

STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS FOR KOSEN STUDENTS - REFLECTIONS OF PAST AND PRESENT ENDEAVOURS

Tomek ZIEMBA

Dept. of General Education,

Study abroad programs have always been a point of interest for students interested in foreign languages and cultures. Specifically for National Institute of Technology (henceforth referred to as Kosen) students, who are expected to become engineers that can flourish globally, unique study abroad programs are often found, linking with other engineering-related institutions abroad. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and border closures leading to a complete elimination of any international travel, getting back into the pre-pandemic norm is still taking time. This study will reflect mainly on a post-pandemic program, based on previous efforts, and what should be expected for future excursions.

Key Words : study abroad, student motivation, international exchange, ESL/EFL, CALL

1. INTRODUCTION

This study originates from an international exchange program between the National Institute of Technology, Oita College, originally referred to as Oita National College of Technology, now referred to more commonly as Oita Kosen. In the originally published Aoki et al (2009) report, details on an original international exchange program were brought forward, and this program continued for almost a decade. The program developed over time to include an outbound program to Singapore Polytechnic, which started with one faculty and later expanded to unique programs across each of the engineering departments from Oita Kosen.

However, in preparation to this study abroad program, pre-departure orientation sessions were introduced. These orientation sessions were run by the English faculty, with the aim of increasing communicative competence of Kosen students before going abroad. The pre-departure orientation sessions were later expanded to include daily meetings and periodic reflections while on site, as described in the Ziemba (2016) study, explaining the detailed processes for study abroad programs that had evolved, to ensure student satisfaction and thinking about personal growth before, during, and after the programs. Oita Kosen then later developed a language-based study abroad program with the Ara Institute of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand.

Originally starting in 2019 at the Timaru Campus, over a dozen students were taken to a rural city in which they had homestay experiences, farm visits, and even had the opportunity to teach about Japanese culture to local elementary school students. The high satisfaction rate at the time led to the program to be renewed for the next year, however just days before departure in early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and all overseas travel was forbidden, and the program cancelled at the last minute. Staff and students from both sides were clearly disappointed with the result, but nothing could be done given the state of the world at that time. With border closures and strict stay home policies continuing longer than originally expected, in early 2022, a renewal of the program was suggested and then approved even with the pandemic still being a significant source of concern.

This study will detail the processes of pre-departure sessions for this mid-pandemic iteration, daily efforts that were had on-site to ensure a greater learning outcome by the participating students, and how the students felt about the whole process overall. Now that the pandemic is no longer an active concern, it is hoped that the experiences throughout this study can be used in preparing future study abroad programs that can still be valid, even in case another pandemic may come forward, or other unexpected and unpreventable issues may arise.

2. METHODS

Although there were many steps and sources of concern throughout the preparation of the renewal of this study abroad program, for the purposes of this study, focus will be put on the pre-departure orientation sessions, the daily activities that were done throughout the duration of the program, and the final returnees presentation session. The pre-departure sessions were based on the original ones described in Ziemba (2016) based on the Overseas Study Program Guidebook developed by Toyama Kosen, which is unfortunately no longer in publication. Given that the majority of the 33 participating students in this program had never been overseas before, and thus had no passports to begin with, fundamental theories had to be introduced, such as culture shock. The participants had all heard of the term before but did not have an understanding as to how it works.

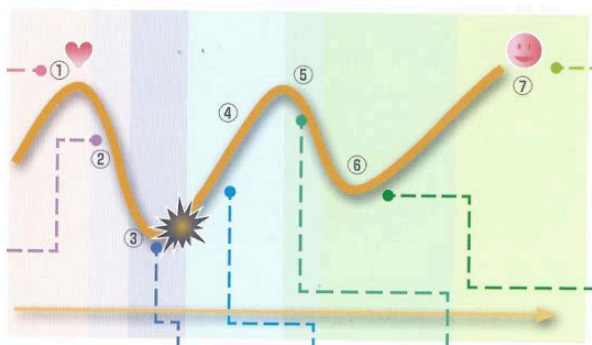


Fig.1 Culture Shock Timeline (emotion over time) taken from the “Overseas Study Program Guidebook” created by Toyama Kosen.

(1) Pre-departure orientation sessions

With the recruitment of students finalized over the summer vacation, including explaining the details of the program with the parents present, assistance from the designated travel agent was also a great support. The sessions were held once a month from October to February, with the departure being in early March, so only 5 sessions were able to be conducted in advance. Throughout these sessions, it was essential for the students to start by getting to know each other, as the participants came from various grades and engineering departments from the Kosen college.

Given that Kosen colleges are divided into 40-student classes from various engineering departments, the groups were set as four to five students purposely from different classes, with the

participants ranging from first-year mechanical engineering students (15 years old) to fourth-year civil engineering students (19 years old).

October	Program overview, group ice breaking
November	Culture shock & having expectations
December	Group presentations on New Zealand
January	Placement test & survival English
February	Pre-departure final check & travel tips

Fig.2 P pre-departure orientation session schedule.

The first session in October had the aim of students to become comfortable with getting to know and work with people they have not before from within their own college. It is an important step to break down their initial barriers and hesitations within their peers before going overseas and doing similar activities with locals. The students were then tasked with preparing on their own time in groups, their expectations of the program, discussing what they were most worried about and how they could overcome it themselves, and with each other’s support, and finally a simple presentation in English about New Zealand itself, so that they can research in advance where they are going and pick up points of interest from their perspectives and share the information with the other participating students.

Throughout the sessions, participants were encouraged to become comfortable with by preparing to introduce themselves in English, be able to give simple responses to predictable questions they may get from locals about Japanese culture, and survival tips, such as how to stop a Japanese credit card if stolen while overseas.

The placement test was provided by Ara Institute of Canterbury, based off CEFR levels, and was conducted online in the form of a multiple-choice online test that students were able to do from their own smartphones or laptops. The results of these tests came back immediately and used to divide students into levels of which they would be studying together in on campus in Christchurch. Thanks to this activity, students knew prior to departure which one of their peers they would be taking daily classes with, regardless of their pre-departure orientation groups.

Finally, a detailed, pocket-sized travel plan booklet was created by and provided by the travel agent went into essential information that is often not considered by first-time overseas travellers, including customs regulations, and the declaration

of medicine and other restricted items that vary from country to country. The booklet included local emergency contact information, and detailed steps on what to do in case of emergencies, pages to write down the daily plans and any other notes of concern, and a page for the students to prepare an English translation of any dietary restrictions or medical concerns they may experience overseas that locals can refer to with a simple glance.

The most difficult part in conducting these pre-departure orientation sessions was the gathering all the 33 students at once face-to-face. Given that students were from various grades and faculties, scheduling conflicts would arise, and not all students were always able to come in-person to the sessions. Thankfully, the college had prepared early in the pandemic, a campus-wide broadcasting system, in which classrooms would have video recordings available on archive and able to participate in real time via Microsoft Teams as well, so in case students were not able to participate in-person due to illness, or had previous engagements, students were able to catch up on their own time, and still collaborate and communicate with their group members on demand using Teams as well.

(2) Daily activities while overseas

With the pre-departure sessions complete, daily communication was promoted as originally detailed in the Ziemba (2016) study, including daily meetings, and writing reflective journal entries. However, given the advancements in technology since that time and that students were all staying at various locations across Christchurch, students were required to make daily posts in a Teams group, including morning health checks, and diary entries. These acted like a group-restricted social media post, in which students must include a photo of something from that day, and write a detailed post, to which others were able to interact with and learn about their peers' experiences in real time as well. These posts were found to be useful to promote the program in real time, as the supervising staff chose some each day to be included in a daily update available on the school's website for anyone to see, including their class peers and their parents. This also helped because not all students kept in regular touch with their parents, and thus were able to see how their kids were doing through their posts updated daily on the school website, including reflections by the supervising staff in Japanese to explain in detail about some of the content brought up in the students' original posts.

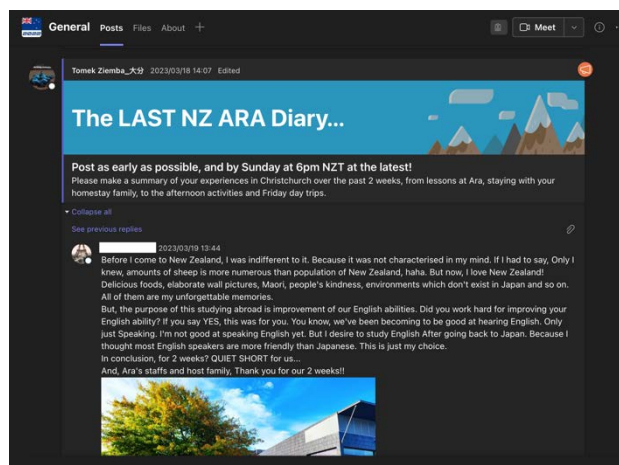


Fig.3 Example of a daily diary post by a student.

(3) Final presentation session by participants

Upon returning to Japan, students were encouraged to post no longer daily, but weekly reflections on how they felt after the program, how they have grown, what do they miss most, and what they plan on doing starting the upcoming school year to make most of their experiences to further enrich their future student lives. The session was originally planned to be held at the end of April, while the students' memories would still be fresh, and that the students who were not able to participate know more about the program and become interested in joining.

However, due to unforeseen circumstances, the session was delayed, but thanks to that was also refined in its content compared to the original plan of having some students present about their experiences. Students volunteered to give mini presentations in English, and the original creator of the program, who is now no longer at the Kosen, to come back and see how the program they developed has grown and give an inspirational speech about studying abroad. Parents of the participating students also were present to see their children present confidently in English in front of a crowd of people interested in hearing their stories, or also to participate the next time the program is offered.

At the end of this session, it was decided by the higher ups, for undisclosed reasons, that the program would go on hiatus, much to the chagrin of all the participants in the audience, but an online survey was also given out to the participating students, interested students, and parents of the participants to see how the program – from the original orientation sessions, to the daily journal entries and the final presentation session – could be further improved.

2. OBSERVATIONS AND RESULTS

The surveys this study was most concerned with was the participating student feedback, as well as the feedback from the parents/guardians of the students who participated in the study abroad program. The participant survey had 28 questions about the entire process, from reasoning to participate, their feedback on the pre-departure orientation sessions, how best to keep everyone on track while on-site, and how they expect to use this experience in their future endeavours. Out of 33 participating students, 23 responded (70% return rate) with the average time taken to complete the survey being over 50 minutes, which shows that the students took their time to seriously respond in detail to the 28 questions that were provided.

However, regarding the parents' survey, only 15 responded (45% return rate) to the 16 questions provided, but also had an average response time of over 27 minutes, which was shown by the detail provided in the free response answers given from the survey. Some specific details cannot be shared in this paper due to privacy concerns, but a generalization of the collected responses obtained was able to be made, that can be used for further improvements to the program and how it is run from the recruitment period to post-program.

(1) Survey feedback results – from parents

Starting with the parental feedback, the overall satisfaction rate of the entire program was at 100%, with 87% very satisfied and the remaining 13% satisfied. Parents detailed the creation and daily updates of the student diaries on the school website as the highest point of satisfaction, with the most common reasoning being that it was a way to check up on how the students were doing in real time, even if their children were 'too busy having fun' to contact their families via LINE with regular updates.

They also mentioned the comfort in having not one, but two of the English teachers that have taught their students previously accompany them on the program, knowing that they could contact the teachers directly in case of an emergency after having direct previous contact with them through the pre-departure orientation sessions and being the homeroom teachers of some of the participants.

Furthermore, most of the parents also mentioned a greater interest in learning English and wanting to explore other countries and cultures, with parents mentioning, for example, that their children were already studying Maori by themselves, or they have expressed interest in taking English certification

tests, like EIKEN or TOEIC, without showing any interest in these kinds of activities prior to their participation in the study abroad program.

(2) Survey feedback results – from students

The student feedback however was thankfully a bit stricter. Most students mentioned they wished they had more pre-departure orientation sessions (once every two weeks instead of once a month), because they felt that they did not have enough time to prepare in advance mentally and linguistically. They also mentioned that they wished they had more information about the campus and city life in advance. There was one campus tour video provided after the online placement test, but the two accompanying teachers had not been to the campus or to Christchurch before, also taking into consideration that the previous 2019 iteration of the program was at the Timaru Campus and not the Christchurch City Campus. This will no longer be a concern in future iterations. Students, on average, claimed that it took them two to three days to get over their initial culture shock and become comfortable in living in a different country and communicating in a different language for the first time. This was shorter than the expected five-day time frame that was detailed in the pre-departure orientation session dealing with culture shock.

Most interestingly, they all enjoyed the daily diary entries conducted on Teams, stating that being able to see others' posts in English helped increase their reading comprehension and writing confidence, and being able to interact and react with each other's posts as a motivator for their future daily posts throughout the program. This is very reassuring because at first, much like in the original Ziemba (2016) study, the students felt annoyed and pressured to have to write something in English and submit it every day, but they grew to look forward to doing it and became intrinsically motivated to keep updating in more detail with longer posts as the days went on.

Finally, the students also mentioned how they were not sure how the returnees presentation session would happen, and that even only a small number of participating students were chosen or volunteered to present about their experiences in front of the large staff, peer and parent audience, they were reminded of their experiences on the program and wished they had volunteered to present as well at the session. In the future, individual presentations could be replaced by group presentations, based on their original pre-departure session groups, to give all the participants an opportunity for one last hurrah and

confidently present in English about their experiences.

The general audience feedback (those who were not participants, nor parents of the participants) showed a very great interest in participating in the program in future iterations and expressed great dissatisfaction in the final announcement at the end of the session that it would not be continued in the following academic year.

3. REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Humphreys & Baker (2021) conducted an interview-based study on Japanese students and their intercultural awareness development while on study abroad programs that focused on various locations and not just one. Regardless of the positive outcome of this study, it is not necessarily valid for study abroad programs in other locations that may be significantly culturally different from Christchurch, New Zealand, such as in Singapore, where the origins of this study are essentially based on. Mimicking of this study will be implemented in future study abroad programs with this Kosen, to see how further refine the study abroad process can be achieved in the long run.

Another source of consideration is the latest study by Tseng et al (2024) reviewing 42 studies from 1995 to 2019 that were meta-analyzed into hundreds of various effects in detail, including the balance of language learning motivators (assumed to be the main motivator for student participation in this program) and training sessions held in advance, much like in this study. Although the data does not cater specifically to Japanese students' L2 learning of English overseas, it reinforces the importance of long-term student feedback consideration.

Smith & Samuella (2024) also recently published research into Japanese higher educational intuitions' policies in study abroad programs from before and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. With the Japanese government and Kosen colleges also focusing on the catch phrase of 'fostering the future of global human resources' as an ongoing goal, the study also focuses on the long-term implications of participating in study abroad programs, such as employment placement potentials after graduating participants conduct job hunting. These long-term aspects were not taken into consideration as part of this study but can be a great point of appeal for higher grade students in participation.

As mentioned earlier in this study, a greater online component in pre-departure sessions could help the students with their original culture shock

and feelings of being overwhelmed upon arrival, regardless of how 'prepared' they were made to be. An interesting option would be like that introduced in the Hiroike & Yokomizo (2023) study, which had students from another Kosen (National Institute of Technology, Tokyo College) interacting with American university students online using Microsoft Flip. Students were able to asynchronously introduce themselves and get replies and interact with students halfway around the world from the comfort of their own smartphones. Given that Kosen students are all registered with Microsoft Teams accounts, the potential learning curve may not be as high as using other online interactive software and are more controlled than simply using social media services, such as Twitter or Instagram. Interacting with local Ara students and their Japanese club in advance can help give students a greater feeling of anticipation upon arrival, assuring them that they know someone locally in advance, and take away from the fear and hesitation the students felt at first going to their homestay families.

Although there is no guarantee that this exact Oita Kosen/Ara Institute of Canterbury will continue annually from now on, having the option to still conduct online international exchange programs regularly is a significant point of consideration. Furthermore, it can expand the possibilities of other institutions to study abroad with by starting with online, asynchronous student interactions to further promote cross-cultural understanding without even having to step on a plane, let alone leave their college campus or even their own homes. This field is currently in high demand for further research and expansion, and similarly envisioned studies are intended to be conducted in the near future. Concurrent iterations of this New Zealand study abroad program will incorporate a more detailed and concrete pre-departure program and further long-term support post return to maximize benefits of participating in study abroad.

Unfortunately, it seems that the new ongoing trend is to fully leave the planning and responsibilities to a travel agent, taking off the burden of responsibility and other tasks from the schools and their staff, and having an agent travel with the students. However, these kinds of programs, as intriguing as they may be for those in management positions, cannot guarantee educational value and significant reflection in students, as these travel agents are not educators. These programs are not simply overseas tours – they are opportunities for students to formatively change their lives even while on site. This 'easy out' trend must be avoided.

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(Received September 27, 2024)