

A Look into a Short Term Study Abroad Program

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Talk about globalization and the importance of helping students develop an international viewpoint is widespread in Japan. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has specific policies and projects aiming “to overcome ~ the younger generation’s ‘inward tendency’ and to foster human resources who can positively meet the challenges and succeed in the global field”. The faculty of Nihon Fukushi University places a strong emphasis on developing students’ understanding of local and global welfare issues and English communication skills. This study will look at a two-week overseas fieldwork program offered to first year students in the faculty of International Welfare Development (IWD) at Nihon Fukushi University. This research seeks to provide insight into the effectiveness of short-term programs in raising students’ awareness of inter-cultural issues and their English communication skills.

Keywords: Communication skills, Globalization, Inter-cultural awareness, Overseas fieldwork

Introduction

A central feature of Japanese educational reform has been the promotion of globalization. In 2012 the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Technology (MEXT) initiated a project for the ‘Promotion of Global Human Resources’ whose primary aim was ‘to overcome the Japanese younger generation’s “inward tendency” and to foster human resources who can positively meet the challenges of and succeed in the global field’. (MEXT, 2014) This was followed by an English Education Reform plan in 2014 specifically geared towards promoting English education from elementary school through to secondary school. (MEXT, 2012) Furthermore, MEXT, realizing the importance of study abroad programs and seeking to offset the decline in the number of students participating in such programs, started ‘promoting the internationalization of high schools and universities in order to develop human resources that can compete on the global stage.’ (Shimomura, 2014) As such, it is commonplace in Japan for students in high schools and universities to take part in study abroad programs of varying lengths. These programs are designed to give students opportunities ‘to experience the target culture and speech community firsthand.’ (Jackson, 2006)

While there have been numerous studies on long-term study abroad programs, much less has been written about the outcomes associated with short-term programs. Do students’ perceptions of the target culture change after a short-term stay? Do perceptions of their own culture and language skills change? Are they able to develop strategies to overcome difficulties in communication or cultural differences? In short, what outcomes can be attributed to participation in a short-term overseas fieldwork program? The researcher is seeking to answer these questions and provide insight into the effectiveness of one short-term study abroad program in raising students’ awareness of inter-cultural issues and in the development of their English communication skills. This is in keeping with several of Steinberg’s (2007; In Bolen, 2007) benefits of studying abroad, which include ‘changes in attitude, skill development and understanding appreciation of the world and one’s place in it’.

Research Design and Methods

Context

The overseas fieldwork program is offered to first year students enrolled in the International Welfare Development (IWD) faculty. The faculty places a strong emphasis on helping students develop a better understanding of local and global welfare issues as well as the development of their English communication skills. The faculty’s curriculum focuses heavily on English language studies and English communication. In line with MEXT’s globalization programs, the faculty has a two-week overseas fieldwork program and it hosts an annual International Collaborative Project called the World Youth Meeting (WYM). This annual two-day event provides IWD students with an

opportunity to work with students from other Asian countries to collaborate on presentations and to put their English communication skills to the test. The IWD overseas fieldwork program destinations are often to countries whose students attend the WYM. This has the benefit of allowing IWD students to meet some of the participating Asian students and to experience the culture and customs of those countries.

At the start of the second term, the previous years' fieldwork program students give presentations to freshmen about their Asian experiences utilizing a reflection video, which they produced after returning to Japan. Freshmen are then given five fieldwork countries from which to choose. Over the four months preceding the fieldwork, there are fifteen weeks of preparatory classes. These classes consist of lectures on various aspects of the program, local culture and customs, travel safety tips, and, in addition, provide the students with opportunities to practice their English conversation skills. To reinforce what they have learned, the students then discuss, plan, research, and give a presentation to their fellow freshmen on what they have learned about their chosen fieldwork program country. The researcher led eleven students in the Malaysia fieldwork group. A university staff member, who had traveled to Malaysia several times before, was also assigned to this group. The group consisted of nine Japanese students, one Japanese-Brazilian student and one Korean exchange student. Only two out of the nine Japanese students, the Japanese-Brazilian student and the Korean exchange student, had studied or traveled abroad prior to participation in the program. The pre-departure survey revealed that these students wanted to take part in the overseas fieldwork program in order to practice speaking English and to learn about another culture.

Design and Methods

The researcher used a mixed method ethnographic approach in examining the short-term overseas fieldwork program. Ethnography being 'the study of people in their naturally occurring settings' in order to 'capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally.' (Brewer, 2000) This study seeks to relate in the students' own words their experiences in a new culture, their impressions of their English language and communication skills development, and their inter-cultural awareness. Furthermore, by employing a mixed method approach, it was hoped that areas in the pre-fieldwork and fieldwork portions of the program requiring refinement or narrowing of focus would be revealed.

Pre- and post-departure surveys were given to students. Participation in the surveys was voluntary. Eight students returned the pre-departure survey while five returned the post-departure survey. The survey questions covered the following things: overseas travel experience, self-assessment of their English language skills, reason for joining the program, level of interest in other cultures, general concerns about overseas travel and pre-fieldwork perception of Malaysia. Although not all the students completed the surveys, some comparisons can be made based on the participating students' impressions before and after the fieldwork.

During the two-week stay, the researcher kept daily fieldwork notes as did the students. The students' notes formed an integral part of the post-fieldwork review and consolidation process. Students were expected to write reports about their fieldwork experience and to produce a reflection video. For the first time in the history of this program, students in the Malaysia group were asked to write their reports in both Japanese and English. This was quite difficult for students but the results were surprisingly informative. These reports were used both for grading purposes and, also, to present to freshmen in order to recruit them to the following year's Malaysian fieldwork program. Prior to departure, students paired up with other members and chose which lectures, visits or excursions they would write about. Each student was also expected to write a home-stay report as well as a personal reflection report on any aspect of the program he/she chose. These reports provided some interesting insights and comments.

Finally, the researcher interviewed two of the participants. The one-hour and ten-minute interview, like the written reports, also provided some interesting observations and comments. All of these will be discussed in the Results section.

Results

Pre and Post Fieldwork Surveys

A comparison of the students' responses in the pre and post fieldwork surveys revealed some subtle changes in their image of Malaysia. Prior to departure students had used the word 'multiethnic' to describe Malaysia but this was replaced in the post survey with terms such as 'multiracial' and 'diverse'. In addition, comments were made on the open mindedness of the Malaysian people and the mutual respect they displayed between the ethnic and religious groups. People were described before the overseas experience in very general terms such as, 'always smiling',

'beautiful' and 'calm' and changed to more intimate descriptions such as 'kind', and 'friendly and close' after the experience. The most telling change was with regards to religion especially Islam. Students had expressed worries prior to departure about terrorism and its links to Islam. The words they chose to describe it before included 'scary', 'terrorism', and 'strict'. This contrasted with comments after like, 'They cherish it and follow its doctrines', 'strict but in Malaysia they are friendly' and 'not a problem. We could enjoy (our time) with Muslims'. Lastly, in terms of what the students thought about studying and traveling abroad, one can also observe a subtle shift in attitude. Studying and travelling abroad before was 'useful', 'exciting', 'fun', 'great for motivation', but also, they 'feel nervous' and it would be 'very hard'. However, after they described them as having 'broadened their view', let them make 'new discoveries that they can't find in books or on the Internet', they could 'grow as a person', become 'self-motivated', and 'widen their knowledge'.

In the future in order to enlarge the database, it would be useful for program professors to require all students to complete the surveys. A larger database would lead to more valid conclusions.

Presentation

The Malaysia fieldwork group presentation to the incoming freshmen was for the most part a parroting of facts, figures and a general overview of their pre-departure presentation. In the home-stay and extracurricular sections, students offered more personal tips on improving communication such as sharing personal interests, i.e. music and animation. In the concluding remarks, the final presenter stressed the importance of understanding one's own culture and of being able to explain it to people from other cultures. Several students mentioned this in the written reports as well as in the interview. The need for English communicative competency coupled with an understanding of one's own culture was considered by students to be very important. This is in line with MEXT's priorities.

As part of future pre-fieldwork programs, it would be important to have students research and discuss aspects of Japanese culture that they think may be of interest to the Malaysian students and home-stay families. Another approach would be for the Malaysia fieldwork students to include in their presentations to the freshmen, the aspects of the Japanese culture about which the Malaysian students and home-stay families had enquired. The freshmen could then be prepared to address these points.

Video

The reflection video, which was produced after returning to Japan, was successful in conveying the social elements the students experienced while in Malaysia. Smiling faces and peace signs abound in the videos. It is interesting to note how the photocompositions also changed. In the first part of the stay, pictures showed groupings where the University Sains Malaysia (USM) volunteers and the fieldwork groups did not mix. In the last few days of the stay, similar group shots showed a considerable intermixing of the two groups. This clearly illustrated the success of the two groups interacting and overcoming the cultural and language barriers.

Fieldwork Notes

On reviewing the researcher's fieldwork notes, it was found that they contained mostly information on aspects of program management, notes about the lectures and excursions, and only a few observations of students' interactions or comments. One observation was that all of the Japanese students were initially reluctant to interact with the USM student volunteers. This was not the case with the Japanese-Brazilian and Korean exchange students. In the case of the Japanese-Brazilian student, he brought a guitar with him and this allowed him to create opportunities for conversation. In spite of his broken English, the Korean exchange student who was seven years older than his classmates made an effort to respond to the Malaysian students' enquiries. Perhaps his determination not to waste the opportunity was due to his maturity. As he said in the interview, it is important to 'first try it try it a::h although grammars a::h vocabulary is wrong just try it'. The Japanese students, on the other hand, were reluctant and sat together at the back of the bus during excursions in the first two days. The researcher's attempts to stimulate interaction with group mixer activities were unsuccessful. It wasn't until the third day when everyone was thrown together on an unexpectedly long bus ride that spontaneous conversations began to occur. The Japanese tendency to stick exclusively together and hide behind a cultural perception of inadequate second language abilities was breached. After that day, there were gradually more attempts at making conversation.

In the future, it would be advisable to have two sets of fieldwork notes. One set would focus on the program management issues, while the other would focus on students and their social interactions. To address the reluctance of the two groups to interact, it would be useful to have students plan some ice-breaking activities for the bus trips during the pre-fieldwork training classes.

Student Reports

The students' reports were compiled and printed in a 142-page pamphlet entitled, 'The Malaysia Study Program'. It contained twenty-two reports on the various lectures, visits and excursions, ten home-stay reports, and eleven personal reports as well as pictures and schedule minutiae. The reports were first written by the students and then edited by the researcher for issues related to grammar, punctuation and clarity. In editing the students' work, every effort was made to retain their words and overall meaning. There were many consultations between the students and the researcher to clarify the English texts.

In examining the students' writings, an interesting feature emerged in terms of the use of positive and negative adjectives and the nouns they were modifying. In total 124 adjectives that conveyed positive meanings were used and of these, the majority were attributed to Malaysian people's attitudes, multiculturalism, and more concrete aspects like food, places and activities in or of Malaysia. The 39 negative adjectives were mostly used to describe the NFU students' sense of self, culture and language ability. In the more intimate home-stays and personal reports, a higher number of positive descriptions were used. Also, there was an interesting shift in almost all of the students' home-stay reports. At first, the reports revealed how worried the students were at the prospect of being on their own in an English immersion environment and by the end of the reports, they spoke highly of their home-stay family, their experience and their desire to meet the family again in Malaysia or Japan. Five of the students continue to have regular contact with members of their home-stay family through Social Networking Sites.

In order to facilitate the writing of the final reports, it would be advisable to have meetings each evening during the fieldwork to discuss and review students' daily notes. Doing this would encourage students to add information they may have missed as well as give them an opportunity to clarify their ideas. The pamphlet, 'The Malaysia Study Program', is given to the incoming freshmen and is, also, used by the university to advertise the faculty in their campaign to recruit new students to the university. The university received a positive response to the bi-lingual pamphlet from public and private schools.

Interview

The Korean exchange student and the Japanese student had a lot to say in the one-hour and ten-minute interview. The interviewer and the students went through a series of questions that were meant to assess, on the one hand, whether the fieldwork had changed their interest in Malaysia and/or foreign countries, cultures or peoples and, on the other hand, how well they felt they were able to communicate in their second language, English.

The students' preconceived ideas about many aspects of Malaysian culture, people and the physical surroundings such as the strictness of the religion, unkindness of the people and the more mundane, spiciness of the food and state of the buildings were challenges from the very start. With a growing sense of inter-cultural awareness, the Korean exchange student said that he came to realize that Malaysian people 'have a positive mind' that 'impress[ed] me so I could change my thinking'. While the Japanese student also commented, he thought he had 'change[d] my mind'. Furthermore, the students related how the friendships they made were important enough that they now kept in regular contact through Facebook Messenger. They also remarked on how difficult it was at first to communicate in their second language but, gradually through daily experiences like shopping or ordering at restaurants their confidence grew. 'I get use [to] gradually with store people'. Taking advantage of social occasions, the students discovered that common interests were keys to building their confidence. In overcoming the limitations of their communication skills, they even developed more difficult strategies such as, using humor or 'funny body language' and 'crazy dancing'.

The student interviews provided some of the most insightful data, but the lengthy recordings proved to be difficult to transcribe. To improve on this, it would be useful to give students the questions in advance and ask them to think about their responses, set a time limit of twenty to thirty minutes per session, and interview more students in order to enlarge the scope of the database.

Follow Up Survey

This researcher surveyed the students who participated in the Malaysia fieldwork ten months after the program had been completed. The students were first asked if they still kept in contact with their home-stay families or any of the USM student volunteers. Of the eleven students nine said that they kept in regular contact with the people they met there through social media. The second question asked if students wanted to visit Malaysia again. All of the students answered that they would like to visit Malaysia again. Finally, the students were asked if they had any concrete plans to go to Malaysia. Three of them said they had plans to return to Malaysia during the spring break. Two more answered that they had not made specific plans but were considering it. This short survey clearly showed

that, even ten months after the completion of the study tour, students had built such strong social bonds with their home-stay families and other Malaysian friends that they were positively inclined to travel there again on their own.

Because the participating students were freshmen and had never completed a study abroad program before, it would be interesting to follow up with surveys and interviews at the end of their third year of academic studies and discover whether the fieldwork experience had any long-term effect.

Conclusion

This examination of a short-term study abroad program found students had, in fact, changed their perceptions of the foreign culture as well as their views of themselves, their own culture and their English language skills. Importantly, they were able to use what language abilities they had to build friendships, challenge themselves and overcome communication difficulties with a growing sense of confidence. As the follow up survey conducted ten months after the program showed, the students' perceptions and relationships had lasted for a considerable length of time after they returned to Japan.

As noted in each of the sections in Results, this research study has revealed a number of areas, which could be improved for future short-term study abroad programs. In particular, from the students' point of view, they wondered what happened to change their perspective and attitude towards the new culture. In addition, future research studies of these programs could benefit from a narrowing of not only the focus but, also, the methodology. Rather than relying on a mixed method ethnographic approach, future research studies could use instead a more qualitative research method, such as a deep exploration of students' own narratives in their fieldwork diaries and reports, coupled with short interviews of a larger number of students.

In closing, it is worthwhile to hear what one student had to say in his own words, '~ if you want to change yourself it is up to you to challenge [yourself]' and 'I learned ~ it is important ~ you should not [be] afraid to talk with other people'.

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