	3-2 【生活編】持ち物チェックをしよう.....	14
2-2 海外で「働く」経験をする意味とは？	7	第 4 章 海外研修プログラム期間内・終了後の過ごし方	15
コラム2「海外で学ぶ・働くということ」	8	4-1 現地での安心・安全な過ごし方のコツ.....	15
第 3 章 海外研修プログラム参加にあたっての事前準備	9	4-2 異文化との出会いからはじまる適応と成長のプロセス.....	16
出発までの大まかな流れ/事前準備7ヶ条.....	9	コラム3「こなす」と有意義になった！海外での過ごし方.....	18
2-1 ①【コミュニケーション編】事前研究シート～現地(国)について～.....	10	2-1 ③ 帰国後の振り返りシート.....	19
2-2 ②【コミュニケーション編】事前研究シート～受け入れ先について～.....	11	4-3 今後のキャリア・プランニング.....	20
3-1 【コミュニケーション編】コミュニケーションの基本.....	12	2-2 ④ 働く目的を考えよう！.....	21
2-2 ② 「これ一枚で自分が隠れる」自己紹介シート.....	13	4-4 海外研修プログラム終了後アンケート.....	22
3-2 【生活編】持ち物チェックをしよう.....	14	さいごに.....	23
第 4 章 海外研修プログラム期間内・終了後の過ごし方	15	付録 海外研修プログラムの記録.....	24
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Fig.4 Table of contents of the “Overseas Study Guide Book” used in pre-departure orientation

The students were intrigued and interested in the contents and filling out the guide book, but it was found that the students were not using it while in Singapore, as some even lost it during their internship. It would be suggested to complete the contents as much as possible pre-departure, and have students finish their final reflections upon return and submit it to supervisory staff upon return.

#### (4) Final Reflection Journals and Exit Interviews

Students were finally encouraged to reflect once more on their internship programs upon return at the points of one day, one week, and one month after. This final reflection was started in the second year of observation with students writing it directly into their journals and submit them to the accompanying faculty upon return. Like the use of the guide book, some students lost their journals and did not submit final reflections. To counter this, during the third year, an exit interview was set in place where the researcher would conduct one-on-one interviews with the students. General questions such as what were the highs and lows of their internship experience, as well as reflecting on what they had learned and how do the students feel they have grown were also asked. Gradually throughout the exit interview, students began to share thoughts and information that was not previously shared in journal entries or daily meetings, and the planned ten minute time limit per student was over extended to several minutes, some lasting longer than half an

hour. These interviews were not cut short, so that students could have an outlet and speak their minds clearly and fully before returning back to Japan. These interviews lead to students having lower rates of reverse culture shock, which is still a concern.

はじめ  
 。今日、SP校に行ってバディの人達が  
 ととても仲良くしてくれた。  
 英語が出来るようにすれば、もっと  
 上手にコミュニケーションがとれて  
 楽しんだらと思った  
 授業では高専よりは積極的に  
 質問をしている生徒が多いと思った  
 ので、もっと頑張らなければならな  
 と思った  
 インタビュウ希望郵便に海外での  
 仕事に興味があるためと書いたが、  
 実際に行ってみて、世界を舞台に  
 いろいろな人と関わりながら仕事する  
 ことはとてもやりがいがありそうだ  
 と感じた。

Fig.5 Reflection journal sample by student

Comments made by students in their exit interviews were recorded and it is hoped that these comments can be used anonymously for future cohorts to go on study abroad internship programs. Some of the things mentioned by students include:

- “I came here confident, but realized how low my actual level of English ability was.”
- “I was not courageous enough throughout the program, and it made me want to change myself as a person.”
- “My listening comprehension in English improved but I still want to have a greater vocabulary so I can communicate better.”
- “I was ashamed of being shy and holding back at several times in the program. Reflecting through journals and daily meetings made me realize what I needed to change about myself and my actions.”

Another addition was that of a scavenger on one free day of the itinerary during the third year of observation. Students were instructed to go across the city to find historical sights and local cuisine. Students found it to be an entertaining learning

experience through fun, but some complained they needed the rest from an already busy itinerary.

## 5. FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

### (1) Application and Selection Process

The process of selection of students continues to be a problem for the accompanying faculty. Students fill out an application form, which includes a short essay in English to test their English ability. It was found that most students would seek help from their seniors, other English staff or exchange students to have a more native-like written passage.

Also, most applicants were accepted regardless of academic status or record, due to the low number of general applicants. In the third year of observation in particular, TOEIC or TOEIC Bridge scores were set for participation and the number of students who cleared these requirements were extremely low in number. A second application period was implemented, which then accepted any applicant as in previous years. This was especially a concern in the third year due to multiple students who went on the internship returning only to have failed their grade and repeat the year again.

Limiting participation based on high level of English ability is understandable, but not recommended due to the limitations of increase in ability that can be measured. A study by Taguchi (2013) showed that students with previous experience in studying abroad or higher levels of language ability showed lower levels of improvement compared to first-timer participants. Tsuneyoshi (2005) also states that these English based study abroad programs can actually help students gain confidence and ability in their use of the target language. These studies as well as the experiences observed show that limitations based on linguistic ability of participants is not ideal.

### (2) Continuation and Regulation of Internship

Due to continuous budget constraints and also manpower of Oita Kosen staff, a fourth year of observation was not possible. With the current status of the internship program in limbo, and recommendations for students to participate in other Kosen-related internship programs, there is a risk of the independent study abroad experience to be replaced by more general programs run nationally. Jackson wrote in their book (2008) that programs should be customized and cater to specific learning needs of students. Does a particular student want to focus on improving their language ability? Or do they want to simply have a new cultural experience?

Maybe they want to learn specific trade skills for their future? Catering to these needs on a national scale can help increase participation and motivation.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Through a review of literature and over three years of observation with testing various provisions to help increase the personal growth of students, these study abroad opportunities need further refining. Effective pre-departure orientateons can help prepare the students for what is ahead of them and prevent culture shock, journal writing can help give students an outlet to communicate and test their written ability, and exit interviews and reflections can help generalize and lead the students to a holistic interpretation and greater appreciation for the value of their study abroad experience.

Further observation and testing on various provisions should be continued in study to help contribute to a kosen-friendly program, as the environments of the students vary quite differently from regular high school and university programs.

Our Kosen students are expected to become future engineers able to contribute and participate on a global scale – and it is through study abroad programs that they can test their abilities and pave the way to their own unique future upon return from their overseas study abroad sojourn.

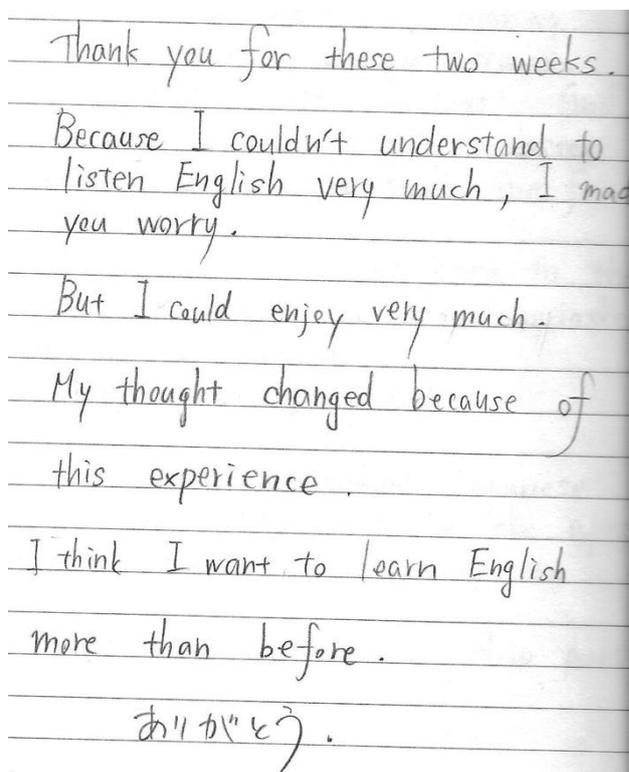


Fig.6 English reflection in a student journal

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