

Examining College Students' Culture Learning
Before and After Summer Study Abroad in Japan

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Abstract

With study abroad becoming an integral part of the American higher-education curriculum, home-institution instructors face the challenge of understanding the type and content of learning taking place abroad. We report on a study conducted at a service academy on the U.S. East Coast to examine American college students' cultural learning in the course of a summer study abroad program in Japan. Seven engineering majors completed pre- and post-study abroad seminars, and completed a culture survey before and after their trip to Japan in 2008. Content analysis of the students' responses to open-ended questions revealed gains in students' cultural knowledge on various aspects of the Japanese culture, leading to changes in their perceptions of Japan and Japanese people. The study adopted the cultural framework set forth by the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages. (Contains 2 figures)

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Introduction

One purported outcome of study abroad is improved cultural understanding. Study abroad broadens students' intellectual horizons, deepens their understanding of another country's cultural and social issues, and yields first-hand knowledge of another people's approaches to the tasks and challenges of everyday life. All these help students develop more informed perspectives about the society and people of another country. However, recent discussions on culture learning related to study abroad indicate that time spent in a host country does not necessarily augment cultural understanding and that study abroad does not yield culture learning without active intervention by home-institution instructors in the course of the program, before, during, and after travel (Vande Berg, 2007; Kinginger and Belz, 2008). This paper describes a study conducted to examine cultural learning of seven students majoring in engineering following a summer study abroad program in Japan, 2008. Four Japanese language instructors of the Languages and Cultures Department organized the summer study abroad program in coordination with the Aerospace Engineering Department. The same four Japanese instructors determined the program content, provided pre- and post-trip seminars, and conducted program outcome assessment. One of the four accompanied the group, providing language and culture expertise during the trip. The present study is part of the outcome assessment of this particular summer study abroad, examining culture learning in particular. The paper first describes the goals of culture learning in the context of study abroad. The paper also describes how the students were prepared and guided before and after the trip. The paper then explains how students' culture learning was documented and analyzed, presenting the findings quantitatively

and qualitatively. The paper concludes with discussions on a design of study abroad to maximize culture learning, types of culture learning relating to study abroad, and suggestions for future study.

Goals of Study Abroad and Culture Learning

The socio-cultural theory of learning describes learning as “a process of acquiring new conceptual knowledge and/or modifying existing knowledge as a way of re-mediating one’s interaction with the world and one’s own psychological functioning” (Lantolf & Tome, 2006, p.5). Culture study should be concerned with enhancing students’ knowledge base so as to shape or re-shape students’ perception of the other culture, showing them new ways to think, to question, and possibly to change their attitudes toward another culture. American students studying Japanese culture in America are situated in their own home culture, learning about Japanese culture from a distance. Knowledge is particularly important to these students, physically disconnected from a society that would otherwise serve as a natural resource or network of cultural information.

The socio-cultural theory of learning also suggests that human action, including thinking, evaluating, and judging, is hardly autonomous; one’s behavior and thought are inherently mediated by the social, historical, political, and economic networks of the society in which they take place (Lantolf, 2004; Wetsch, 2002). When American students study Japanese culture in America, they learn it as narrated for them by America’s collective interpretation and perspectives of Japan and Japanese culture. Study abroad physically removes students from their home culture to the other culture where its own set of networks operates to shape its own collective interpretations and perspectives of reality. Through their personal experience and interaction with the culture, students affirm or disaffirm their inherited interpretations and

perspectives of the culture, finding new meanings and negotiating between the old and new mental frameworks to come to their own understanding of culture. Study abroad thus makes culture learning authentic and personal.

We therefore envision the cultural goals of study abroad to be: 1) increasing and enhancing knowledge of Japanese culture, and (2) possibly changing preconceived perceptions of the Japanese culture through direct and personal cultural contacts.

Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to examine culture learning of a group of seven American undergraduate college students participating in a four-week study abroad program in Japan, summer 2008. Two research questions corresponding to the two cultural goals of the study abroad program described above were:

1. Did students' cultural knowledge about Japan increase following the summer study abroad program?
2. Did students' perceptions of Japan change following the summer study abroad program?

Methods

Participants

The study followed seven students majoring in Aerospace or Systems Engineering participating in a summer study abroad in 2008. There were two females and five males, all between ages 20 and 22. While all seven had studied another language (French, German and/or Spanish) in high school, two of them had never traveled outside of the country and the other five had traveled to popular vacation spots for spring break or family vacations in Europe. None of the participants had previously studied Japanese nor traveled to Japan or any other Asian country. At the time of the study, none were studying a foreign language—they were either uninterested

in a foreign language, or unable to fit language classes into their schedules due to constraints associated with their majors.

Procedure

The Languages and Cultures Department and Aerospace Engineering Department jointly proposed a faculty-led study abroad program for Aerospace and Systems Engineering majors to learn Japanese language and culture while enhancing professional development opportunities in the summer of 2008. The itinerary of the proposal included visits with Japanese aerospace centers and meetings with their respective government agencies as well as visits to places of Japanese historical and cultural interest. All participating students were required to take pre- and post-study abroad seminars. The seminar before the trip consisted of four separate 90-minute sessions which included Japanese language and culture lessons. The culture lessons included historical and cultural information about the places to be visited, rules of conduct in public places, meeting and communicating with people including some language lessons, readings and discussions on Japanese society, and ways to observe and record cultural encounters. While in Japan, the students were instructed to record and examine their personal cultural encounters. The seminar after the trip was a one-credit course (total of 16 contact hours). The post-trip seminar provided the students with opportunities to reflect upon their experiences in Japan and to share those experiences with each other. In one each of the pre- and the post-trip sessions, the students filled out a survey specifically developed for this summer study abroad program.

Instrument

The pre- and post-survey contained a total of 42 questions, of which five specifically addressed the students' cultural knowledge and perceptions of Japan. The present study focused on these five questions:

1. What makes Japanese unique is:
2. Good things about the Japanese people are:
3. Bad things about the Japanese people are:
4. Good things about life in Japan are:
5. Bad things about life in Japan are:

Students were asked to write in their answers. The students responded to the same questions twice, once before the trip and once after the trip. The students' pre- and post-trip responses were compared for possible changes in the students' knowledge and perceptions of Japan.

The five question items in the survey intentionally avoided the use of term 'culture' since it is subject to many different interpretations. We viewed culture operating at a collective level (country) as well as at an individual level (people). The questions about the Japanese country and Japanese people were intended to capture the respondent's perceptions, not confined to definitions of culture offered by various academic disciplines. The questions also directed attention to both "good" and "bad" aspects of Japan. American students living in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual society are taught to be "nice" and "sensitive" to others, particularly to those from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. We purposely included "bad" aspects of Japan in questions to make students feel free to express negative opinions.

Data Analysis

We adopted the principles of the content analysis method and used the ATLAS.ti qualitative-research toolkit (Muhr, 2004) to facilitate the analysis. Content analysis, while generally classified as a quantitative method, is also a qualitative method in that researchers are concerned with the text (e.g., words), their relation to their context (e.g., meanings), and identifying and considering potentially relevant concepts (Shaw, 2006). The development of a

coding scheme, a fundamental element of the content analysis, though theoretically informed, is always to some degree an emergent or inductive process. The use of content analysis together with a qualitative-research toolkit in the present study, therefore, did not seem inconsistent. The content analysis used in this study was modeled after Elo and Kynagas (2007) and Downe-Wamboldt (1992) and involved four stages. First, the researchers read the students' responses thoroughly and created literal codes, quoting a word, a phrase, or a sentence actually used in their responses. Second, the researchers grouped the literal codes together according to shared or similar meanings, and then created a thematic code. For example, the literal codes 'hospitable to visitors' and 'helpful to anyone' were collapsed into the same thematic code which is 'attitudes toward others.' Third, the researchers cross referenced each thematic code to the three categories of cultural knowledge outlined by the cultural framework of the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 1999): cultural *products*, *practices*, and *perspectives*. Cultural *products* include what is formerly known as Big C, that is, the art, music, literature and other contributions of a given culture to the benefit of humankind, while cultural *practices* relate to small c: ways of life, customs, and manners. Cultural *perspectives* are best defined as values, beliefs, or worldviews underlying both cultural products and practices.

Assigning one of the three categories of cultural knowledge to thematic code necessitated more detailed criteria. We developed a series of questions for this purpose. Examples of such are:

1. Is the thematic code abstract or concrete in nature?
2. Does it refer to behavioral or performed aspects of culture?
3. Does the comment include the student's insights into interpretation of culture?

For example, the thematic code 'attitudes toward elders' represents a behavioral aspect of Japanese treatment of elders, and accordingly was assigned to the category of cultural *practices*.

In some cases, more than one category was assigned to a single thematic code. For example the thematic code ‘economy’ was assigned to the category of cultural *products* when the students described Japan as “a wealthy nation,” while the same was assigned to the category of cultural *practices* when the students stated that “Japan embraces the global market.” We counted the number of thematic codes and the frequency of quotes for each of the three categories of *products*, *practices*, and *perspectives*.

Findings

Students’ Cultural Knowledge of Japan

In order to examine changes in the students’ cultural knowledge before and after the trip, we counted separately the number of thematic codes revealing their cultural knowledge in the pre- and post-surveys. We also examined the individual categories *products*, *practices*, and *perspectives* of student cultural knowledge for the pre- and post-surveys and compared the frequency of comments on each category. Larger numbers of thematic codes and quotes indicated stronger cultural knowledge associated with the respective categories.

The pre-survey contained a total of 36 thematic codes, of which 17 (47%) referred to *products*, 19 (53%) to *practices*, and 0 (0%) to *perspectives*. The post-survey contained 57 thematic codes. Of the 57 codes, 15 (26%) referred to *products*, 40 (70%) to *practices*, and 2 (4%) to *perspectives*. This is summarized in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Cultural categories were mentioned in pre-survey responses 76 times, of which 33 (43%) referred to *products*, 43 (57%) to *practices*, and 0 (0%) to *perspectives*. Cultural categories were

mentioned in post-survey responses 95 times, of which 17 (18%) referred to *products*, 76 (80%) to *practices* and 2 (2%) to *perspectives*. This is summarized in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 about here

The number of thematic codes increased from 36 before the trip to 57 after the trip. The frequency of cultural categories mentioned in the survey responses increased from 76 before the trip to 95 after the trip. These increases suggest that the students recognized more cultural artifacts, behaviors, and attitudes and that they were more willing to comment on Japanese culture after the trip. Significant changes between the pre- and post-trip were observed in the *products* and *practices* category. The frequency of comments about practices increased from 43 (57%) before the trip to 76 (80%) after the trip, while comments about products decreased from 33 (43%) before the trip to 17 (18%) after the trip. There was an increase in the *perspectives* category from 0 (0%) to 2 (2%), suggesting that the students began to apply insight to interpreting the cultural phenomena observed during their trip. In summary, after the trip students increased their Japanese cultural knowledge, revealing the biggest increase in the *practice* category, and the students began to explain Japanese culture as experienced by the Japanese people.

Examples of Students' Cultural Knowledge Before and After the Trip

Before the trip, the students, citing cultural *products* that Americans would typically associate with Japan, described Japan for example, as a country "with a long and rich history," "on the cutting edge of technology," and with "great transportation systems." Japanese political and economical practices in the *practices* category were described as "a power on the Asian

continent,” facing “pressure to militarize”; it “continues to have economic success and has strong political ties to the United States,” however, it “is an underdog on the world scene.” The Japanese way of life was described as “ceremony in everything.” The students perceived the Japanese people as “polite, quiet, considerate to others,” “courteous and diligent,” “hospitable to visitors, as well as hard-working.” However, Japanese businessmen were “loose in alcohol and gambling.” No comments referred to *perspectives*.

After the trip, the students started describing Japanese culture with deeper and more complex statements. As for the *products* category, a thematic code not appearing in the pre-survey included ‘homogeneous’: Japan “has a central culture” and “it [Japan] is such a small country that a lot of the culture can be very similar.” Japan was also described in terms of its natural environment and physical space: Japan is “very crowded” and “the climate is partial to rain and the hotels are made for much smaller people.” As for the *practices* category, Japan was described as ‘immobile’; “if one is in one ‘class’, he or she is not able to jump ‘classes’ in society as may be possible in the United States.” Japan was also ‘group-oriented’ in that “people care more about the group than about their individual interests” and “they [Japanese people] see themselves as a team, not individuals.”

Comments in this category also mentioned ‘attitudes toward others’: “Japan is unique because of the way the people treat each other with an incredible amount of respect,” “the Japanese people are very polite and helpful to anyone they come across” and “it [Japan] is a culture of acceptance.” As for the *perspectives* category, efforts to interpret Japanese culture were observed in the following comments: “The isolation of the country’s geography has played a role in how many things have developed such as religion and foreign policy” and “The

Japanese people are very restricted in their demeanor and personality in the professional world, which I feel removes an element of diversity from their economy.”

Discussion

Study abroad is an opportunity for students to live in a culture and experience first-hand the life of the people of a culture. Direct and personal contacts with the culture enhance cultural knowledge and understanding. However, careful planning and intervention on the part of home-institution instructors are needed to bring about the desired outcomes. This section, discusses a three-step approach to designing study abroad programs and the types of culture learning yielded by study abroad.

Design of Studying Abroad

As many researchers suggest, study abroad programs are generally uneven in the level of support for language and culture available to students, both at home in the form of pre-departure programs and courses, as well as on site (e.g., Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, & Lassegard, 2002). Much of the learning that occurs abroad is unguided or unscripted. Maximizing student learning from study abroad requires careful and deliberate preparation before departure, active guidance and intervention by an informed and resourceful instructor during the trip, and time to reflect on cultural experiences after the trip. A three-stage approach to summer study abroad programs—pre-trip, in-country, and post-trip—demands more direct involvement than ever from home-institution instructors in the design and operation of summer study abroad programs.

The program in the present study was organized, designed, and led by the home-institution instructors. It was organized to fulfill the students' professional goals for the aerospace engineering program while providing culture-learning opportunities. The pre-seminar on culture was prompted initially by the students' lack of exposure to the Japanese language and culture to minimize the negative effects of culture shock. However, explicit cultural goals for

study abroad for all students regardless of background are essential. Too often, culture learning associated with studying abroad lacks specific goals and objectives. Preparation for studying abroad consists of a brief on what and what not to do in a host country so as to avoid conflicts with the locals. Culture learning entails more than a list of warnings. Well designed study abroad programs include articulation of culture learning goals—types, content, and methods of culture learning.

Cultural Learning and Study Abroad

The goals of culture learning for this particular program reflect the backgrounds of the four Japanese instructors who designed it. Their collective experience prior to this program indicated that students' interests in culture in the classroom were more or less limited to food, martial arts, and films. They designed this particular program with the goals of building on existing interest and knowledge, enabling examination of the Japanese culture with enhanced and renewed interest and ways to observe, document, and reflect the student's cultural encounters. The culture-learning needs were more immediate since the participants had never been to Japan and had peripheral interest in and knowledge about Japan.

Study abroad provides a stage where preconceived cultural knowledge and perceptions are tested, evaluated, and possibly transformed. The importance of contact with local people for (delete to) successful study-abroad experiences has been well documented in various studies (e.g., Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Gareis, 2000; Stier, 2003; Byram & Feng, 2006). In the present study, the students already had formed their own ideas about the Japanese culture before landing in Japan. While in Japan, they met and interacted with Japanese people in professional and private settings, observing conduct of business and behavior in such settings. During that process,

the students came to understand Japan with more a thoughtful outlook toward the Japanese culture.

Byram and Feng (2006) state that bonds between strangers (i.e. students) and natives (i.e. hosts) forged by meaningful and sustained contact facilitate the overall adjustment of the former. The overall adjustment of students in the present study included realization that they themselves are products of their own culture. They began to compare Japan and America when commenting on Japanese culture. The students might have felt the need to explain their own cultural peculiarities—values, beliefs, and world-view—and relate them to concrete examples of practices in their own culture. After all, they were being observed, tested, and evaluated as products of American culture in the eyes of Japanese people.

From start to finish of this study abroad program, we saw a progression of culture learning—increased cultural knowledge of the host country leading to enhanced cultural understanding, leading in turn to *intercultural* understanding, understanding of two cultures. Students are generally unable to articulate why they behave in a certain ways because they have never considered the values or assumptions behind their actions, or even realize that such exist. Study abroad gives students an opportunity to examine their own home culture and themselves as products of their own culture. Culture learning involves asking why. Why do people in a given culture tend to behave according to certain patterns, why in common life circumstances do people in one culture react in some ways and people in another culture react in other ways? Learning a culture entails understanding the values and beliefs that explain all these, a highly abstract and analytical process (Damen, 2003; Tang, 2006).

Critical Thinking and Study Abroad

Study abroad provides abundant opportunities for students to observe how people and society function in personal, professional, and social settings. It is quite understandable that the students in the present study showed a marked gain in knowledge associated with the *practice* aspect of the Japanese culture. However, as discussed earlier, culture consists not only of complexes of concrete behavior patterns—customs, traditions, and habits. Rather, culture is a set of rules or recipes governing behavior in a given culture. Behavior is a concrete expression of unspoken values, beliefs, and world-views shared by the people of a culture. Relating cultural goals to language studies, for example, students learn not only how to communicate according to linguistic and behavioral protocols of a given society but also have a solid understanding of cultural meanings of the protocols learned and rehearsed in the classroom (Tang, 2006).

Culture learning involves more than learning survival skills to travel in foreign countries or learning functional skills to enter a global labor force. More importantly, culture learning contributes to the development of critical thinking skills. Students learn to recognize cultural differences, explain them, predict how such differences are likely to apply in a given situation, and manifest an attitude important for making one acceptable in the foreign society (Schulz, 2007). In the present study, the students started explaining some aspects of Japanese cultural practices from the standpoint of Japanese cultural perspectives.

Cognitive and Affective Outcomes of Culture Learning

The ultimate goal of culture study is culturally informed students with sound knowledge, able to make informed judgments about another culture. However, culture learning goals could be stated in many different ways according to the definitions or visions of culture learning

espoused by different instructors. In this study, we focused on increasing cultural knowledge about Japan and changes in students' perceptions of Japan.

Cognitive and affective outcomes of learning are often discussed separately. Some schools of thought (e.g., Lafayette & Schulz, 1997) even dismiss affective goals, that is, attitudinal changes, as plausible learning outcomes of culture study. One may argue that attitudes are learned from learners' society, communities, and homes and that schools cannot and should not be accountable for what they have no control over. However, we believe that cultural learning naturally involves both intellect and affect, both thoughts and feelings (Moran, 2001). The students in the present study changed their perceptions about Japan as they gained more cultural knowledge. When commenting on the Japanese culture, they were mindful of social and cultural constraints placed upon Japanese people. Intellectual and attitudinal outcomes are thus connected and interdependent. However, we do not believe that change need be always geared toward a positive direction. Students' images or perceptions of another culture, positive or negative, should be duly verified based on sound knowledge, keen observation, and informed judgment. For some students, emotional attitudes toward a culture over time follow a "U-curve," with initial excitement and jubilation followed by steady disappointment and then again by a gradual rise (Seelye, 1993). Cultural knowledge enables students to examine life under different ground rules. Culturally informed students can recognize and explain cultural phenomena, withholding judgment even when facing differences seemingly counter to their own cultural beliefs and showing thoughtful attitudes toward them. In the present study, the students revealed more thoughtful attitudes, both positive and negative, after the trip.

Conclusion

The students in the present study had no Japanese language background except for rudimentary conversational skills taught in the seminar before the trip. They did not have the language skills required to express, exchange, and discuss topics of interest with the Japanese people. This may explain why their cultural knowledge and understanding remained primarily concerned with the *practice* aspect of the Japanese culture. We designed our culture survey to capture students' cultural knowledge and perceptions about Japan before and after their study abroad. The cultural framework of the National Standards (1999) provided helpful guidelines to identify the types of cultural knowledge necessary to understand culture learning in its scope and complexity. Whether the survey questions were adequate to capture the scope and complexity of students' cultural knowledge and perceptions remains an open question. We are currently planning a new study to include students' photo journals kept during the trip and discussions conducted before and after the trip in addition to the pre- and post-surveys. Computer software is useful for handling a large bulk of data. However, the most challenging part of the data analysis may be developing a cultural-lexicon coding scheme that can be replicated across raters, time, and study. We will continue to develop our coding handbook with refinement and modification in the future. Culture being a learning objective of great interest and importance today, the development of a viable cultural-lexicon coding handbook might be of interest to many researchers in the field.

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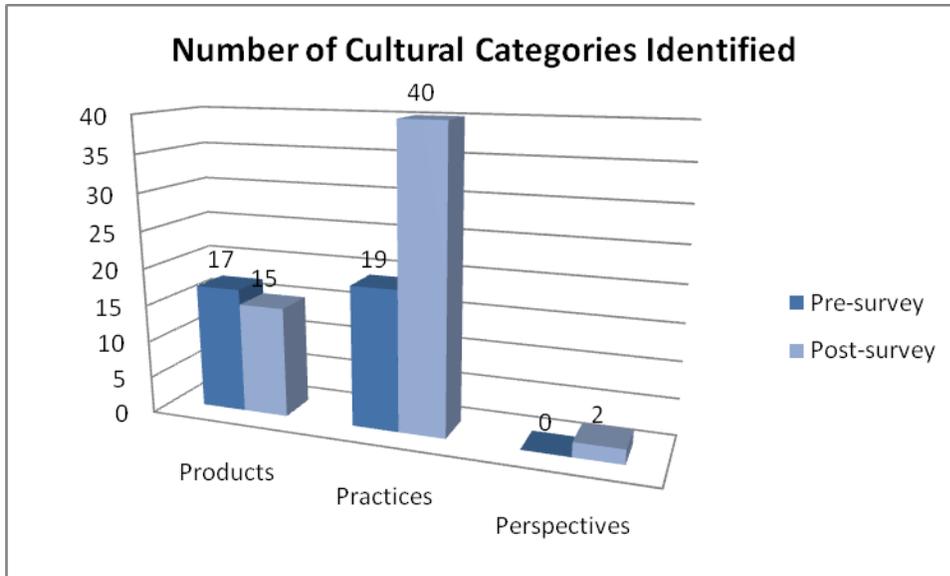


Figure 1: Number of Cultural Categories Identified

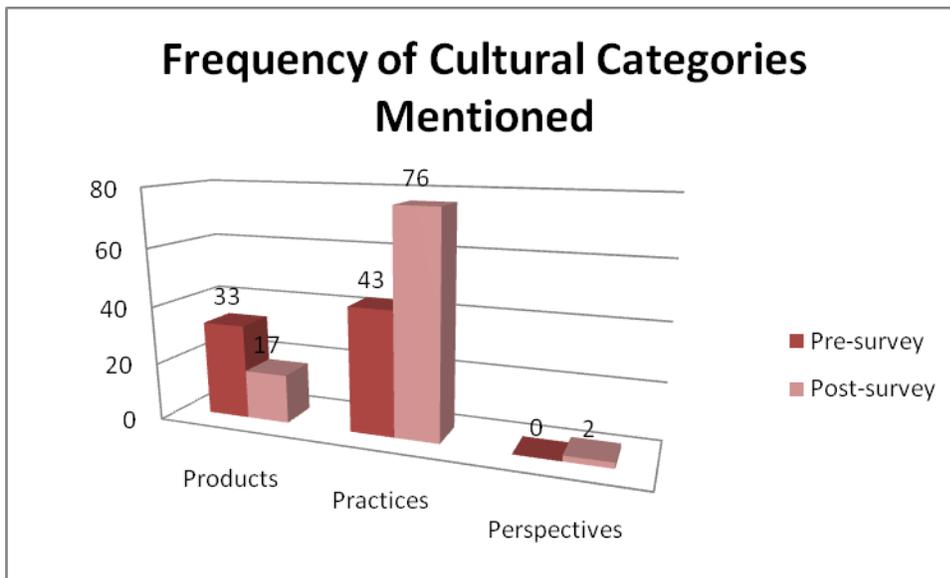


Figure 2: Frequency of Cultural Categories Mentioned