

Factors Affecting Language Gain During Study Abroad — A Study on Homesickness —

海外留学における英語学習成果とその要因 —ホームシック度の関連性—

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Abstract

When second language (L2) learners participate in a homestay abroad, the homestay environment may trigger homesickness since learners are likely to directly compare the homestay family with their own family at home. This paper examines the experiences of 26 Japanese university students during a 15-week study abroad (SA) in Canada and looks into their homesickness experiences in relation to language proficiency and language gain. A set of both quantitative and qualitative data was used to study the effect of homesickness on language gains and the study indicates the following: 1) some learners in each of the pre-departure English proficiency levels experienced homesickness, 2) more than half of the learners with homesickness made gains in post English proficiency scores, 3) previous SA experiences did not lower the risk of experiencing homesickness, and 4) triggers defined by homesickness theories were confirmed by the interview responses.

【Key word】 Study Abroad (SA), Homesickness, English Proficiency, Affective Factors, Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

要 旨

海外留学でのホームステイという異国の家庭の一員となる行為は、自身の家族を想起し比べる環境となりやすいために、ホームシックを引き起こしやすいと言える。本研究論文は、日本人大学生26名の、15週間に渡るカナダでの留学経験において、ホームシック度と英語学習成果との関係を探るもので、量的及び質的データを含めて考察した。主な結果は以下である：1) 留学前の英語能力テストによって分けた各レベルに、ホームシックを体験した学習者がいた、2) ホームシック度が高かった学習者でも、半数以上が帰国後の英語能力テストに伸びを見せた、3) それまでの留学経験は、ホームシックを引き起こすリスクを下げなかった、4) ホームシックの定義で挙げられているホームシックを引き起こす事柄を、インタビュー回答で確認できた。

【キーワード】 スタディアブロード、ホームシック度、英語能力、情意要因、第二言語習得

1. Introduction

Higher education around the world is internationalizing and this has helped to make study abroad (SA) a common experience for university learners. Learning a second language (L2) or

fulfilling academic requirements tend to be the main goals of SA for many learners. Other goals might include having an intercultural experience by entering into a culturally new environment. This paper, therefore, defines SA as learners spending as short as two weeks up to one year or more taking language and academic courses in foreign universities.

When learners choose to study abroad, they accept the fact that along with positive experiences there might be some hardships, for instance, coping with cultural differences, attempting to communicate using limited L2 skills, and being homesick. The symptoms of homesickness include depression, withdrawal, absent-mindedness, anxiety and phobic avoidance accompanied by strong ruminative activity centered on home (Fisher, 1989). Perhaps the significance of homesickness in the SA context is that with their minds occupied with ruminative activity, it is to be expected that learners are not able to use cognition for other highly cognitive activities. In addition, symptoms such as withdrawal may prevent learners from positive interaction in the L2 resulting in less gain on English proficiency tests.

The underlying questions of this paper are to examine how harmful homesickness is during SA for language gains and how important it is to avoid homesickness for L2 learners while abroad. This study investigates homesickness in relation to language proficiency and language gain in the SA context, as well as triggers of homesickness in the SA context. Specifically, the following research questions are posed. 1) Is homesickness triggered by low English proficiency level? 2) Does homesickness impede language gain? 3) What experiences do learners have while abroad related to homesickness? Finally, homesickness theories are summarized and used as guidelines to review interview responses.

2. Homesickness and Study Abroad (SA)

2.1 Literature on Study Abroad (SA), Homesickness and Language

There are few academically researched publications available investigating “language” and “homesickness” in “study abroad” context. In fact, using online Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), searching for any publication type (i.e., journal article, books, dissertations/theses) from 1990 to 2011, there is no match found that includes the three keywords, “language”, “homesickness” and “study abroad” in the title and abstract. Therefore, this study is one of very few studies considering “language” and “homesickness” in “study abroad” context.

While hundreds of research studies have been carried out on “language” and “study abroad”, this combination is not relevant to this study. By using two keywords, “homesickness” and “study abroad”, three publications were found, two of which are relevant to this study. Coleman and Chafer (2010) report a study of UK graduate students in Senegal, West Africa, learning French. Their report shows a correlation between initial homesickness and use of internet communications to home. However, this report does not mention if use of internet communications to home triggers homesickness, or if students with homesickness contact home

to possibly lower their level of homesickness. Yen and Steven (2004) report a qualitative study of five Taiwanese university students in the US. The interviews revealed some problems faced by them, including the language barrier, racial discrimination, and homesickness.

By using two keywords “homesickness” and “language” in combination, 19 academically researched publications were found, which have some relevant findings. In chronological order, Kwon (2009) reports, by randomly choosing 165 international undergraduate students in the US, there are no significant differences in feelings of isolation, homesickness and loneliness between different ethnic groups. However, more female international students experienced homesickness than male students. This is useful information for administrators and educators to know in dealing with female SA participants. Tavakoli et al. (2009) report that to overcome acculturative stress, meaning stress felt adjusting to a new culture, stress management techniques were taught to 118 international students in the US. One group did group assertiveness training, another group did private expressive writing, and a third group did both. It is reported that group assertiveness training was rated positively by students and led to lower negative affect, whereas expressive writing was less well received and led to higher homesickness and fear, but also to higher positive affect. The combined group had no effect, the reason given being that the two types of training negated each other. Accordingly, it is useful to know, for example, that writing journal entries alone may trigger homesickness. Ying and Han (2008) studied a total of 155 Taiwanese students in different universities in the US, and their statistical analysis shows students on campuses with fewer other Taiwanese formed more friendships with Americans and developed greater English competence by the second semester than those on campuses with more Taiwanese students. Furthermore, homesickness, affiliation with Americans, and English competence in the second semester predicted adjustment in the third semester among students at moderate ethnic density schools. The significance here is that homesickness is one of the three factors for predicting adjustment later. Finally, Ayano (2006) reports that Japanese university students in Britain suffered severely from homesickness, and that the homesickness levels remained very high throughout the year of SA experience. Ayano also reports that the physical distance from home and the degree of difference and unfamiliarity in a host town are positively correlated with the degree of homesickness. This report may indicate that Japanese learners choosing English-speaking countries as SA destinations can generally have a higher risk of experiencing homesickness, compared to going to Asian countries.

2.2 Defining Homesickness and the Theoretical Basis

In the field of psychology, homesickness studies have focused on two elements: “attentional focus of home-related ruminative activity” and “the symptoms which accompany the experience.” (Fisher 1989: xiii) Symptoms such as absent-mindedness, ruminative activity centered on home, and depression are mentioned in section 1. The main reason for experiencing

homesickness is that moving into a new environment creates stress and this stress creates the need for mental ‘escapism’ to ease the pain, which often means thinking of home (Fisher, 1989). In this paper, homesickness is defined more broadly as uneasy feelings derived from missing family, friends, as well as familiar activities, food, and language at home.

There are four main theoretical bases for homesickness that are used to investigate interview responses in section 5 of this paper. The first is the loss model proposed by Bowlby (1999). This is explained as being similar to when an infant is deprived of visual contact with the mother. The infant will show signs of anxiety, panic and searching behavior. The loss model supposes the homesick person to be temporarily bereaved, suffering acute anxiety and panic because of loss of direct contact with home and family. The predominant distress symptom would be anxiety, and preoccupation with thoughts of home is a characteristic.

The second model is the interruption theory proposed by Mandler (1975). This theory also predicts raised anxiety and preoccupation with thoughts of home but for different reasons. The interruption theory assumes that the interruption of on-going activity (i.e. life in the home country) creates tension, and this tension creates irritation and even anxiety if a substitute activity cannot be found.

The third model is the control theory proposed by Fisher (1986). Fisher explains “that the transition from a familiar to a new environment results in a period of loss of control. A person who is skilled at dealing with the demands of his or her life prior to transition suddenly becomes helpless in a new location” (Fisher,1986:xiv)

The fourth model is the transition theory proposed by (Wapner, Kaplan, & Ciotton, 1981). Adapting to the new role results in a period of anxiety. For example, a person who moves from home to college assumes the role of a college student as compared with the role at home of son or daughter or student.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

26 second-year students from the College of Business Management at J. F. Oberlin University volunteered to participate in this study. 25 of the students were female, and one was male. They were SA participants for the length of 15 weeks at Thompson Rivers University (TRU) in Canada.

This research was authorized by the J. F. Oberlin University Research Ethics Committee and followed the procedures required by the committee. First, the participants were notified about the purposes of the study, the data collection, and the procedure, and they signed two forms of informed consent: 1) to participate in this research and permit all of the data to be used for academic publications and presentations, and 2) to permit the interviews to be recorded. They were paid to participate in this research by the Institute for Language Education Research and

Development at J. F. Oberlin University.

3.2 Data Collection

This research took the form of a longitudinal study with English proficiency tests, questionnaires, and interviews. Pre-departure data was collected around one month before departure, indicated as Time 1 in tables and figures. While-abroad data was collected around four to five weeks into SA, indicated as Time 2. Post data was collected around 1 month after their return from SA, indicated as Time 3.

To measure English proficiency, learners took the Computerized Assessment System for English Communication (CASEC) proficiency test. The CASEC proficiency test was used because it is a computer adaptive test which learners can take online in approximately 40 minutes and the results are calculated only a few seconds after the test. Moreover, this test produces equivalent scores for the standardized TOEIC and TOEFL tests, which are relevant for research purposes.

Homesickness can be tested with questionnaires. The most well known inventory is the Dundee Relocation Inventory (DRI) (Fisher, 1989). This inventory has over 100 questions for researchers to choose from and create their own questionnaire. This paper used 20 questions (see Appendix 1) from the Dundee Relocation Inventory (DRI). All participants answered questionnaires around four to five weeks into their SA and homestay experience (Time 2). Once the questionnaires had been returned, the data was transferred into digital format. The homesickness level for each learner was determined by simply summing the points allotted for each answer. By summing the points, the lowest score possible was 20, and the highest possible score was 100.

Pre-departure interview data as well as while-abroad interview data was collected from all participants. During pre-departure interviews learners were asked, for example, about what they were going to do in order to improve their L2 skills while abroad, any worries about life with the homestay families, and anticipation of homesickness. During while-abroad interviews learners were asked, for example, about what they were actually doing to improve their L2 skills, about the life with the host family, and if they were feeling homesick.

Since the study is based on 26 participants, which is a rather small sample to run statistical analysis, this paper presents an exploratory study on homesickness and English proficiency based on 26 SA participants.

4. Results and Discussion from the Quantitative Data

4.1 Gains in English Proficiency Scores During SA

The first of the quantitative results to be presented are the gains in English proficiency scores made by learners during their study abroad. Table 1 shows the sample size and how the learners were divided into five level groups according to the TOEIC (equivalent) scores of the

CASEC proficiency test taken as a measure of pre-departure English proficiency. The level groups are used in this paper as a guide to highlight the trends in the results.

Table 1: Sample Size and English Proficiency Level Groups

Level Groups	TOEIC (equivalent)	Sample Size
		Time 1: Pre-Departure Result (n=25*)
Advanced	700+	<u>0</u>
High-Intermediate	600-699	5
Intermediate	500-599	7
Low-intermediate	400-499	6
Elementary	340-399	7

(*There were 26 participants, but one participant did not take pre-departure test, and 2 participants did not take post test.)

Figure 1: English Proficiency Score Changes from Pre-departure to Post

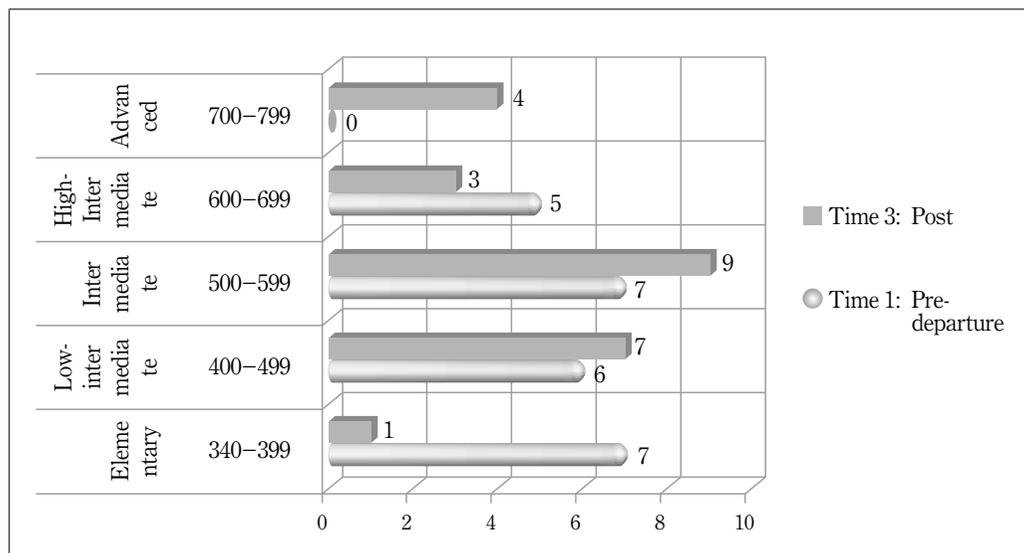


Figure 1 shows a clear improvement of English proficiency test scores. In Figure 1, there were no learners who scored over 700 and were placed in the advanced group at pre-departure (Time 1), but four learners scored over 700 at Post (Time 3). In fact, the highest score at Time 1 was 675, and the highest score at Time 3 increased to 755. Next, seven learners were in the

elementary group at Time 1, but only one learner remained in the elementary group at Time 3. The rest of the six learners scored over 400 and moved up to the low-intermediate group at Time 3. Finally, among the 25 learners who took the pre-departure English proficiency test, 18 made gains in their proficiency scores at Time 3. These results show that even a 15-week SA experience is effective in enhancing learners' language proficiency.

4.2 Pre-Departure English Proficiency and Homesickness

The next set of quantitative results concern pre-departure English proficiency and homesickness levels. In this paper, learners who scored above 60 points out of 100 on the homesickness questionnaire are flagged as “learners with homesickness”. There are eight learners who fall into this category, as shown in Table 2. Note that Table 2 shows the results of the pre-departure English proficiency test and so there is no advanced group since no one scored above 700 on this test.

Table 2: Pre-departure English Proficiency Score and Homesickness (n=8)

Level Groups	Time 1: Pre-Departure TOEIC Score	Time 2: Number of Learners with Homesickness (overall number of learners)
High-Intermediate	600-699	2 (out of 5 total learners)
Intermediate	500-599	3 (out of 7 total learners)
Low-intermediate	400-499	1 (out of 6 total learners)
Elementary	350-399	2 (out of 7 total learners)

There are one to three learners with homesickness in each level. Even in the high-intermediate group, there are two learners who showed signs of homesickness. In fact those two learners in the high-intermediate group scored the highest and second highest in the pre-departure English proficiency test. It can be inferred that homesickness may not be closely connected with pre-departure English proficiency. Furthermore, according to the pre-departure English proficiency results, low English proficiency level does not seem to directly cause homesickness.

4.3 Learners with Homesickness Making Gains in English Proficiency Scores

Considering only the learners with homesickness, many of them made gains in their English proficiency scores. This was despite the fact that all eight of these learners showed high levels of homesickness. Table 3 shows pre (Time 1) and post (Time 3) TOEIC scores of the eight learners, and six of them made gains in their English proficiency scores. Indeed, learners 24, 4,

and 19 scored over 700 on post (Time 3) TOEIC. It is curious but learner 24 had the highest post TOEIC score (Time 3) among all 26 learners and also scored the highest on the homesickness questionnaire. From the results shown in Table 3, many learners with homesickness improved their English proficiency scores and this result suggests that homesickness does not prevent learners from making language gains during SA.

Table 3: English Proficiency Scores of Learners with Homesickness (n=8)

Learner	Homesickness Score (points)	Time 1: Pre-Departure TOEIC Score	Time 3: Post TOEIC Score
24	79	595	755
17	69	475	485
11	68	365	430
4	66	675	740
7	64	585	590
15	64	360	N/A*
8	63	580	495
19	60	670	710

(*Learner 15 did not take post proficiency test.)

4.4 Previous SA Experience and Homesickness

Another aspect of homesickness is its relation to previous homestay experience. It is surprising to find that SA has become a common experience. Indeed, out of all 26 learners, 16 had previous experience of SA from two weeks up to three years. Table 4 shows the eight learners with a high level of homesickness, and it is notable that six of them had previous SA experience. In fact learner 24 who scored highest on the homesickness questionnaire had three SA experiences prior to this SA. Learner 19 had three years of SA experience. This indicates that previous SA experiences do not prevent learners from experiencing homesickness again.

It was initially assumed that two triggers of homesickness were low English proficiency level and no previous homestay experience in this study. In other words, it was supposed that not having a good level of language to communicate with the host family would trigger isolation and therefore trigger homesickness. Also, experiencing SA for the first time would trigger homesickness. However, these factors do not seem to be related to homesickness. The next question then is to find out what factors cause homesickness. Some of the feelings and experiences triggering homesickness are gathered from the interview responses in the following sections.

Table 4: Previous Homestay Experiences of Learners with Homesickness (n=8)

Learner	Previous Homestay Experience 1	Previous Homestay Experience 2	Previous Homestay Experience 3	Time 2: While-Abroad Homesickness Score (points)
24	2 weeks in Elementary School	2 weeks in Junior High School	2 weeks in High School	79
17	none			69
11	none			68
4	2 weeks in Elementary School	2 weeks in Junior High School	none	66
7	2 weeks in University	none	none	64
15	1 month in University	none	none	64
8	2 weeks in University	none	none	63
19	2 weeks in Junior High School	3 years in High School	none	60

5. Results and Discussion from the Interviews – Triggers for Homesickness

In order to examine possible triggers of homesickness, the homesickness theories summarized in section 2.2 will be used as guidelines to review the interview responses. All participants spoke in Japanese during the interviews, and the authors of this paper translated all of the Japanese responses into English. In this section, the focus is on the eight learners marked as learners with homesickness in section 4. They are all female. Interview responses of these eight female learners reveal some feelings and experiences in relation to homesickness.

It is important to note that homesickness does not take into consideration the crossing into another culture. In fact, the Dundee Relocation Inventory (DRI) has no question items directly related to confronting cultural differences, foreign languages, or food from home. One of the reasons is that Dundee Relocation Inventory (DRI) was aimed at carrying out research on the psychology and wellbeing of those living and studying away from home in boarding schools (Fisher, 1989). However, when learners study abroad, the destination is often far and culturally different from home. Drawing a line to distinguish between culture shock and homesickness is not easy. It should be noted that adjusting to cultural differences is usually included in the study of culture shock. For example, coping with food differences is included in the dissatisfaction

stage of the culture shock process proposed by Inamura (1980), or in the ethnocentric stages of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) proposed by Bennett (1993). In this paper, however, as defined in section 2, homesickness is uneasiness from missing family and friends, and familiar cultural references.

5.1 Being Alone – The Loss Model

One of the homesickness models is the loss model summarized in section 2.1. This loss model supposes the homesick person to be temporarily bereaved, suffering acute anxiety and panic because of the loss of direct contact with home and family. The homesick person is like an infant deprived of visual contact with the mother.

Learner 17 falls into this category. Learner 17 is one of only two learners among the eight with homesickness without any previous SA experiences. The pre-departure interview response is below. Learner 17 shows a very close relationship with her mother and shows concern about being apart for the first time. When asked if she thinks she will be homesick during SA she indicated that she will definitely be homesick. She was asked to give a number from 0 to 3. The lowest score is 0 which means she is confident that she will not be homesick, and 3 indicates that she strongly thinks she will be homesick.

I would give it a 3. Well, every day I am always all over my parents. If there is some free time, and my parents are sitting on a sofa, I just hang and sit on my parents like a koala. So, as much as possible, I stay with my parents, and if there is any free time, I am physically attached to my parents. For this reason, I dislike being at home by myself and I put on a DVD to distract myself when I have to stay home alone. (Pre-departure interview response by learner 17)

As learner 17 expected, she experienced homesickness during SA. In fact, on the homesickness questionnaire, learner 17 had the second highest score. The need to be in touch with her mother was very strong, and the following response shows the intensity of learner 17's email activity.

I email almost every day. One time, my mother was on a trip for two nights, three days. During that time there were no emails. I had forgotten about her trip, so I did not know why she was not replying to me for so long. Later, she emailed me and reminded me she was on a trip. I then remembered about her trip. I felt okay then. Other than that, so far, I have been fine. (While-abroad interview response by learner 17)

Learner 17 demonstrates the loss model. If a learner is strongly emotionally attached to parents, homesickness is probably inevitable.

5.2 Not Being Able to Do the Same Things as at Home – The Interruption Theory

Another theory of homesickness defined in section 2.2 is the interruption theory, which points out that interruption of on-going activity and not being able to find a substitute activity create irritation. Learners are easily irritated if any of the relaxation, soothing, and fun activities they engage in at home country cannot be accessed while abroad. Some of the learners with high homesickness scores expressed this irritation, as described in the following sections.

5.2.1 Being Deprived of Enjoyment

The next interview response is by learner 24, who scored the highest on the homesickness questionnaire. The following response exemplifies the interruption theory. During while-abroad interview, learner 24 showed irritation toward not being able to do the things she used to enjoy at home on her own.

Recently, I have been feeling homesick a bit. I feel homesick when I cannot play as I want. There is no place to have a good time and there are no busses to get around. Sometimes, I feel I really want to go shopping. I just want to be able to go shopping in Tokyo or Yokohama as I usually did. (While-abroad interview response by learner 24)

From learner 24's interview response, the result of an interruption of on-going activities created tension. The "interruption theory" is apparent from the response.

5.2.2 Not Being Able to Access Favorite Foods

Another important source of reassuring comfort, in fact a necessity for some learners is food. In a sense, interruption of access to the food they like is highly irritating, and some learners expressed irritation over food. Below is one example found in the interview response of learner 7, whose score was high on the homesickness questionnaire. Learner 7 expressed her concerns about the food at her homestay.

Well, I am not a fan of foreign food. Some of my friends eat bread for breakfast in Japan. But, I even have stomachache if I eat something other than rice for breakfast sometimes. I have to eat rice in the morning. But now, I am a little bit used to not having rice in the morning. It is good though that my host is a Filipino family, because we have rice almost every day. Some of my friends' host families do not like Japanese food and they say they do not get any rice at all. I am glad that even though it is Thai rice, at least I get some compared to no rice. (While-abroad interview response by learner 7)

5.3 Loss of Control – The Control Theory

The third model summarized in section 2.2 is the control theory (Fisher, 1986). This theory explains that when moving from a familiar to a new environment, people often feel a loss of control, and a period of feeling helpless is experienced in the new location. This serves as a trigger for homesickness. The following sections describe examples of this trigger.

5.3.1 The Loss of Control of Language Skills

During SA, learners communicate with their host family in L2, which is a significant challenge. Losing access to communication in L1 and instead struggling to express themselves with their limited L2 skills, learners often feel at a loss. The following is an interview response of learner 15 prior to her SA. Learner 15 explains how her previous SA experience was depressing since she felt her L2 skills were not enough to communicate with her host family. She showed concern about the upcoming SA on the same point: communicating with the host family with her limited English skills.

When I went last time (to SA), I could not speak (in English) so I felt very depressed. I shut myself inside my room and I did not go out. My host family was very kind and they asked me to come out, and took me to different places... This is my worry for this coming SA. (Pre-departure interview response by learner 15)

When asked how she would cope with this problem this time around, learner 15 responded that she would leave her room. Learner 15 explained she should not worry too much about making mistakes in her English grammar. However, she also showed concern that she does not like to repeatedly ask the interlocutor to repeat words for her. The following is the pre-departure interview response explaining how learner 15 plans to cope with the problem of lack of English skills for the coming SA.

I worry about my grammar, probably too much. Maybe I should think like it is okay if my message can get across. This kind of thinking might be the best. When someone was saying something, I asked to speak slowly. But, even when they said things many times, when I still could not understand, then I felt very sorry... I constantly said “What? Can you say it again?” (Pre-departure interview response by learner 15)

Learner 15 expressed her concern for her homesickness because of lack of English skills for communication. The following is a pre-departure interview response by learner 15 when asked to give a score from 0 to 3 depending on the expectation of homesickness.

I would give it a 2. I will have difficulty communicating, so three months will be long and difficult. I will also simply miss my friends. (Pre-departure interview response by learner 15)

5.3.2 Loss of Control During Unexpected Happenings

People feel at a loss easily when something unexpected happens. In the SA context, feelings of a loss of control might increase because: 1) those unexpected happenings may be something learners have never experienced before due to being abroad and staying with a host family; 2) if solving problems is necessary, then doing so with limited L2 skills can be challenging; and 3) the people they usually consult, i.e., parents and friends, may be out of reach. There are many unexpected happenings reported by learners with homesickness and this section will review some of them. For long responses, the troubles are summarized.

Learner 4 reports an unexpected happening, and it concerns a money problem. She lived with host parents and five other SA students from places such as China and Africa. One African female student asked learner 4 to let her borrow credit card to register a phone bill to be sent to learner 4's credit card. Learner 4 explained "This never happens in Japan – borrowing someone else's credit card to pay money. I think, maybe she feels that I am her family. Then, I should be thankful for her thinking." (While-abroad interview response by learner 4) This problem was solved after an intervention by the international office at the host university.

Learner 11 reported trouble upon arrival. Learner 11 found out on the arrival day that her host family was on vacation, so the host's brother and his wife came to stay with learner 11 for a week. However, the brother and the wife did nothing at all for learner 11. "They did nothing for me. They did not care. I felt they were really very irresponsible." (While-abroad interview response by learner 11) This host family was contacted by the international office at the host university to request an improvement in the way that they hosted students.

Learner 7 reported feeling homesick upon arrival because of an unexpected host family situation and she also suffered from noise. She was notified prior to her departure that her host family had a 3-year-old child. However, when she arrived, there was a 1-year-old as well. Also, she did not expect Filipinos as her host parents. These unexpected things upon arrival made her feel homesick.

I had read about a 3-year-old, but there was no mention about a 1-year-old. So when I first met them, I thought "What? There are two?" I was surprised by that. Also, the host parents are Filipinos. They use Canadian English, but they have accents. I am used to the accent now. Also, the children are noisy. They do not march into my room, but they open the door quietly and try to come in. Host mother tries to stop them, but.... Also, when I am studying or writing a diary entry, I hear screaming ... Last night was difficult, too.

It was not a cry, but just screaming out like GYA...!...I felt homesick a bit. When I first thought things are different from what I expected, then my emotions and feelings went down and I could not eat very much. I think it was because my health condition was bad. I thought of my family, well, more about my friends. I was wondering what my university friends were doing. (While-abroad interview response by learner 7)

In the interview responses, they talked in depth about these problems with irritation, which clearly showed their distress and concern for their time with their host family.

5.4 From Family Member at Home to Guest at Homestay – The Transition Theory

The fourth model of homesickness summarized in section 2.2 is the transition theory, which explains that adapting to a new role results in a period of anxiety. Transition to SA context can be challenging. For instance, transition from L1 speaker to L2 learner with limited language skills involves effort. This overlaps with section 5.3.1, the loss of control of language skills. Some experiences related to language control have already been mentioned.

Becoming a member of, or a guest to a host family requires transitional effort, and this is another characteristic of the SA context. Even though the host family is called “host family” and learners are taken into the homes, the learners are not quite family members in the new home. The following is an interview response by learner 4, who describes feelings of not quite becoming a family member at her new host home.

I do talk to my host family, but it is not like I am that close. Well, I guess I am a little bit close. But, it almost feels like there is an invisible wall. Maybe I think my friends are feeling similar at their homestay. (While-abroad interview response by learner 4)

6. Other Observations - Repeating Homesickness

Finally, one of the surprising results in this study is that prior SA experience does not seem to lessen the amount of homesickness. The suspected reasons behind this phenomenon are that homesickness is an emotional response to a situation, and therefore is situational. In other words, if learners are exposed to situational triggers, they are likely to experience an emotional response regardless of previous exposure to similar triggers.

The following pre-departure interview response by learner 11 explains how, because of a similar experience before, learner 11 expected to feel homesick again.

I would give it a 2 (on a 0 to 3 scale). Well, no, I think I will definitely be homesick. I am not from Tokyo, so when I came to Tokyo, I felt homesick. It was a little bit different from culture shock. I thought people in Tokyo are really cold and that I wanted to go home. I

had felt like that before, so the feeling might be a little bit different this time, but since I experienced that, I kind of know how I would feel. (Pre-departure interview response by learner 11)

Another response comes from learner 19 during the while-abroad interview. She had experienced SA for three years in high school, but she scored high on the homesickness questionnaire. The following is a response when asked if she would not feel homesick since she had done years of SA before.

No, many people say that but it is not true. Actually, I had experienced homesickness before, so I feel traumatic now sometimes. My home stay family is very nice. There is only a host mother, so I have a lot of chances to speak. She is very powerful and we get along, but we say anything to each other, so sometimes we feel awkward by joking too much. Then I feel “oh no”. When she says something a bit harsh, I feel that I am being scolded. At such time, as soon as I feel I have been scolded, I feel traumatic and start crying. My host mother says she is not angry. So, having an experience can actually be a bad thing, I think. I feel “Oh! So, this is it. My happiness will all disappear now.” (While-abroad interview response by learner 19)

Learner 19 went on to talk about how her previous SA experience made it difficult to adjust to a new culture since she constantly kept comparing the two experiences.

I feel culture shock by comparing Australia (previous 3-year SA destination) and Canada. It is bad to compare. I try not to compare these days. I home stayed in Melbourne, so I compared city and country side. I also compared the size of the family. It was a big host family with four host brothers. So I compared these differences. At first, I compared meals, too. Everything was a source of culture shock. But now, I am getting used to it. It is like I am on Canada magic. (While-abroad interview response by learner 19)

7. Conclusions

7.1 Summary

This paper studies homesickness in relation to language proficiency and gain. The findings are as follows: 1) according to the pre-departure English proficiency scores, regardless of pre-departure English proficiency levels, learners experienced homesickness; 2) more than half of the learners with homesickness made gains in post English proficiency scores; 3) previous SA experiences did not lower the risk of experiencing homesickness; and 4) triggers defined by homesickness theories were confirmed by the interview responses.

Considering homesickness in the SA context, the following can be inferred: 1) the interview responses revealed that homesickness is commonly experienced caused by multiple triggers; 2) moreover, common symptoms of homesickness listed in section 1 such as “depression, withdrawal, absent-mindedness, anxiety and phobic avoidance accompanied by strong ruminative activity centered on home” were all detected from the interview responses reviewed; 3) however, learners in this study did not face such a severe level of homesickness that they needed to leave the SA context and come home; 4) most of all, learners with homesickness made a lot of language gains; 5) which seems to lead to an understanding of homesickness as not something which is utterly harmful for language gains during SA.

7.2 Implications

There are some implications of this research study. Regarding the entry into a new culture and feeling homesick, there are two suggestions about pre-departure preparations. Firstly, learners should have realistic expectations (Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie, & Yong, 1986; Grove & Torbiorn, 1993; Martin, 1993). The loss theory of homesickness reviewed in this paper highlighted this trigger for homesickness. Therefore, it is crucial to have realistic expectations about what will be encountered in the new environment, the nature of the intercultural experience, and most importantly, the learner’s own ability to function effectively in the new setting. One study shows that SA learners who have positive but unrealistic expectations will experience psychological difficulties, as they will likely be disappointed with the experience they are having and their own performance (Martin, 1993). Secondly, in pre-departure preparation programs, learners should be involved in activities to reflect on their expectations. Summaries of some of the discussion questions for this reflection include the following (Paige, 2003): What do learners expect to gain from the SA experience? What do learners think the new environment will be like, including cultural differences? How personally satisfying do learners think the new environment will be for them? What do learners expect of themselves in the intercultural situation, for example, how culturally sensitive or adaptable do they think they will be? Do learners think they will experience culture shock and homesickness? When discussing these questions, educators must help learners maintain their enthusiasm while at the same time thinking realistically about the upcoming experience.

Another point is that while abroad, since ruminating thoughts of home is a typical symptom of homesickness, and the loss model of homesickness lists being alone as a trigger, Fisher (1989) suggests that physical exercise and keeping busy are important. If the host school has exercise programs or activities for learners to participate in, especially during the early days of the SA, it helps the learners to feel less homesick. Learners should be informed also that even though they themselves made the challenging choice to be away from home, it is okay to admit and talk about being homesick.

7.3 Limitations and Future Research

In concluding, it should be noted that this study has some limitations. Firstly, this research found that regardless of pre-departure English proficiency score, learners experienced homesickness. However, the relationship between English proficiency level and homesickness is complex. Indeed, the interview responses in section 5.3.1 indicate that having to express themselves with limited L2 skills may have been a triggering factor for homesickness for some learners. Therefore, more research into low English proficiency triggering homesickness is needed to further understand the mechanisms of homesickness and English proficiency. Secondly, homesickness questionnaires were administered to learners only once while-abroad, but some learners might have experienced homesickness later than weeks four to five. Finally, this study was based on 26 participants. A larger sample would allow statistical analysis to discover other perspectives on homesickness in relation to English language proficiency and gain.

These points should be considered for future SA research looking into factors affecting language gain. Understanding the difficulties that participants face in SA experience will help educators prepare L2 learners better to support the learners' SA experiences and enhance their language learning opportunities.

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C. Tajima wrote sections 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

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- Appendix 1: Questionnaire items to establish homesickness levels.

ホームシック度チェック

*各質問であてまる項目を選んで○をつけてください。

		ない 0% Never	極まれ 25% Rarely	ときどき 50% Sometimes	しばしば 75% Often	いつも 100% Always
1	ここではうまくやっていけていると感じる (I feel able to cope here.)	5	4	3	2	1
2	ここでは楽観的に前向きに生活している (I feel optimistic about life here.)	5	4	3	2	1
3	ここにいることにとても満足している (I am satisfied with my present residence.)	5	4	3	2	1
4	ここでの勉強にうきうきした気持ちになる (I feel excited about study here.)	5	4	3	2	1
5	ここにいると達成感を感じる (I feel fulfilled here.)	5	4	3	2	1
6	ここにいると自信が湧いてくる (I feel confident here.)	5	4	3	2	1
7	ここでは愛されていると感じる (I feel loved here.)	5	4	3	2	1
8	ここでは必要とされていると感じる (I feel needed here.)	5	4	3	2	1
9	ここにはたくさん友達がいる (I have many friends here.)	5	4	3	2	1
10	ここに馴染めていると感じる (I feel that I belong here.)	5	4	3	2	1
11	ここでは頑張れば授業の成績は良いほうだ (When I try I do it well.)	5	4	3	2	1
12	ここにいると孤独を感じる (I feel lonely here.)	1	2	3	4	5
13	日本にいる友達に会えなくて淋しい (I miss friends I have at home.)	1	2	3	4	5
14	世界から切り離されたように感じる (I feel cut off from the world here.)	1	2	3	4	5
15	人の名前を忘れやすい (I forget people's names.)	1	2	3	4	5
16	過去のことを思う (I think of past events.)	1	2	3	4	5
17	ここでは不安になる (I feel uneasy here.)	1	2	3	4	5
18	ここでは楽しめないと感じる (I feel unhappy here.)	1	2	3	4	5
19	朝起きてここが家だったらいいのと思う (I wake up wishing that I were at home.)	1	2	3	4	5
20	家族に会えなくて淋しい (I miss my family.)	1	2	3	4	5