

Comparing an Online to an On-site Study Abroad Program

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Abstract: *This paper compares two groups of students. The first group attended a four-month on-site study abroad program. The second group participated in a four-month online study abroad program. Pre- and post-TOEIC scores, as well as the student's attitudes towards their experience, are examined. This article details the procedure each group took, the outcome of their test scores, and their reflections on the program.*

Keywords: study abroad program, on-site, online, TOEIC

1. Introduction

Implementing a study abroad program into a Japanese University's English Language program has been an effective way for students to improve their English language scores on tests such as TOEIC, as well as means to give university students the ability to learn about new cultures in foreign countries. Reports from The Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) have shown that there has been a steady increase in the number of Japanese students participating in a study abroad program from the early 2000s until the beginning of the worldwide outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 (JASSO, 2018). Statistics from the same organization show that in 2017 the average Japanese student participates in a study abroad program for one-month period (JASSO, 2018). Data also shows that even though Japan has one of the lowest average TOEIC scores for university students in Asia, students who complete a study abroad program have had an improvement in their test scores when they return to the country (Roell, 2020). Unfortunately, with worldwide travel restrictions in place, the ability for students to travel and immerse themselves in other cultures while learning English has been limited. Hence, the idea is to introduce, in some locations, the possibility to participate in a study abroad program online.

This paper examines the difference in the teaching methods between online lessons and on-site lessons in a foreign country, the progress that was made by comparing students' TOEIC testing scores (TOEIC), and the student's attitudes and feelings towards their studying experiences.

2. Participants

This study specifically examines a Women's University English major as an international language student body. Before COVID-19, all second-year students were obligated to attend a four-month study abroad program in either the United States of America or New Zealand. The requisite was established so that the students would acquire the ability to learn English while learning about other cultures. As the COVID-19 outbreak started, the idea of an online study abroad program was proposed on the basis that even though the students were not able to travel

to a different country, teachers could incorporate local customs and cultural understanding into the English language lessons.

The on-site study abroad program has been in effect for half a decade, with students given pre and post-TOEIC tests based on their listening and reading abilities. Students were also given a questionnaire before their departure evaluating their anxiety and expectations. After their return to Japan, each student gave a detailed presentation explaining their experience while highlighting both the positive and negative aspects of their study abroad.

Starting in the first semester of their first year of university, students in the English as an International Language (EIL) program (these students major in English language learning) had to take seven English language courses a week. Each course had a duration of fifteen to sixteen weeks (the sixteenth week was optional if the professor decided to render a final exam or not) with each class time having a duration of one hour and thirty minutes. On top of the classes, the university offered an English language space called English Language Teaching Center (E.L.T.C.). This space offered areas where students could watch English language movies or T.V. dramas in a lounge, a large assortment of English language books to read, a free English language conversation space where students could make an appointment to have conversations with English-speaking foreigners, and a study area where students could make an appointment with teachers to review the material learned in class or get extra help with concepts that they did not understand. The university also organized extra-curricular activities for students, such as speech contests and meet and greet activities such as Halloween or Christmas parties. In short, motivated students had the resources to better their English abilities if they decided to put the time and effort into it.

In the study abroad, program participants were divided into two groups, based on their language ability, which was established upon their TOEIC scores for listening and reading, their academic grades, and to a lesser extent regarding in which group they had friends. The study abroad programs for both groups had a duration of sixteen weeks and were held in Auckland New Zealand and/or online from Auckland New Zealand. The first group of students attended the ELA program, while the second group participated in the AUT program.

In 2018, the first group consisted of thirty-two students from the English as an International Language Department who were sent to New Zealand and placed in levels based on their TOEIC scores before departing from Japan. The majority of the students placed in the New Zealand classrooms mostly corresponded to the same students that were in their same classrooms at their university in Japan, nonetheless, there were also students from various countries. Several factors were considered when deciding the placement of the students in the class. One of them was the concept of groupism. The relational for having a large group of students taking classes together stem from the idea of groupism, which was defined by Hinenoya & Gatbonton (2000) as “harmonization within the in-group, achieved when members downplay their individualism for the well-being of the group”. An advantage of groupism is the idea that the group as a whole can achieve success more efficiently than an individual can (Hofstede et al., 2010). On the other hand, the second group consisted of forty students who participated in an online study abroad program. As with the group that traveled to New Zealand, the students were divided into groups based on their academic ability and TOEIC scores established before starting the program. These students were placed into classes where there were only students from the same university. In essence, the students would have had the same classmates if they attended on-site classes at their Japanese university.

As pointed out before, both groups took the TOEIC Listening and Reading tests before starting their abroad study programs, and after their completion to assess if there were any improvements in their English proficiency. Students were also given a questionnaire to assess their attitudes towards their experience, as well as gather suggestions on how to improve future students' experiences.

3. Results

The following graph shows the total TOEIC scores of students who attended the on-site study abroad program in New Zealand. As is shown in the first chart the average score for the 32 students before leaving Japan was 364 (Blue bar). The students took the TOEIC in August of 2018. The gray bar indicates their score after returning from their overseas studies. The students returned to Japan in January of 2019 and the TOEIC test was administered in February of 2019 with the results returned to the student in March of 2019. On average, student scores increased by 111 points. The increase shows that the students improved from an elementary English proficiency level (very limited communication) to an elementary proficiency plus level (limited communication) (Global Exam, 2021) with a four-month study abroad program.

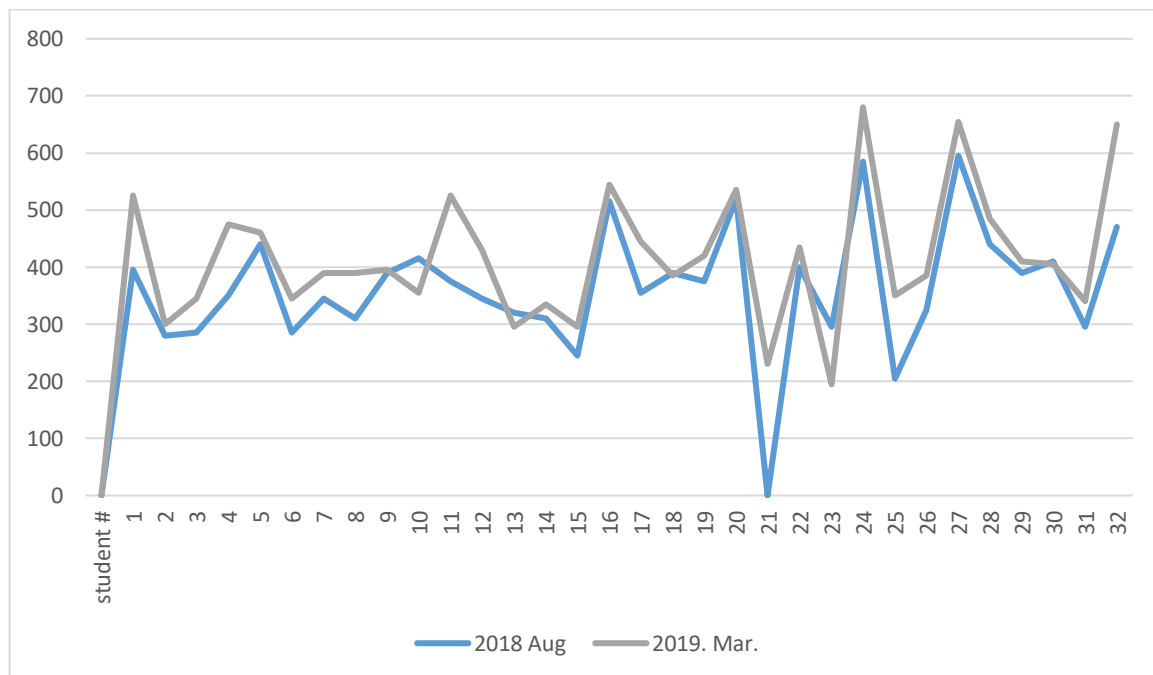


Figure 1: Pre and Post TOEIC Scores for Students who Travelled for Study Abroad

The second chart shows the TOEIC scores of the 40 students who participated in the online study abroad program. As the chart indicates the majority of the students were in the low 300 range in their TOEIC score, with the group average being 334 points. This indicates that they were at an elementary English proficiency level (very limited communication) before starting the online program. Both the group that traveled to New Zealand and the group that stayed in Japan were considered to have an elementary proficiency plus level (limited communication) prior to the start of their studies.

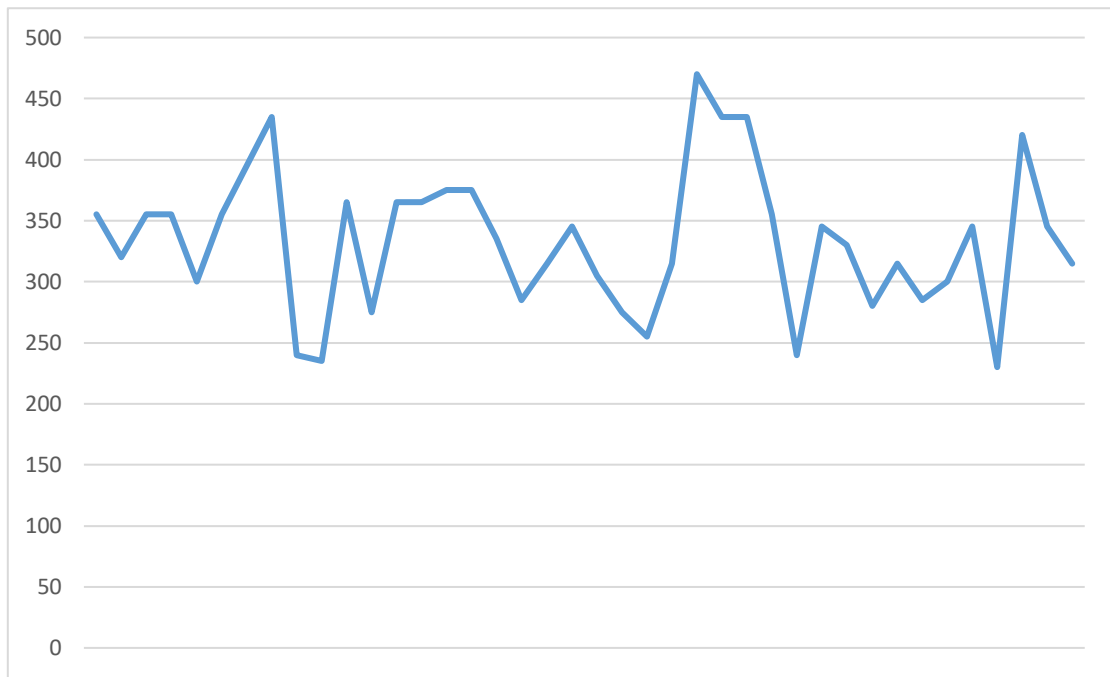


Figure 2: Pre-Online Study Abroad TOEIC Score

As can be seen in the chart below, at first, the post-online study abroad TOEIC scores were surprising. The students who stayed in Japan had a high change deferential than the students who went to New Zealand. Therefrom, they increased their TOEIC scores by an average of 130 points compared to the 111 points for the students who went to New Zealand.

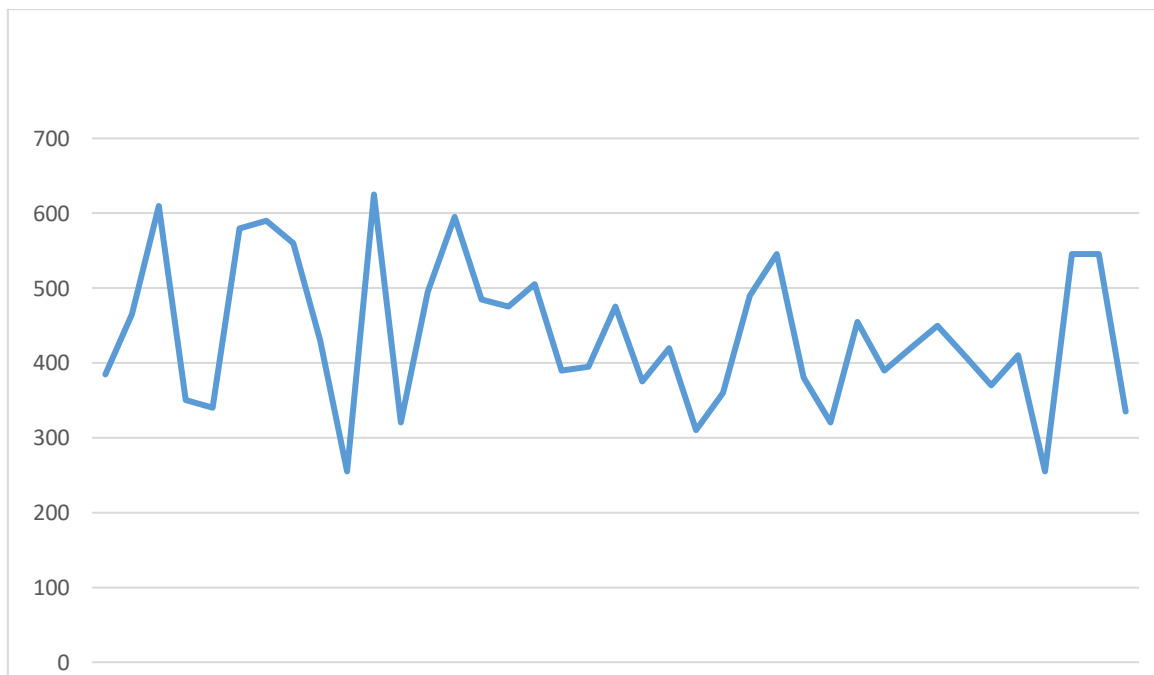


Figure 3: Post-Online Study Abroad TOEIC Scores

There are two factors to consider when evaluating these results, the first is the way the TOEIC test is created. When taking the pre-study abroad TOEIC test, the online students had a lower

starting point. The level of difficulty of the questions was lower than that of the group of students that physically went to New Zealand (Terada, 2021). The second factor to consider is that online students had fewer distractions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people had restricted freedoms, such as the impossibility to do activities with their friends outside of their homes. Students were confined to their homes with not much else to do but study. As the TOEIC averages for both groups are similar, them both were considered to have an intermediate English language ability. The main difference between the on-site and the online study abroad programs is found in the student's attitudes towards their experiences.

4. Questionnaire

Upon completion of each program, a student survey was conducted to assess the student's perception of the lessons received, their feelings towards their experiences, and their suggestions to improve the program in future years. The questionnaires for both the on-site and online study abroad programs students followed a similar theme. Students who had traveled outside of the country had overwhelmingly positive feedback about their experience and were more open to different cultural experiences; meeting new friends, trying new experiences, and an overall better understanding of other cultures. Still, some complained about their living quarters. These complaints referred to things such as having a noisy roommate or the host family constantly making the same dish every night. These issues were all resolved with the help of a third-party company that oversaw the homestay operations. Other issues dealing with everyday life also arose, but not as a major issue. No one complained about the education they received or the ill-treatment of people in New Zealand. As for the changes suggested by the surveyed students, they pointed out that the four-month period was too short, and that they would like, if possible, to have fewer Japanese nationals in each classroom. Finally, the students who attended an on-site study abroad program, as a whole, wanted to do another study abroad program either again in New Zealand or a different country.

On the other hand, the group of students that participated in the online study abroad program had very different opinions about their experience. Most of them felt that their time online was wasted and not worthwhile. Many were disappointed with the classroom setup, as referring to that there were only students from their university in the class, which translated into an impossibility to frequently communicate with non-Japanese students. The only foreigner that was in the classroom was the teacher, except for the few times that New Zealand students were invited to the class to discuss their culture. The students also complained about the learning environment, which they qualified as being boring, following a preset lecture, teamwork, discussion, and homework (presentation) structure. As for changes that were suggested many believed that there was no point in doing a study abroad program online and that in the future an online option should not be offered. Finally, this group of students was tremendously disappointed in not experiencing daily life in a foreign country. Most wanted to do an actual study abroad in a foreign country even if it was for a shorter period.

5. Conclusion

The pre-and-post-TOEIC scores of the two groups were a surprise. Before analyzing the data, it was assumed that students that traveled to a foreign country would have increased their TOEIC scores by a higher margin than the students that did their studies abroad online. When pondering factors such as that the online students had fewer distractions around them and that they started at a lower (easier) point, it becomes understandable. It also must be noted that the difference in the percentual change between the two groups was not significant. The major

difference between the online and on-site study abroad programs was seen in the attitudes of the students after the completion of the program. Students who traveled to New Zealand mostly had positive feedback from their experience. This includes the quality of the lessons, their interaction with people of other cultures, and their overall understanding of the latter. All of this, as opposed to the feelings of most of the students that stayed in Japan to do their study abroad program. These students were disappointed with most aspects of the program, such as the quality of the lessons, their lack of interactions with foreigners, and their inability to have new experiences.

Even though both groups of students increased their TOEIC scores after the programs, the students who attended an on-site study abroad program were much more satisfied with their experience than the online ones. This as students who stayed home were disappointed with their experience and still yearn to travel overseas. Thus, if a school is considering doing an online study abroad program it is recommended that the organizers create activities that are more interactive and stimulating to the participants.

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