

Powerlessness and Empowerment: Reflections of Japanese University Students While Studying Abroad in Australia

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Abstract— This paper reports on the experiences of Japanese students studying abroad in Australia. Nine female Japanese university students were asked to keep a journal of their thoughts, experiences, and reflections during a five-week study tour in Perth, Australia. In addition, the researcher observed the students' language classes, and interviewed teachers and program administrators. These journals and observations provide insight into their concerns and expectations, unique challenges, as well as the strategies the participants used to improve their linguistic and sociocultural competency. Drawing on selected passages from the students' journals, the author discusses them with a focus on themes of anxiety, powerlessness, and empowerment. The results of this study may serve as a resource to program administrators, pre-departure curriculum developers, and teachers who aim to improve the study abroad experiences of their students.

Index Terms— EFL, English language education, sociocultural competency, study abroad

I. INTRODUCTION

As the world reopens to more regular opportunities for study abroad, it may be useful to look at the experiences of students who studied abroad previously in order to better understand the challenges they faced during their overseas experiences. In particular, students often express feelings of anxiety about potential miscommunication and unforeseen situations that they might encounter overseas [1]. How can educators, administrators, and host families help alleviate this anxiety and better prepare students to have a successful study abroad experience? This paper seeks to provide insight into the kinds of experiences students have through their own reflections. By looking at examples of both successful and unsuccessful interactions, positive and negative experiences, as well as the students' strategies for improving themselves and their linguistic and cultural competencies, we can inform future research and curriculum on study abroad.

Kinginger [2] defines study abroad as “a temporary sojourn of pre-defined duration, undertaken for educational purposes with common motivations including language learning or simply meeting degree requirements” (p. 11). However, she goes on to point out that study abroad experiences vary widely in purpose, duration, and depth, generally falling somewhere along the spectrum between long-term migration to the country and a short vacation. The majority of Japanese study abroad participants (56%) in 2019 opted for language programs with terms of stay under three months, with 13% choosing longer language study courses. In contrast, only about 3% of Japanese students studying abroad were university students

pursuing a degree or studying non-language subjects [3].

Although it is unclear the degree to which students can improve their language proficiency in a matter of weeks, there are other measurable benefits. In a study of five different short-term study abroad programs, Lee [4] found that beginner and intermediate level students improved willingness to communicate, increased international posture (sense of interconnectivity with the international community) and lowered anxiety during study abroad programs of just five weeks.

Where students stay is another important aspect of study abroad that can greatly impact the depth and quality of their experiences. Schmidt-Rinehart and Knight [5] carried out a study of students, host families, and housing directors in which they found that homestays were one of the most important parts of the students' study abroad experience. It is important to consider that students staying with a host family and otherwise engaging with the local community will have opportunities to improve not only their linguistic competence but also sociocultural competence, which Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurell [6] define as a "speaker's knowledge of how to express messages appropriately within the overall social and cultural context of communication, in accordance with the pragmatic factors related to variation in language use" (p.23). They go on to explain four subcategories of sociocultural competence including (1) social contextual factors, or how language is tailored to social situations, including differences of power, (2) stylistic appropriateness (3) cultural factors, such as the specific practices of communities, and (4) non-verbal communicative factors, including silence and use of space. We can imagine both the linguistic and sociocultural experiences of study abroad students having a great impact on their how they see and feel about themselves. Aveni [7] states, "Given the importance of language and communicative behavior in the construction of self in society, language use and interaction must be conducted in such a way that the self will be enhanced or at the very least protected. In this regard, language becomes both an instrument of power and a weakness for the user" (16). The following discussion explores the reflections of Japanese students studying abroad in Australia as they manage their own sense of self, at times moving from states of powerlessness to empowerment.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to better understand the sociocultural and linguistic challenges faced by Japanese students during the adjustment phase of their study abroad experience. The researcher investigated the experiences of nine female Japanese students from a Japanese women's university while they studied abroad. The students came from a variety of academic majors and were in their first, second, or third year of study. The program was voluntary and not part of the students' regular course of study. Instead of starting with specific predetermined research questions, the study makes use of Grounded Theory, a theoretical framework in which data are collected, coded, and analyzed. Themes and patterns that arise from the data are then used to draw conclusions or at least inform the overall investigation [8].

The students travelled to Perth, Australia together during their summer break and studied English at an intensive English program offered at a major Australian university. Each student lived with a host family that was assigned by the university. The researcher acted as the sole chaperone for the trip, flying with the students from Japan to Australia and staying there for the first week of their five-week study tour program. He observed the students' language classes,

interviewed program teachers and administrators, and provided guidance for students who needed help and support.

Prior to departure the participants were asked to keep a journal in the language of their choice, about their thoughts and experiences during their five-week study abroad program. They were informed that participation was optional and that they could opt out at any time with no repercussions. The students were provided with a pen and notebook, in which was pasted a page describing the study, the researcher's expectations, and the agreement to participate. All nine students agreed to participate and eight submitted journals to the researcher upon their return to Japan. The length of the responses varied with a range of two to 32 entries per journal. Four students chose to write in English, one in Japanese only, and the remaining three mixed the two languages.

All journals were anonymized and transcribed, and entries that were written in Japanese were translated to English by bilingual native Japanese speakers hired by the researcher. Each student was assigned a pseudonym, which will be used in texts quoted in this paper. Identifying information, such as place names were replaced with general terms, which appear in parenthesis. Words, phrases, and passages that were translated from Japanese appear in italics. The grammar of English entries was left as is unless it distracted from the meaning or flow of the passage.

The transcripts of the journals were then coded using a two-cycle approach as described in Saldaña [9]. In the first cycle, the researcher used descriptive coding to identify passages of interest. Upon review of these coded passages, the researcher chose to focus on expressions of feelings, in particular anxiety, instances in which the participants made choices about language use, including explanation of strategies they employed, as well as thoughts and reflections on their experiences. In the second cycle, the data were recoded with these themes, and then organized into the following categories: Reasons for going abroad, anxiety before arriving, powerlessness, empowerment, and students' final reflections.

III. RESULTS

Although the students were allowed to write freely in their journals, they were asked to write their first journal entry while flying to Australia by answering a few specific questions:

- What experiences have you had with English?
- Why did you join this study tour?
- What expectations or concerns do you have about your study tour experience?

The following two sections report on the students' stated reasons for joining the study tour as well as their expectations and concerns, which mostly reflected feelings of anxiety.

A. *Reasons for going abroad*

The students' reasons for joining this short-term study abroad program varied yet could be categorized into mainly three motivations: language study, opportunity, and self-development.

Though language study would appear the most obvious reason for a university student to join a study tour in which she would spend most of her waking time in an intensive English program, only two students stated this as their primary motivation, as expressed directly by Asuka, "I want to improve my English." However, it is possible that other students did not write this as a goal considering it already assumed.

Other students saw the study tour as a unique opportunity, such as Zarina who wrote “I thought that the time which I could do this experience is only now.” A similar feeling was expressed by Hiroko who explained that this program was her last chance to go abroad before the strict schedule of job-hunting began in her third year. If successful, her efforts would result in a demanding career in which there would be little chance to take a five-week trip to Australia.

Other students mentioned more personal self-development, like Eri who stated, “I want to change myself.” As the later entries from her peers showed, personal change and growth were certainly on the horizon.

B. Anxieties

When describing their concerns and expectations, most of the students wrote about anxiety connected to communication and culture. Asuka expressed her worries in a general statement: “I concern about communication in English,” while Zarina answered more specifically, describing her concerns as, “Whether I can communicate with my host family well. Whether I can become familiar with this surrounding.” Her second comment perhaps points to the need to provide opportunities for students to learn about their host culture, host families, and living situation prior to departure. Ironically, the strongest communicator in the cohort, Hiroko, also had anxiety about communication with her host family, and mirrored Zarina’s worries about adapting to Australian life: “I have more concerns than expectations now. I’m looking forward to seeing my host family, but my English level isn’t so high, so to communicate with them is one of my concerns. I don’t know life of Australia so the life in Australia is also one of my concerns.” Overall, the primary concerns among the students, which were also relayed to the researcher in informal chats, were based on a lack of confidence in their communicative and sociocultural competencies. These anxieties appeared to manifest themselves in later entries in which the students described feelings of powerlessness and the consequences of their inaction or avoidance of communication.

C. Powerlessness

One of the lowest proficiency students on the study tour was Io, and fortunately for this study, she was also one of the most prolific journal writers, giving valuable insight into her challenges navigating the new English environment in which she found herself upon leaving Japan. In her first entry, she described missing the meal on the flight to Australia. For context the flight departed from a stopover in Singapore at night and the only meal was breakfast to be served shortly before arrival:

I was surprised *because breakfast was served suddenly* [italics indicates original text written in Japanese]. *I went to the bathroom to wash my face. However, breakfast time was finished when I came back from the bathroom. I didn’t eat anything until dinner, so I was very hungry.* -Io

The idea of asking the flight attendant for her meal upon returning to her seat does not appear to have crossed her mind, nor did she mention missing the meal to the teacher accompanying her on the flight, possibly due to her lack of communicative competence.

After arriving in Australia, the students were soon met by their host families and taken to their home. Hiroko, describes how her lack of communicative competence created a barrier to finding out about what she wanted to know:

I met my host father for the first time. My host mother will come back (home) tomorrow because of her work. There are only my host father and I in the house. I don't know what to talk or what to do... It's difficult for me to communicate with him now. There are many things I don't know... -Hiroko

Inaction connected to a lack of confidence was also observed by another student, Zarina, after her first day of class: "I thought that Japanese were more passive than any other foreign students. I (also lack the) courage to communicate." She further reflected on their sense of powerlessness and dependance on the teacher, which appears to feed into further anxiety: "We rely entirely on (the teacher who guided us here), so I worry about next week... (shocked emoji) Also, today, we were helped a lot by him."

Io, the student who missed her meal on the flight, wrote about another time that she suffered hunger due to miscommunication and her lack of agency; this time when dealing with her unfriendly host brother:

I was waiting at home alone when my mother went to meet her husband to the airport. Host brother came home while waiting but I just said "hello" to him. I was worried that the other Japanese girl and mother and father did not come home even at night. I felt hungry. 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 (mobile texting app). I was scared of him. So I stayed with mother who was cooking for dinner." -Io

Of particular interest in this interaction is that the students chose to communicate with each other using text messaging while standing in the same kitchen, possibly to avoid speaking in front of the host brother. Although it could be considered a failed communication act in terms of both language study and integration into the host family, the students are demonstrating resourcefulness in dealing with what appears to be a very stressful situation for them.

In a later passage, Io further demonstrates anxiety resulting from her lack of communicative competence, which resulted in a misunderstanding about a trip that her host mother was to take:

Teacher told me that my mother is going to Melbourne. I was surprised about that. I thought she might be disgusted my English and that was why she goes to there... I was sad. I love her very much because she was so kind to me. So if the reason why she goes there was my English skill, it was so sad. -Io

It may be hard to imagine a host mother leaving the house because of the poor English of her host student, but it is an indication of the extreme anxiety that Io felt about her lack of language

ability. Io continues the story, explaining her lack of understanding about the trip to her host mother, who fortunately was able to allay Io's fears:

When I came back home, mother asked me about her trip. When I heard that from my teacher, I was confused and don't know what the teacher said. So I could said just "really?" to my teacher and listened again and again what the teacher said. I couldn't explain these to my mother clearly. I think my English made her disappointed. Additionally, her response was scared a little. But she said "Sorry (Io)." She explained that she was going to help (her daughter) who was staying at a hotel in (another city) by herself. She was coming here (next week). There were a lot of stuff to carry. Therefore, she was going to (that city) and help her. I was relieved to hear that. Teacher and mother said I could change host family for a week. But I said, "I love mother and I love my host family, so I'm not change host family (even) one week." I didn't want to change even for one week. -Io

She writes her journal almost entirely in Japanese with a spattering of English words, such as place names and common English words such as "breakfast time", but it is interesting that here she switches to English to write "I love my host family, so I'm not change host family (even) one week." She then repeats the last phrase in Japanese perhaps showing the importance or depth of feeling about her statement.

Although the students mostly write about these incidents of powerlessness during the first week of their stay, one student describes her frustration at the lack of communication with her host family on Day 18:

I feel sad a little, because I have a little time to spend with my host family. It is only dinner time. But I can't understand their talk at all. I try to listen to it hard and concentrate on having dinner. They don't tell me anything much. After dinner, they do on their own. So I go to my room, too. I don't have time to use English much in my host (family's) house. -Zarina

This student's reflections express her frustration with her difficulty in understanding her host family, but also with their apparent lack of effort to talk with her at length or engage with her beyond dinner. Fortunately, this negative experience is less indicative of the students' entries in the middle and later entries in their journal. In fact, there are many encouraging examples of students using various strategies to improve their communication competency and sense of selves, what one might call generally, Empowerment.

D. Empowerment strategies

Self-handicapping

Throughout their journal entries, the students described various coping mechanisms and strategies that they used to deal with their anxiety and lack of communicative and sociocultural competency. In fact, Io attempted to preempt her anxiety by using a technique of self-handicapping before she even arrived in Australia:

My host mother came there, and I met her for the first time. She gave me a hug. I'd exchanged email with her before we met. She was such a nice person. I didn't worry about my English skill because I told her through email that I can't speak English well." -Io

Apparently by lowering her host mother's expectations of her English ability, Io felt less anxiety about her language ability.

Interconnectivity

The students spent each weekday studying at the university's intensive English program together with students from other countries and other Japanese universities. Io, a lower proficiency learner, described one particular class:

I took the class in the other room. I sat between Mint and Katarina. It was so fun. We took some pictures together at the end of the class. Today's teacher is Claudia. She was so kind, and her class was easy for me so I wrote this diary during the class. But at the same time, I concentrated on listening her English. I was laughed at by Katarina. I took class and break with Akiko from (another Japanese university) and Fabian. When Claudia called my name, I didn't notice. Katarina and Jorge told me that. I was glad that classmates from other countries remembered my name. -Io

Accompanying this entry was a drawing of the classroom scene, in which Io showed the other four students from her college sitting very closely in the front row. She also highlighted that the students from the other university were sitting together, but that she sat in the back row with three non-Japanese students, Mint, Katarina, and Jorge. Whether she is conscious of it, Io is demonstrating that her seating choice is empowering her toward a greater level of communicative competence and international interconnectivity.

Several days later, Io goes on to describe a successful experience she had exploring the nearby town of Fremantle:

I went to Fremantle by myself. The market was opened so I peeked a little. The shops outside had some good things with cheap price. Fremantle sells cheap stuffs, but the quality is not so good, so I have to be very careful when I buy something. Although it was hard, I spoke with some shop staffs too. The staffs there asked me like, "Are you from Japan?" and "Are you coming here for holiday?" so I talked about those things. When I was about to go back home, I met with some crazy people too. It was my first time to go outside the town for a shopping and speak with people there in English. I was very nervous and scared, but I somehow felt comfortable and sense of easiness. -Io

From being the girl on the plane who was could not ask for her meal, Io has come a long way. Beyond showing the courage to explore a new town alone, she demonstrates newfound empowerment by conversing with shop staff and as she describes feeling comfortable and at ease.

Goal setting

Sometimes the students' strategies for linguistic, cultural, and personal improvement were very subtle, coming in the form of specific goals that they set for themselves. One student, Fumi often framed her entries around specific objectives. As one example she asked her host mother for advice and then used the response to set a goal for her language improvement: "I said to (my host mother) 'I want to improve English skills' so she said to me 'If you want to do that, you should watch easy TV show.' So I'll watch TV for a month."

After her first day at school, Fumi assesses the situation and decides on a plan to increase interaction with students those in her study tour group:

Today I went to (the university) first time!! I didn't think there are many exchange students from foreign country (but I was wrong). There were many exchange student from Japan. So I thought I shouldn't talk to only (my college's) students. I should communicate with foreign country's students and Japanese students who (don't) come from (my college). -Fumi

Furthermore, when confronted with misunderstanding, she determines to use a book she brought with her to improve her vocabulary, writing,

When I take class (at the university) I often can't understand what my teacher says. Other students in my class look like understanding about what our teacher says. I have brought English words book to Australia so I try to learn new English words as soon as possible.

Other students also responded to miscommunication with immediate goal setting, including Hiroko who wrote, "I can't understand what the (store clerk) said because she spoke so fast. I want to understand without asking again." In a later entry she realizes the difficulty that extraneous noise creates for her listening, and also uses this as an opportunity to strategize:

When I am in stations and other places, I sometimes hear announcement. I try to listen to it and understand what it says, but I can't do when I am in little noisy places, even if I can understand it when I listen to it in quiet places like listening test. I have to practice listening!!
-Hiroko

After an activity in which she gets to sing with other students at the university, she reflects on her pronunciation:

Sometimes it is difficult for me to pronounce English. I don't know how to read. Some words in the songs are difficult to pronounce for me, especially "our" is the most difficult word for me. I couldn't say the word in English songs. Singing songs is fun for me but I need practice time when I sing English songs. -Hiroko

Although these examples of empowerment strategies came mostly from within students themselves, at times they were also inspired by others.

Inspired by peers (non-Japanese students learning Japanese)

At the university where the students were studying there was a group that held regular events for Japanese students studying English to interact with local students who were studying Japanese. These interactions provided not only linguistic practice, but also opportunities for the

Japanese students to be inspired by their often more confident partners. After one exchange, Minako commented:

After class, I ate lunch at the usual café. And then went to Japanese conversation club that starts from 4pm. It was held at main campus. It was just talking and talking. People I talked with could speak Japanese really well, so I couldn't speak English so much. I just did conversation in Japanese but they were interesting, especially Chinese and Indonesian. We made a plan to meet up at (a nearby station) after my school and eat pizza together tomorrow! I thought we should have gone to this club before. I think it is very good to make a friend who can speak both language, Japanese and English! I really respected them, cause they became to be able to speak Japanese very early, even though I've learned it nearly for 8 years! And I was stimulated by them. -Minako

Another student also found inspiration in her interlocutors:

I joined Japanese Club for the first time. It was interesting! There were many foreign people, but they were very good at speaking Japanese. Moreover, they can speak another language! So they can speak three language! They spoke more Japanese than us... I want to be like them... It was good to come there before I left here. They speak Japanese, and sometimes suddenly they speak English. I respect them...(diamonds emoji). Japanese club is good.” -Zarina

These feelings of admiration were reflected in even a third student's journal:

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

And finally, our low-proficiency learner, Io was also impressed:

We were waiting for sunset. We talked a lot. English is difficult for me. But Lucas said that it's okay to make mistakes to me. Keisuke often made mistakes and Lucas also made a lot of mistakes when he learned Japanese. He cheered me up. The sunset was really beautiful. -Io

The students were not only influenced by non-Japanese peers but also Japanese with a higher level of proficiency, as explained by Fumi: “I could make new friend from [another university]. She can speak English well so it makes me (feel) positive.” It becomes apparent that the people around these students are an important influence on them and none more so than their host families.

Encouraged by host family

In contrast to her early struggles and anxiety, Io also made references to the positive impact of her host mother, including this comment from her first day: “My host mother explained how

to get on the bus kindly. She didn't care even if I asked the same question many times. I was so lucky to stay at her house as a homestay student."

Another student, Asuka, also wrote about her supportive host family and their friends. On one occasion she explained how this feedback helped her gauge her improvement and encouraged her to communicate more:

I think that I'm getting to make more natural communication with my host family. My host father often wash my clothes, and after washing them, I said, "thank you for washing my clothes." And he said "you're welcome, and I'm glad that you always say to me 'thank you for washing my clothes'." And my host mother said, "You are good! Good English!" I was very happy to hear that. I have to try to communicate more with them, I think. -Asuka

In another incident she described receiving positive feedback from a family friend:

I think I'm getting better at having conversations in English. Today my host family's friends came to our house and we had a party. When we were preparing for our dinner, one of them asked me, "Would you like some gravy sauce?" So I answered, "Yes please" and then she told me that was a really good way to answer. -Asuka

Clearly her host family took an active role in their host student's language development, and she welcomed their feedback and encouragement. In the next section, we will look at the students' thoughts about their experience studying and living in Australia.

E. Students' Final reflections

The students were asked to write a final entry in their journal on their way home to Japan on their overall feelings about their study tour experience. Their final entries included feelings of gratitude to teachers, sadness at having to leave, and pride at their growth and improvement.

The study tour had a large impact on Zarina: "This studying abroad and homestay were the first time for me, so they were the best memories in my life. All that I had experienced were my treasure." Though, she did express some regret at missed potential due to her limited English ability: "If I were good at speaking English more, I could enjoy more. I'll study English harder in Japan."

Hiroko offered a particularly reflective answer:

I learned that being active is very important in my life during this tour. I stayed much time in my local area and school for many years, so I didn't go other places and I didn't want to go there. However in Australia, I visited many places, and I did many experiences. I thought I was a very active person in Australia, and I felt I was not same person in Japan. When I went to outside, I could learn many things and the time passed so fast. I made good use of my time in Australia. Being active is very important because I can get many things!!

Remembering that she initially saw the study tour as one last chance to travel before beginning the intensive period of job hunting, it seems that the tour not only fulfilled her

expectations for visiting a foreign country but also resulted in significant personal growth and actualization.

IV. CONCLUSION

Though limited to one particular group, this study provides a glimpse into the reflections of these female Japanese students' study abroad experiences. It would be irresponsible to draw any definite conclusions or pretend that their experiences represent all students, or even all female Japanese students. However, certain patterns are visible and warrant further consideration, either for future research or while developing pre-departure curriculum and short-term study abroad programs.

First of all, as one would imagine that misunderstanding combined with preexisting anxiety can lead to worse anxiety and feelings of powerlessness. It may be impossible to determine whether a student missing a meal or being afraid to ask about dinner is in the long run a positive or negative experience, those in charge of these students: educators, administrators, and host families, should no doubt be aware of a student's potential lack of initiative and self-confidence. One could imagine that practicing roleplays based on similar situations before departure might help them be better prepared to act and speak up for themselves.

A very encouraging pattern in these journals was the degree to which students used goal setting as one strategy to deal with communication failure and lack of proficiency. The students who utilized this technique appeared to build confidence in themselves and recognize their own progress towards greater linguistic and cultural competency.

The importance of interaction with non-Japanese students appeared to be highly beneficial to these students – even if they spoke mostly Japanese together. The language partners served as role models and inspired the Japanese students to study harder and challenge themselves. It would be interesting to interview local students to see their perspectives on the interactions.

In addition, a good relationship with the host family can also empower students, and in contrast, a poor relationship, or just one marked by a lack of interaction, may increase anxiety, and negatively impact the student's experience. More research should be done on what factors determine a positive relationship with the host family and what can be done to encourage this, on both the student and host family sides.

Ideally, these findings and other future research can be utilized to improve learners' study abroad experiences. In particular there is great potential to decrease student anxiety and give them more tools for self-empowerment through pre-departure lessons and in-country guidance.

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