

Short Report

Theme-Based Interdisciplinary Approach to Short-Term Study Abroad

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Study abroad programs provide many learning opportunities and can significantly influence participants. Students often return with a positive change in world view, greater awareness when communicating with people from other cultures, improved motivation for studying foreign languages, and an enhanced interest in academic study. Unfortunately, in Japan, there has been a dramatic decline in participation rates for study abroad programs. Primary reasons for not participating in traditional study abroad programs include cost, foreign language proficiency requirements, and time commitment. To help students at Akita Prefectural University (APU) overcome these obstacles to study abroad, English language teachers from APU's Research and Education Center for Comprehensive Science (RECCS) have been developing and implementing innovative study abroad programs that are affordable, do not require a high degree of English language proficiency, and are short-term. In addition, these programs are interdisciplinary and provide a unique overseas experience where participants have the opportunity to develop communication skills in English as well as gain new perspectives and knowledge related to their major areas of study.

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Since 2004, the number of Japanese university students participating in study abroad programs has sharply declined. In fact, only 1% of Japanese university students were enrolled in programs overseas in 2013 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2014). Reasons for this low participation rate include cost, foreign language proficiency requirements, and time commitment. A semester or a year abroad can be very expensive, significantly adding to the financial burden of attaining a higher education degree. Foreign language proficiency requirements are often difficult for Japanese university students to meet. According to the International Institute for Management Development (IMD), Japan ranks third to last for language skills and second to last for English proficiency in the top 60 economies worldwide (Rosselet, 2013). The extra time commitment is also a barrier to studying abroad. Students are reluctant to delay graduation and subsequent entry into the workforce because academic credits from host institutions often do

not get transferred to students' home institutions. This means that students must spend an additional six months to a year in school to complete the requirements for their degrees.

Other reasons often cited for not participating in study abroad programs include risk and students' "inward-looking" (*uchimuki*) orientation. Personal safety is always a primary concern when participating in study abroad programs. Japan is considered one of the safest countries in the world, so students might be apprehensive about venturing away from there. Furthermore, students these days seem to be more reluctant to challenge themselves by leaving the comfortable environment to which they are accustomed.

The sharp drop in participation rates in study abroad programs is receiving considerable attention from Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). In an effort to develop the necessary "global human resources" Japan needs to remain competitive in the 21st century economy, new

programs are being developed to encourage more young people to study abroad (Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development, 2011). For example, in 2013, the Japanese government initiated the “*Tobitate! Ryugaku Japan*” campaign; the aim of this new scholarship program is to double the number of Japanese students studying abroad by 2020, which coincides with the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan [MEXT], 2014).

Here at Akita Prefectural University (APU), English language teachers from the Research and Education Center for Comprehensive Science (RECCS) have been working with assistance from members of the Faculty of Bioresource Sciences to develop and implement a variety of short-term study abroad programs. These programs are designed to address issues often associated with study abroad, including cost, language proficiency, time commitment, risk and inward-looking orientation. First, these programs are affordable: APU covers the cost of a round-trip international airfare, and RECCS English teachers have negotiated with service providers for reduced rates. Second, a high level of English language proficiency is not required for these programs. Selection is based on a written application and personal interview in Japanese and English. All students are welcome to apply and most are accepted. Third, the programs are short-term, lasting between two and three weeks, and coincide with the summer break. This is very convenient for students who would also like to do other things during the break such as work part-time or take extra classes. Fourth, precautions have been taken to minimize risks: RECCS English teachers and members of the Faculty of Bioresource Sciences who accompany students are familiar with the areas and local customs. Pre-departure orientation meetings prepare students for potential problems that might arise. Finally, students travel together and support each other, thereby helping to alleviate the anxiety that often arises when stepping out of one’s comfort zone.

In addition to addressing common concerns students have about study abroad, these programs are designed to maximize learning by incorporating elements that promote student engagement. Student engagement refers to the amount of time and efforts students put into their studies and other educational activities. The more time and efforts spent by students, the greater knowledge, skills, and awareness they gain.

Activities that promote active student engagement include collaborative, curricular-related research, intercultural communication, and integrative learning (National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE], 2015). Collaborative learning activities, when used appropriately, can help alleviate the anxiety associated with learning a foreign language (Nagahashi, 2007a, 2007b), enhance student engagement, increase motivation, and improve English language skills (Nagahashi, 2014). During study tours, students work in small groups to conduct field research on topics related to APU’s curricula and report on their findings in English. Intercultural activities not only enhance students’ understanding of another culture but also promote development of presentation skills (Nagahashi, 2013). Sharing Japanese culture with university students from host institutions and with local residents allows APU students to develop their English communication skills and acquire a better understanding of the host culture. Opportunities for integrative learning help students make connections across curricula to develop interdisciplinary understanding.

Interdisciplinary Learning

RECCS English teachers’ rationale for utilizing a theme-based, interdisciplinary approach toward a short-term study abroad is to help APU students connect what they are learning in their English courses to what they are learning in their major courses. In Japan, traditional boundaries between disciplines often keep students from seeing connections between disciplines and courses. In particular, for APU’s science, technology,

and engineering undergraduate students, English is often viewed as just a subject needed for passing university entrance examinations. Once students achieve their goal of university matriculation, motivation for learning English often diminishes.

An interdisciplinary approach to learning helps students acquire a greater awareness of links that exist between disciplines and improves motivation. When students are given the opportunity, they are able to make connections between their APU English and major courses as evident in the following comment illustrated by one of the 2014 “English Adventure” study abroad members. “Before the study tour I only knew that just studying English for my dream, didn’t know how to do it. But now I know. I realized how few vocabulary I had. So, next, I’m going to increase a vocabulary which is not only words for daily conversation, but also for my major Biology” (Nagahashi, 2015).

The theme of sustainability was chosen for the collaborative, curricular-related research projects that students work on during their study abroad. This topic was selected because it is relevant to all APU students, whether they are on the university’s Akita campus and belong to the Faculty of Bioresource Sciences or on the Honjo campus and belong to the Faculty of Systems Science and Technology. Sustainability is a key issue facing the people of Japan today. To respond to the challenges of creating a sustainable society, Japanese university graduates need to be equipped with “holistic knowledge,” which means a wide range of knowledge and core competencies, including communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills (Tamura & Uegaki, 2011).

APU’s Interdisciplinary Study Abroad Programs

Since 2011, a variety of short-term, theme-based interdisciplinary study abroad programs have been successfully implemented by RECCS English teachers and members of the Faculty of Bioresource Sciences. These programs include (1) a customized version of the

University of Guam’s (UOG’s) “English Adventure Program,” (2) an APU original program, “Explore Oregon, USA,” and (3) the University of British Columbia’s (UBC’s) “English for the Global Citizen.” The following section describes each program in detail and lists some of the benefits APU students gained as participants in these programs.

“English Adventure Program”

A customized version of the University of Guam’s (UOG’s) “English Adventure Program” was first made available to APU students in the summer of 2011. At the request of APU faculty members, UOG made several additions to the standard program, which primarily comprises language classes and cultural activities. The customized program includes English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, academic lectures by UOG professors and special guests, assistance with APU students’ research projects by members of the university’s International Friendship Club (IFC), presentations by APU students for students at a local elementary school, and hands-on activities at UOG’s Center for Island Sustainability and Triton Research Farm.

Results of the 2014 post-trip questionnaire suggest that this customized program produced several benefits for participants, including enhanced motivation for learning English, positive changes in their world views, and better attitudes toward and understanding of foreigners (Nagahashi, 2015).

“Explore Oregon, USA”

“Explore Oregon, USA” is an original APU faculty-led program, which took place in the summer of 2012. Oregon was selected as the location for this tour because of the state’s diverse agriculture, commitment to protecting the environment, large number of federally recognized Native American Indian tribes, and universities that are well known for their academics and sustainability initiatives. Oregon produces more than 220 agricultural commodities, is among the top ten greenest

states in the United States, is home to nine federally recognized tribes, and has both private and public universities that are nationally recognized for strong academics and leadership in sustainability.

This unique study tour included travel through three of Oregon's six agricultural regions, a tour of a USDA National Clonal Germplasm Repository, visits to two Native American reservations, and campus tours and lectures at two top Oregon universities.

Results of the post-trip questionnaire suggest that this short-term study abroad program was effective for enhancing intercultural awareness, increasing motivation for learning English, and improving research, writing, and presentation skills (Nagahashi, 2013).

“English for the Global Citizen”

The University of British Columbia's (UBC's) “English for the Global Citizen” was first offered through APU in 2015. “English for the Global Citizen” is designed to help students “improve their English skills and learn about civil society, global citizenship, and sustainability.” The three-week, September program, which was added at the request of the author, coincides with UBC's fall semester. The program's timing allows APU students to experience Canadian university campus life and a homestay with local families.

APU students' response to this new program was very positive. By the end of the program, participants had noticeably improved their ability to communicate in English and acquired a better understanding of the importance of sustainability. As one student reported, “We Japanese know that sustainability is good for the environment, but just only know it and sometimes think that is like a brand. On the other hand, in Canada, people think sustainability as a responsibility thing. I think the latter is a correct attitude.”

In summary, the three programs described above offer many opportunities for APU students to integrate what they have learned in their various courses and develop interdisciplinary understanding.

Conclusions

Utilizing a theme-based interdisciplinary approach toward short-term study abroad programs provides many opportunities for highly engaged learning and helps students develop awareness of connections between disciplines and courses. Participating in APU's short-term study abroad programs is an effective way for students to prepare for our increasingly interconnected world: by developing English communication skills, intercultural awareness, and a better understanding of sustainability, which is one of the most pressing issues in today's world.

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