

Study abroad experiences on students' willingness to communicate: a case study of Japanese university students

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Abstract

This study qualitatively and quantitatively reports on findings of an investigation into Japanese students' perceptions of willingness to communicate (WTC) in the study abroad context. The students completed WTC questionnaire before and after participating in a one-year study abroad exchange program, and responded to an open-ended questionnaire reflecting their experiences abroad after their return. Although many studies have claimed that study abroad experiences significantly develops or improves their abilities including WTC, this study did not confirm any differences among students in their pre and post-WTC except for few isolated items. The study carefully examined the reasons behind this and concluded that students engaging in study abroad already have high WTC to start with. However, from the open-ended questionnaires, it is evident that students reflect their experiences positively, rating in particular that study abroad experiences afforded them self-growth, broadened their view, deepened their intercultural understanding, and learning to confront and deal with difficulties on their own.

Keywords

Study abroad, Japanese students, willingness to communicate

Introduction

Most studies investigating the relationships between students' study abroad experiences and how they affect students have shown to be positive. For instance, Cubillos, Chieffo and Fan (2008) investigated the impact of a five-week Spanish course on the listening comprehension of students participating in short-term study abroad program and found that participants' listening skills improved. In Serrano, Llanes and Tragant's (2011) study, students who studied abroad outperformed their lexical and grammatical skills to those who took semi-intensive program at their home institutions. As these examples show, it can be stated that the study abroad participants tend to achieve higher levels of listening ability, oral

proficiency, acquire better sociolinguistic skills, and enhanced metacognitive awareness. Along with these skills, given that communication is an indispensable part of study abroad (or L2 acquisition), students' willingness to communicate (WTC) has gained attention among researchers. WTC, defined as "the intention to initiate communication, given a choice" (MacIntyre and Charos, 1996), was originally proposed to find a trait-like personality that people reveal when communicating. Later researchers began to use WTC as a tool to examine learners' readiness to communicate in L2. For example, Oz, Demirezen, and Pourfeiz (2015) investigated students' English as a foreign language learners' perception of WTC in Turkish context and found successful learners had higher WTC. For relationships between study abroad and WTC, Kang (2008) reported students' speaking abilities, participation in classes and their WTC all significantly developed as a result of study abroad. Of particular interest, this study examined how study abroad experience affects students' WTC and how they see themselves after a year abroad.

1 Data collection procedures

1.1 Participants

The participants were 23 students (16 male and 7 female students) from a comprehensive university majoring in various disciplines who participated in a yearlong study abroad exchange program. Students' majors were as follows: 7 engineering, 6 agriculture, 3 natural science, 2 information science, 2 literature, 1 law and 1 economics. The lengths of their stay were nine to eleven months.

1.2 Procedure and Measures

The participants were asked to complete the scale which majors students' 1) intercultural friendship orientation in English learning, 2) motivational intensity, desire to learn English, 3) intergroup approach-avoidance tendency, 4) interest in intercultural vocation or activities, and 5) interest in foreign affairs developed by Yashima (2002), a month prior to their study abroad, and a week to a

month after they returned home. Students were also asked to fill out an open-ended questionnaire asking following two questions: 1. Are there any changes you feel about yourself after coming back to Japan (other than language) and 2. Please give advice to those students planning to study abroad in the future.

2 Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do students' WTC change after a year abroad?

Research Question 2: How do students reflect their study abroad experiences after returning home?

3 Data analysis and Results

To answer the first research question, Mann-Whitney's Test for dependent samples was conducted to investigate the differences between pre- and post-WTC (Table 1). The results did not indicate any significant differences between the two.

Table 1.

	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Z</i>	
pre-WTC	123.28	16.34	-1.75	<i>n.s</i>
post-WTC	123.37	18.84		

n.s = not significant

Next, the same test was conducted to examine students' WTC according to each category 1) to 5). However, this also did not find any significant differences between pre- and the post-WTC. Finally, each item was compared, and the study found significant difference only in two independent items (see Table 2). The results for Cronbach's alpha for WTC pre- and post-WTC were $\alpha=.83$, $\alpha=.87$ respectively.

Table 2.

Items	Pre-mean (<i>SD</i>)	Pre-mean (<i>SD</i>)	<i>Z</i>
1	4.96 (1.11)	5.46 (.95)	0.29*
6	2.38 (1.55)	1.31 (.62.)	0.03**

* $p<.05$ ** $p<.01$

For research question 2, below are excerpts from students comments about their study abroad experiences*. They were answered in Japanese, and were translated by the author.

- All I can say is that I learned so much studying abroad. I was able to make friends all over the world; Through many experiences, I learned how to face difficulties and be confident about myself.

- I start to think what kind of person I would like to be in the future. I have so many choices which I never thought of before.

- I can never tell (you) enough how much I learned through the study abroad program. The only advice I can give to other students is to go and see it for yourself and experience how your world changes.

- Some people say you do not have to go abroad to see the world since there are internet and other tools. Well, they are wrong, there are things you can only gain by going abroad.

- I used to be passive about most of the things, with school, friends and studies. After study abroad I became more active and very positive about my research. It's a life changing experience in every possible and positive way.

- If you cannot make up your mind, I highly recommend to visit the study abroad office. You will be able to talk to professors and learn more about the program.

4 Conclusion

This study investigated how a yearlong study abroad experience influenced students' willingness to communicate. Unlike previous studies, the study did not show an increase in students' WTC. There are several reasons which can be explained for this result. First, most students participating in the study abroad program already had interactions with foreign students in one way or the other, and many had the experience of participating in the short-term study abroad. These previous experiences probably helped increase WTC. Second, in order to apply for study abroad, students must meet the language requirement either in TOEFL-iBT or IELTS which likely to have affected their WTC while engaged in their study. Third, it is mandatory for students to take a series of intercultural competence and communication lectures before their departure, and the lecture covers many aspects of WTC. Finally, as Andreou, Andreous and Vlachos (2006) state, since the way people learn and succeed in study is greatly influenced by individual difference, with experiences mentioned above, these students could be said that they all had high WTC to begin with. However, when looking at the students' open-ended questionnaires reflecting their study abroad experiences, all students state them positively, many indicating that their communication competence, motivation to study English, interest in international activities and foreign affairs increased, which are all categorized in WTC. Therefore, although the study could not find the pre-post difference statistically, the result can be concluded that a study abroad program is effective and is an opportunity for students to expand their willingness to communicate. The limitation for this study was its sample size, and it will require a larger sample size to replicate this research to determine more

robust and generalizable patterns. Also, since some studies have indicated that effects of the learner's experiences may dissipate or neutralize over time (Llanes, 2012), if teachers can provide opportunities for students by incorporating the experiences student had abroad into their regular classes, or by offering workshops, the effects of study abroad program can be reinforced further upon returning home. Future studies could consider and address these issues.

5 References

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*For full result, please refer to:

<http://ieec.iee.nagoya-u.ac.jp/ja/abroad/plan/taiken.html>.