

Japanese Students' Use of Digital Tools While Studying Abroad

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Abstract. This paper reports on Japanese students' use of digital tools while studying abroad. Data was collected from student journals on two study tours to Australia and then used to formulate an online survey that was administered program-wide to students who had participated in programs of varying length to a variety of destinations. The results show that students use digital tools, such as smart phones, to deal with a variety of challenges they face from personal interaction and language issues to navigating their environment. Attitudes about the effects of digital tools and internet connectivity on study abroad were mixed but generally positive.

1. Introduction

Studying abroad can be a valuable component of a student's university experience. An obvious reason to study abroad is to improve foreign language proficiency, but other motivations might include learning about another culture or personal development. Various studies have shown greater linguistic improvement in students who study abroad over students continuing to study in their home country [1, 2, 3]. Unfortunately, definitive results in these kinds of studies are difficult as there is almost always some variation between courses of study at home and abroad, with many gains attributed to more intensive classroom study combined with opportunities to use the language outside of the classroom. Regardless of the specific reasons, most students who study abroad in mid- to long-term programs abroad show strong improvement in a range of language measures, including oral fluency, pronunciation, and lexical acquisition when compared with students in their home country studying in regular language classes. There is some evidence that students in intensive immersion programs in their home country can see similar or even better improvement [4], though again the specific context is very important. For those seeking more detail, Kinginger (2009) [5] provides a thorough review of studies on language acquisition during study abroad.

More recent studies have gone beyond language learning to look at other areas influenced by study abroad. Tanaka and Ellis (2003) [6] illustrates improvements in students' attitudes toward learning and self-efficacy. In addition, Medina-Lopez-Portillo (2004) [7] showed a strong correlation between time of stay and cultural sensitivity, with students who stayed a year or longer developing deeper cultural sensitivity. It is clear that the benefits of study abroad go beyond language study alone. However, it is important for educators seeking the most effective and beneficial study abroad program to explore, understand, and analyze their students' unique experiences and the myriad of factors that can affect the program.

2. Methodology

The current study is one part of a larger study abroad program needs analysis that took place over two years. The researcher made use of Grounded Theory [8], a theoretical framework in which preconceptions are minimized, and there is not a predetermined "problem" that is being investigated.

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In Grounded Theory, mixed methods are utilized, and the issues involved are allowed to arise in a primarily inductive way. The data collected is coded, analyzed, and then organized. Finally, the researcher attempts to connect the findings to relevant ideas and existing research. Additional data collection can be added as the need becomes clear.

This paper makes use of a variety of data collected during three distinct phases of research with three different cohorts of students. The Perth Study Tour 2016 stage involved the researcher accompanying a group of students on the first part of a short-term study abroad program. The students kept journals during their entire five-week stay and the researcher observed their orientation, activities, and classes during the first week. Similarly, the Perth Study Tour 2017 stage involved a journal study and observations, but also included a follow-up survey. Finally, based on themes that arose from the first two stages, the researcher administered a program-wide survey on students' use of digital tools. This paper will explain the process that led to the ideas for this survey and share the results of the survey.

This research project took place at a small, women's college in western Japan. The students from all three phases of the study were recruited because of their involvement in the university's international programs, which allow students to study at one of over 60 partner institutions around the world. The study abroad programs fall under the categories of (1) one and two-semester exchanges and (2) study tours, which last four to six weeks. Phase one and two of the research project involved participants in five-week study tours to Australia.

The participants in the first phase of the project were nine female Japanese university students in their first, second, or third year of study in various departments. They all had low- to intermediate level oral English proficiency and little to no experience abroad. The second phase of the project followed 15 female Japanese students from the same university. The second cohort had a slightly wider range of language ability, from low to advanced, and some had experience abroad. This group also differed in that they were given a pre-departure lesson with preparation tasks based on situations that were identified as challenging based on the earlier study and other sources. Both cohorts participated in the same study tour program held one year apart.

The study tour was a five-week study abroad program in Perth, Australia. Each student lived with a host family and studied English at an intensive English program offered at a major Australian university. Participation in the research project was voluntary but all students agreed to join the study and signed a written consent form. Each student was given a journal with writing prompts for before, during, and after the study abroad period. Students were asked to write in the language of their choice about their thoughts and experiences. In addition to the journal study, the researcher attended the first week of the students' orientation and language classes. Furthermore, he interviewed the program administrators and teachers about the program and student progress. After the students returned to Japan, their journals were collected and coded. All names were changed to pseudonyms and any identifying information was generalized and put in parentheses. Japanese entries were translated to English. Grammar in English entries was left as is unless it distracted from the meaning or flow (corrected language is in parentheses). Entries were labeled with recurring and/or relevant themes.

3. Results

The students' journals revealed several interesting themes about their experiences. Many expressed anxiety before arriving, in particular lack of confidence in their language ability. This anxiety carried over to other entries during their stay that expressed feelings of powerlessness [9]. In contrast, there were also many entries expressing various feelings of empowerment, including goal-setting, taking charge of their learning environment and interactions, and encouragement from peers and host family. In addition, one unexpected theme was interspersed throughout their journals: the use of digital tools. In the following excerpt, Io describes an uncomfortable situation with her how brother:

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(My host) brother went to kitchen looking for something to eat. Few minutes later, I also went to the kitchen. At that time, mother and father came back. I found brother cooked something so I thought today's dinner was pasta. (My friend) tried to help him but he said he didn't need any help. She told me that through Line. I was scared of him. So I stayed with mother who was cooking dinner.

-Io

In this case, the two Japanese students used the text-messaging app Line while standing in the same room in order to communicate without the host brother being aware.

In another entry, Minako explains her experience at a language exchange event that was held at the university:

We just talked only using Japanese. But, language of the conversation between them switched from Japanese to English and also English to Japanese. It was cool! I want to be like them! I'll try to keep sending a message to them. And actually now, after I came back (to my host family's house), I'm sending messages many times while writing this! ☺

-Minako

Here she made use of text messaging to continue an interaction that happened on campus after returning to her host family's house.

References like the two described here were common in the students' journals and pointed to the use of text messaging as a social interaction tool and strategy for dealing with various situations in ways that may not have been possible otherwise.

Another theme was also apparent in several of the students' journals: getting lost. In the following entry, Sachiko describes her experience:

I took the train with Tomo. But I don't know the bus stop. I got lost at (Cloud Street). I ask some people. Somehow I backed home at 6:00. If I had a pocket Wi-Fi, maybe I didn't get lost. Sometimes, I couldn't get the way to the bus stop. Still, I think it was a good experience for me because I was able to ask for a help many times to the people who were passing by.

-Sachiko

The most interesting point here is not the fact that she got lost but her musings about the experience. She quickly recognizes that having portable Wi-Fi would have helped her avoid getting lost, but then reflects on the value of the experiences she had when she was forced to interact with people because of the situation. Another student, Miyu, had a similar experience navigating with the help of others:

I felt nervous on my way to the university by myself this morning, but I was able to get there as I asked how to get there to people walking by so I felt some sense of accomplishment. Asking someone and taking communication with people there helped me a lot when I visited the UK last winter so I felt relief that I was able to do the same here in Australia too.

-Miyu

These excerpts from both the first and second stages of the project led to the development of two research questions:

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1. How are students using digital tools during their study abroad?
2. Does the use of digital tools promote or hinder their interaction in English?

To attempt to answer these questions, the researcher distributed an online survey to all of the students who studied abroad in 2017. Twenty-one participants responded to the survey. The most common destination was Australia, followed by the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. The vast majority (76%) participated in study tours, while just 14% joined semester long programs, and only two students (10%) studied abroad for an entire year. Their attitudes toward their study abroad experiences were overwhelmingly positive with 71% saying it was “wonderful” and 24% “pretty good”. Only one student chose “so-so” and none rated their experience negatively. Slightly more than half reported staying with a host family with the others in a dormitory or “other.”

Figure 1 displays the students’ responses to questions regarding which digital tools they brought with them (multiple answers allowed). As would be expected, all of them brought smartphones with them. In addition, nearly half brought computers. Only three had their own portable Wi-Fi.

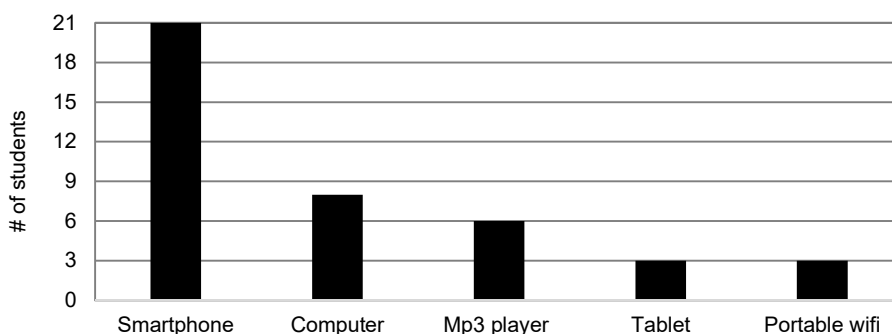


Fig. 1: What electronic devices did you bring with you?

When asked about the availability of Wi-Fi at their host family’s house or in their dormitory, 67% of students said that they have unlimited access, 14% reported having limited access, while 19% said they had no access to Wi-Fi. Regarding the availability of technology at school, three quarters (76%) reported having access to Wi-Fi. Two-thirds of students (67%) described having computers for use in class and half were allowed to use these at any time the school was open. Just one student said that her school had tablets.

As displayed in Figure 2, students reported using mobile devices for a significant amount of time with two thirds of them averaging between one and five hours a day, two students saying they used a device six hours or more per day.

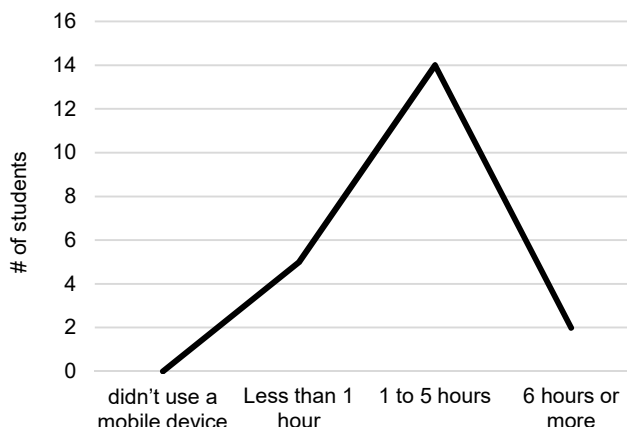


Fig. 2: On a typical day, how much time did you spend using a mobile device?

Figure 3 shows the types of apps that students reported using. The three most popular mobile

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apps that they used during their study abroad were text messaging (95%), translator/dictionary (71%), online maps/navigation/transportation (71%).

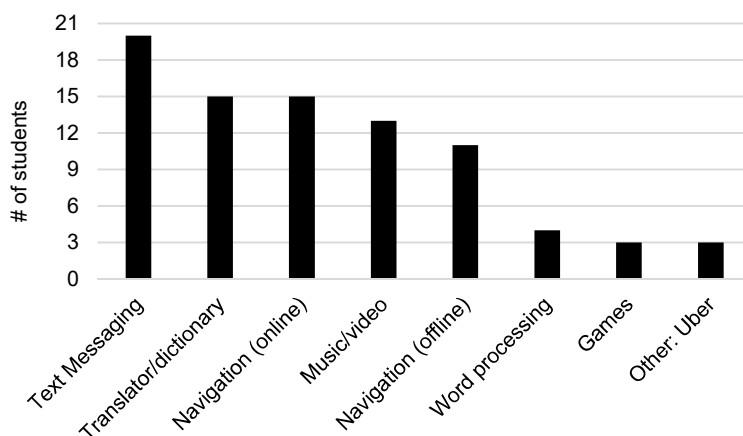


Fig. 3: What mobile apps did you use often during your study abroad? (multiple answers allowed)

Another question of note on the survey was “how often did you communicate with the following people using email or text message?” By far, the most common interaction was with friends and classmates studying at the same school with 48% reporting communicating once a day or more, compared with just 19% who communicated that frequently with friends from home. Another interesting finding was that they reported fairly frequent communication with a teacher in English (29% once a week or more) but far less communication with a teacher in Japanese. Unfortunately, it is unclear to which teacher they are referring.

Finally, students were asked about how they thought continuous access to the internet (portable Wi-Fi or local cellular service) would affect their study abroad experience. In general, they seemed to think it would make them safer (71%), more comfortable (67%), and more likely to communicate in English (67%).

4. Conclusion

Overall, this study has provided a window into the short-term study abroad experiences of Japanese university students and their access to and use of digital tools. Some of the students stated a desire for greater connectivity but expressed concern about how that would affect their interaction with local people. The vast majority of students in this study had access had access to the Internet at homestay, dormitory, or school and carried their own smartphone, which was often offline beyond the range of Wi-Fi. They used mobile devices for a wide range of purposes, including communication, translation, navigation, and entertainment, with most of them spending a several hours on a digital device daily. However, it is uncertain at this point how the increased use of digital tools will affect language interaction, and this area needs further study.

In the end, students go abroad for different reasons and have a variety of experiences. Through the diverse people they meet and challenges they face, they develop skills, learn more about the world, and grow as people. Digital tools are changing people’s lives and it is no surprise that they are affecting study abroad as well. The exact ways that these tools are changing students’ study abroad experiences are unclear, but they are undoubtedly having an effect. Future research should seek to better understand

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these affects and find ways for students to use digital tools for to enhance their interactions and experiences.

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