

Counterfactual Understandings: What Japanese Undergraduate Students Wish They Had Known Before a Short-term Study Abroad Experience

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Abstract

Making the most out of a short-term study abroad program is vital for students who are investing in an experience they hope will benefit them personally and academically. This study explores participants' counterfactual understandings of a three-week short-term study abroad program focusing on content and English as an additional language learning for Japanese undergraduate students at a university in British Columbia, Canada. It identifies what participants wish they had known about where they were going and what they would have done if they had known that information. Qualitative methods were used to gather written narrative data from 37 participants and analyze that data for themes emerging from the participants' counterfactual reflections. Results point to six themes related to the participants' unexpected short-term study abroad experiences: food and drink, facilities, money matters, shopping, climate and geography, and community characteristics. On reflection, if the students had known more about those themes, they may have prepared differently for their trip and they might have had different experiences during the program. To prepare students to get the most out of a short-term study abroad program, pre-departure activities making use of inquiry and task-based/experiential learning are recommended.

Key Words: *Short-term study abroad; Content-based instruction; English language learning; Pre-departure preparations*

Canada continues to attract large numbers of international students, with almost 500,000 international students studying in this country in 2017. Of these students, around 24% of them choose British Columbia (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2018), and about 6,500 of those students are from Japan (British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills & Training, 2017). However, these numbers represent international students coming to Canada who require valid student study permits. For students studying in Canada for less than six months, a study permit is not required (Government of Canada, 2019). Thus, the numbers of students taking part in short-term study abroad programs in British Columbia can be difficult

to estimate, particularly for students from Japan who are able to enter Canada for up to six months for tourism, business, or study without a visa.

Although the numbers are hard to estimate, short-term study abroad programs, which generally involve less than six weeks of study, seem to be a popular choice for international students, with most post-secondary institutions in British Columbia offering these types of programs. The current study explores the experiences of a group of undergraduate students from Japan on a three-week long short-term study abroad program that focused on both content and English as an additional language learning at a Canadian university in British Columbia. Specifically, the study identifies the participants' counterfactual understandings of their short-term study abroad experience. In other words, the participants reflected on what they didn't know before going abroad and what they would have done if they had known that information. The findings point to the participants having perceived knowledge gaps related to food and drink, facilities available on campus and in the community, money matters, shopping, climate and geography, and personal characteristics of local people. Had they known more about these elements of their short-term study abroad experience, they would have changed how they packed for the trip and how they would have experienced certain aspects of their time in Canada. By identifying what the participants wish they had known before coming to Canada and what they might have done with that knowledge, program planners and curriculum developers can better prepare future short-term study abroad students for what they will meet in the host community and facilitate a deeper engagement and higher levels of satisfaction during and after the program.

The Short-Term Study Abroad Experience

For students who can't interrupt their post-secondary studies, the option of taking part in a short-term study abroad program offers an attractive opportunity to study in an additional language. However, there are many different types of short-term study abroad programs, and the different variables that contribute to a quality program are complex (Jackson, 2008). These variables can include elements such as the program length, accommodations, teaching approaches, and interpersonal relationships (Churchill & Dufon, 2006).

Taking part in a program like this can have a positive impact on students, especially when they are able to use the additional language they are studying and take part in the local culture (Jackson, 2008). For example, students who complete a short-term study abroad program may become less anxious (Allen & Herron, 2003; Lee, 2018), advance their additional language communicative competence and learn new vocabulary (Sato, 2012), increase their willingness to communicate (Kang, 2014; Lee 2018), experience gains in listening comprehension (Llanes & Muñoz, 2009), develop better intercultural awareness (Lee, 2009), acquire new knowledge, improve motivation and expand their world view (Pigott, 2011), cultivate friendships, create support networks, and experience a sense of freedom (Gay, 2016), grow as a person with new life skills and a greater feelings of maturity (Lee, 2009), improve their levels of personal autonomy (Niendorf & Alberts, 2017), and foster their international posture and how they relate to the wider international community (Lee, 2018).

Despite the above benefits, student expectations may not always be met during their short-term study abroad experiences. High on the list of expectations for short-term student abroad students is the chance to meet local people. Yet, these intercultural encounters may not take place in the way that students expect if finding these encounters is simply left up to the students themselves (Douglas, 2015). Many short-term study abroad programs have limitations related to intercultural learning, and it is challenging for students to engage with local people in the local language (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2018). In fact, although students typically have a strong wish to engage with the local culture, some programs might not provide sufficient opportunity for that engagement (Horness, 2014). It can also be challenging to find opportunities to use the target language outside of class, even when living with a homestay family, possibly because it might be difficult for local users of the target language to negotiate meaning with students who have developing levels of additional language abilities (Tanaka, 2007). Students may also hold misconceptions related to the local culture. For example, multicultural and multilingual host communities might not align with students' preconceived expectations of interacting with native-speakers of the language under study, leaving it up to students to realign their understanding of the local context and seek out meaningful additional language encounters with users from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Kato & Reeder, 2015).

To promote the benefits of short-term study abroad and to mitigate the challenges, a number of proposals have been put forward. Some of the primary motivations for students taking part in a short-term study abroad experience involve interacting with local people and improving additional language skills. Based on these motivations, short-term study abroad programs should provide students with intercultural encounters and interactions with local people along with input into the curriculum (Benson, Barhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013). In addition to intercultural encounters being an important part of a successful short-term study abroad program, a full and varied schedule of extra-curricular activities and rich classroom experiences is also key to student satisfaction (Douglas, 2015; Douglas, Sano, & Rosvold, 2018). Programs further need to take student expectations into account during their planning to help students adapt to what they meet unexpectedly in the local community (Kato & Reeder, 2015). Echoing the above researchers, Inoue (2019) has proposed that ideal short-term study abroad programs for the Japanese students in her study involved cultural engagement, leisure activities, sightseeing, and interaction with locals.

Research Questions

To uncover participants' counterfactual understandings of their short-term study abroad experiences, two overarching research questions guided the current inquiry:

1. What do participants wish they had known in relation to their short-term study abroad experiences before they came to Canada?
2. What would students have done if they had known what they didn't know?

Methods

Participants

Before beginning recruitment and data collection, the current study underwent review by the author's university behavioural research ethics board. Once approval was obtained, the researcher visited the potential participants at the start of their short-term study abroad program to explain informed consent and describe the study. A date was set for the researcher to revisit the potential participants toward the end of the program, at which time potential participants had an opportunity to ask any questions they may have and sign the consent form. All of the students who took part in the short-term study abroad program that is the focus of this study agreed to take part in the study, resulting in a total of 37 participants. There were approximately equal numbers of male and female participants. The participants were first-year undergraduate students studying business at the same university in the Kanto region of Japan. The participants generally were independent users of English, with the researcher estimating their English language proficiency at around a B2 level, indicating the participants could interact and provide their opinions with fluency on a range of topics using EAL without too much difficulty for either the speakers or the listeners (Council of Europe, 2019).

The Context

The short-term study abroad program took place during the summer months at a university in the British Columbia interior. The university is located in a mid-sized city in an important technological, agricultural, and tourist part of the province. English is the predominant language of the day-to-day life of the city, with around 15% of the local population speaking a language other than English or French at home. Before the program started, pre-departure information for incoming students in the form of presentation slides was shared with the sending institution. The information in the presentation slides was related to the marketing project students would undertake, site visits related to the marketing project (such as ski hills and vineyards), clothes they should pack, places they would eat (along with meal planning), where they would stay, what electronic devices they should bring, who would help and teach them during the program, facilities and amenities on campus and in the local area, and a final excursion at the end of the program. A link was also sent with a video tour of the campus and local area.

The program ran for three weeks, with around five hours of classes per day during the week and optional excursions on the weekends. The mornings consisted of business communication classes, and the afternoons consisted of business leadership classes, all with a dual focus on learning both language and content (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). The learning outcomes for the morning classes included understanding the marketplace and designing marketing strategies. The afternoon classes focused on skills to support the students' group marketing projects, including developing written and spoken English skills related to the projects. By the end of the program, students were able to produce a written marketing plan and make a presentation on a marketing case study. Students were also able to take part in mid-week field trips and guest lectures connected to the content of their classes. In addition to a morning and an afternoon instructor, there were seven local undergraduate students hired to assist with teaching and facilitate the extra-curricular activities. During the program, students lived in the university's student residences. Each student had their own private room and shared a bathroom with one other student. Three of the program assistants lived with the students in

the student residences during the program. Students took part in a partial campus meal plan, with some additional catered meals organized by the program.

Procedures

The researcher had no relationship with the participants, other than that of a visiting researcher. He was not one of the participants' instructors and was not employed by the short-term study abroad program. Data collection took place in class toward the end of the program. It consisted of a focus group activity and individual writing prompts. For the focus group activity, participants were divided into groups of six or seven and were asked to reflect on what they wish they had known before they came to Canada, and what would have happened if they had known what they didn't know. The participants' ideas were captured in the form of a poster co-created by the focus group members using coloured felt markers and 20" x 23" poster paper. The focus group activity primarily served to activate the background knowledge of the participants and prepare them to take part in the individual writing activity. The writing activity consisted of a single prompt asking students to write at least 50 words on what they wish they had known before they came to Canada. The students were orally prompted to also write about what they would have done. Finally, they were asked to be as descriptive as possible. The current study reports on the findings from the writing activity.

Data were analyzed through a process of breaking down the writing responses into individual units of text that were significant and related to the research topic. The units of text were then assigned a descriptive code, and the codes subsequently gathered together into emerging themes. Neither the codes nor the themes were predetermined before the data analysis began. The process was iterative and cyclical in nature, with codes being assigned and revised during the process as the researcher became more familiar with the data (Mills & Gay, 2019). The findings are presented in their order of salience by taking a composite approach that combines representative quotes from different participants to illustrate the major themes. The participants' grammar and word choices have not been altered to preserve their voice. Minor spelling errors have been corrected.

Results

What Participants Wish They Had Known

There were a number of things that were unfamiliar or unexpected by the participants in connection to their experiences in Canada, and six main themes emerged from the data to reveal what the participants wish they had known more about before they arrived for their short-term study abroad program. These themes are related to food and drink, local facilities, money matters, shopping, climate and geography, and community characteristics. The themes and their contributing codes in the data are presented in Table 1, along with the number of times units of text in the data were assigned a particular code.

Table 1 What Participants Wish They Had Known

| Themes and Contributing Codes | Coding Instances | Total Instances |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Food and Drink | | 24 |

| | | |
|---------------------------------|----|----|
| Local Food | 10 | |
| Restaurants | 8 | |
| Japanese Food | 3 | |
| Nutritional Concerns | 3 | |
| Local Facilities | | 12 |
| Sporting Facilities | 4 | |
| Cooking Facilities | 3 | |
| Free Time, Internet & Amenities | 3 | |
| Health Care & Transportation | 2 | |
| Money Matters | | 12 |
| Cost of Living | 6 | |
| Gratuities | 4 | |
| Transactions | 2 | |
| Shopping | | 8 |
| Convenience Stores | 3 | |
| General Shopping | 3 | |
| Grocery Stores | 2 | |
| Climate and Geography | | 7 |
| Climate | 5 | |
| Nature and Geography | 2 | |
| Community Characteristics | | 4 |
| General observations, language | 4 | |

Food and drink. When thinking about what the participants wish they had known before they came to Canada, food and drink emerged as the strongest theme in the data. In particular, the participants commented frequently on the local food choices, as they understood them. For the participants, there was a general sense that the food and drink choices were very different, and not particularly nutritious. As one participant wrote, “the food in Canada is totally different from Japan ... there’s less choices for food that we can make. I just ate pizza, hamburger, low quality cup noodle.” Another participant mentioned, “I want to eat more of food with healthy salad. There was a feeling amongst the participants that “there is few vegetable,” and a student commented how “I didn’t know that we can’t have enough vegetables in daily meals.” There was also an impression that Canadian food was particularly sweet. Once student wrote about how “many sweet snacks were sold everywhere. For example, I usually eat some sweet snacks like cupcakes and donuts for breakfast because I have few choices to eat during staying in Canada.” There was also a comment about sugary drinks as well: “every single bottled tea sold in stores were sweet ... this was surprising for me because most of the bottled teas in Japan are

not sweet ... therefore, I expected if nothing was especially labelled on the bottle, I thought they would not be sweet.”

Restaurants also figured large in the reflections on what the participants wish they had known about Canada. There seemed to be some trepidation on the part of the participants to try unknown restaurants. For example, one participant wrote “I was kind of scared to go and try new place because I didn’t know if their drink and food are good.” There was also an impression in the data of missed opportunities because, as another student mentioned, “I didn’t have much time to do research about Canadian local products. Now, I often have meals at Starbucks, Tim Hortons, and McDonalds, but I want to eat local foods.” For the restaurants that the participants did try, there were some expressions of discontent. For example, the hours of operation were a concern, with a participant having the impression that “all the restaurants are closed in the evening.” Closely related, a participant wrote, “there are many [more] opportunities to have meals in dormitory than I expected.”

Going to local restaurants was not always the experience that participants might have wanted or imagined. A participant wrote, “even though there are so many restaurants in [name of town], almost all of them are junk food and expensive. So we cannot have dinner outside many often.” Even trying the local Japanese food wasn’t always a success: “although there are Japanese food restaurants in [name of town], I am not satisfied with Japanese foods that they serve because the taste is quite different from Japanese foods in Japan. I would like to drink miso soup and eat Japanese so much now.” However, there were some pleasant surprises for the participants regarding local restaurants. One participant felt that Tim Horton’s, a Canadian chain of coffee shops, had “really good drinks and food and they are also cheap.” Unique offerings at other coffee shops were also a pleasant surprise, as one participant put it, “there were Dragon Drink at Starbucks in Canada ... I will be missing Dragon drink because there aren’t any in Japan.” Finally, some participants did seem to enjoy the local Japanese food. A participant stated “[name of university] has one Japanese restaurant and they offer sushi. Thanks to that restaurant, I do not miss Japan.” A different participant wrote, “I was surprised to be able to eat Japanese food in Canada. It is very delicious and there are many menu.”

Local facilities. The participants also expressed wishing they had known more about what facilities might be available on campus and in the local community before they arrived. There were some pleasant surprises, such as “towels are prepared for us in the dorm.” Participants were generally impressed with the university’s fitness facilities, with some of the participants unaware before they came that they could engage in sporting activities on campus. One participant stated, “I was surprised at using basketball court and volleyball court freely in [name of university], and also we can borrow basketballs and volleyballs at the office next to our dorm.” Other students corroborated this feeling by remarking they didn’t know “there is the facility that I can play sports especially soccer,” and saying “there is a basketball court outside, so I was playing basketball until 9:30 pm.” The lack of prior knowledge about what sports facilities were available on campus led one participant to regret not being prepared: “I could do exercise or play sports at [name of university] ... I brought a pair of [gym clothes], but it is not enough for me now.”

While they were happily surprised at the extent of the sporting facilities on campus, there was also a sense that participants weren't sure what types of activities and facilities were available for use during their free time in general. A participant wrote, "since we had a lot of free time in the first week but I had no idea to do except watching YouTube in my room." Some students were also at a loss about what to do for their evening meals, and participants expressed disappointment in the lack of cooking facilities in the student residences. One student remarked on the lack of facilities, writing about "the refrigerator which we share with everyone in a dorm." Another participant remarked, "I can't use kitchen in the dorm." Finally, a third participant noted, "I thought I would ... cook the meals. In the fact, though, it was not. It's not only unhealthy but also sad for me."

There were further mixed feelings about other facilities in the local community. On a positive note, one participant was pleasantly surprised by the public transportation system and would have liked to have known how good the system was before arriving: "transportation such as public/local buses work well than I expected, and inside the bus is safe and quiet ... my friend who lives in other country told me that the public transportation does not work at all, so that people never use. That is why I imagined the same thing would be happened in Canada as well." Participants were also pleased "there are so many free wifi in [name of town] that I can keep in touch with my friend anytime!" On the downside, one participant was not happy with local health care facilities: "I was surprised that hospitals in [name of town] are awful! I slipped and twisted my ankle ... so I went to the hospital ... I just took X-ray photos, and paid \$140. I didn't know what happened to my ankle." The participant expected more from his encounter with the local health care system.

Money matters. Issues to do with money also were something that the participants wished they had known more about before coming to Canada. First of all, participants noticed a higher use of electronic payments: "in Canada, using credit or debit card is much easier and useful [compared to cash] when we go shopping." A number of participants also commented on how much various items cost in Canada. One participant stated, "I thought the price in Canada is much higher than that of Japan." Another participant provided a specific example, with the emphatic comment, "I was surprised when I bought water at the vending machine in dorm. This is because it costs \$2.50!! It's crazy!!" A third participant also mentioned how "they [bottled water] are really expensive unfortunately." Restaurants too, were considered "expensive." The high cost of living affected some of the participants' budgets, with a participant noting, "I brought little money only for souvenirs like maple cookies and fragrance. I'm usually good at money management although I failed this time." However, there were alternative perspectives on how much things cost, with a participant being surprised that "we can buy almost all things that we need at low price."

Related to money matters and expenditures in Canada, was unfamiliarity with tipping in Canada. While one participant did say that "tipping is very interesting culture in Canada, another participant remarked, "since there is no tipping culture in Japan... I could not understand why we have to pay tips." The uncertainty around tipping is exemplified by this quote from a participant: "before coming to Canada, I had no idea how much to pay for a tip so I was curious but confused when I had dinner in downtown." The participants wanted to know more about "how to pay tip at a restaurant" because, as mentioned by a number of

participants, “in Japan, there is no tipping culture.” It also wasn’t always clear to the participants as to when they should tip, with one participant illustrating this sentiment with the comment: “I wanted to know which place I should pay a tip.” How to pay for tips was also an issue, with a participant noting “sometimes tip is included or we can chose whether we would like to add tips or not [when using a payment terminal].”

Shopping. Shopping was the fourth theme that presented participants with unexpected moments during their short-term study abroad experience. High on the list of things that students felt unprepared for was their encounters with convenience stores in Canada. Two of the participants mentioned how they felt “convenience store is inconvenient” in Canada, with one of these participants sharing, “I was shocked that how inconvenient the convenience [store] is ... they do not have rice balls nor sandwiches which you can easily find in Japanese convenience stores.” This sentiment was echoed by different participant who said, “I surprised at a convenience store doesn’t sell a lot of snacks and cup noodles.” Although the participants had poor opinions of convenience stores in Canada, they did find grocery stores to fill some of their needs, as noted by a participant who reported, “there are some shops that sells grocery, daily necessities, and clothes.” However, the perceived inconvenience of the grocery stores was remarked on: “Superstore, which sells vegetable is very far from this campus.” Participants were also frustrated at not being able to find the products they were looking for, as revealed by this participant who was surprised that “there is no tabasco at any supermarket in [name of town] ... I could not find tabasco or even anything similar to tabasco.” Finally, when thinking about shopping in general, a participant wasn’t prepared for the store hours, noting “Canadian shopping malls close earlier than Japan.”

Climate and Geography. The participants also expressed a wish to have known more about various factors related to the geographical location of their short-term study abroad program. The first thing that impressed one participant was “there are some wild animals such as squirrels and deer in [name of university].” However, participants seemed to be less impressed with the lack of humidity and the temperatures they encountered in Canada. In describing their arrival in Canada, a participant wrote, “when we arrived ... it was very windy and cold, even though there was no big difference in temperature [from Japan]. After I found out that this was because Canada has dry weather. So even though the temperatures are similar, weather was completely different ... I had to buy a hoodie with long sleeve to confront this coldness.” Other participants also remarked on the dry weather, with one stating, “the air is dry in [name of town]. I was surprised that I had sore throat when I got up at the first day of the trip. I thought that I might catch a cold.” Another student also said, rather dramatically, “Canada’s climate is more dry than Japan. Because of this, my throat was very dry and I felt almost dead.” Regarding the weather, a participant summed up the general sentiment by saying, “the weather in Canada are dry, cool in morning and in the shade but hot under sunshine, long day and clear sky.” More participants corroborated this impression with comments such as, “the sunlight in [name of town] is bright and strong, and “day time in [name of town] was longer than Japan.”

Community Characteristics. The last theme to emerge from the participants’ data was related to how they perceived the local culture and community. On the positive side, one participant wrote that “the people who live in Canada are more friendly and kind.” This sentiment was repeated by another participant who shared, “Canadian people are so kind. Before I came here,

university professors and my parents said me ‘Canada is not Japan, so you have take warning and must keep and eye on your bag.’ However, when I dropped my money, Canadian person picked up them, and many people in Canada greeted me.” On the other hand, there were some negative impressions of local people. There was a theft in the student residences, and one of the participants involved wrote “I cannot trust on people too much. It is because I was stolen one whole pizza that I put in refrigerator, although I put my name and the name of the university ‘[home university]’ on it.” Lastly, some participants mentioned how they were surprised at the trouble they had communicating sometimes with local people. For example, one participant wrote, “I had many times that I felt frustrated because I were not able to tell people what I want to say even though I totally understood what they said.”

What Participants Would Have Done

After reflecting on what they wish they had known before arriving in Canada, the participants then thought about what they would have done with that knowledge. The data analysis uncovered two major themes related to what students would have done in Canada and how they would have prepared for their trip. The two major themes and the contributing codes in the data are presented in Table 2, along with the number of times units of text were assigned a particular code.

Table 2 What Participants Would Have Done

| Themes and Contributing Codes | Coding Instances | Total Instances |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Packing for the Trip | | 27 |
| Food | 10 | |
| Sports Clothes | 4 | |
| Accessories | 4 | |
| Nutrition, Cooking Utensils | 3 | |
| Warm Clothing | 2 | |
| Over-Packing | 2 | |
| Toiletries | 2 | |
| Local Experiences | | 23 |
| Money, Gratuities | 7 | |
| Community Perceptions | 3 | |
| Restaurants | 3 | |
| Shopping, Souvenirs | 3 | |
| Free Time, Sports Activities, Nature | 3 | |
| Language Study, General Knowledge | 2 | |
| Health Care | 2 | |

Packing for the trip. The first major theme connected to what the participants would have done focused on what they would have brought with them from Japan. First of all, considerable space in their luggage would have been dedicated to food. In particular, the participants wanted to “bring Japanese foods from Japan.” The most popular choices were “Japanese snacks,”

“instant foods,” “rice,” “miso soup,” and “cup noodles” or “instant noodles.” For example, one participant wrote, “I would have brought cup noodles or other food that can make my dinner more fun and much more healthier.” The concern for healthier food was also reflected in the comment from a participant who “would have brought vegetable juice from Japan,” and a different participant who “would have brought vitamins tablets.” Some participants also would have brought condiments, such as “my own tabasco from Japan,” or “my own soy sauce.” A different participant had another solution, instead of bringing food, “I would have brought more money for the food.” Finally, in reaction to the perceived sweetness of the locally available bottled tea, a participant wrote, “I would have brought my own tea bags from Japan and made my own tea.” Along with the different food and drink items that the participants would have packed in their luggage, one participant felt, “I should have take my own dishes and chopsticks from Japan.”

Space would have also been made in the participants’ luggage for more clothing. First of all, the participants would have brought “a lot of sports clothing.” For example, one participant “would have brought more comfortable clothing to do muscle training,” while another “would have bring soccer shoes to play soccer,” and still another “would have brought more sports gear like t-shirts, shorts, shoes.” In addition to sports clothes, there was also a sense in the data that if they had known about the cooler weather, they would have also brought clothing more appropriate to the local climate: “I would have brought my sweater from Japan ... I regretted about my package. It was full of mid-summer clothes, which was proper for August in Japan, but was not proper for August at Canada.” Similarly, another participant would have brought “long sleeve” shirts.

In addition to food and clothing, the participants had a few other opinions about what they should and should not have brought in their luggage. A couple of participants mentioned that they would have brought sunglasses if they had known how sunny it was in the local community. Also in reaction to the sunny dry weather, one participant said, “I would have brought ... sun cream,” and another participant said, “I would have brought some masks.” A second participant also wanted to bring masks because of the dry weather: “I would have put on masks when I go to bed.” Finally, in reaction to the cost of bottled water in Canada, a participant wrote, “I would have brought my water bottle from Japan, and take water from the water server every day.” However, despite the things participants would have brought, there were some participants who felt they may have brought too much. For example, a participant wrote, in reaction to not knowing that towels were provided in the student residences, “I would have not have brought my own towels.” Another participant, on finding that some needed items could be purchased in Canada said, “I wouldn’t have brought too many clothes, detergents, and foods.”

Local experiences. Along with packing differently for their short-term study abroad program, there were a number of other things the participants would have done differently if they had known more before they came. For example, one of the participants was challenged communicating in English and wrote, “I wish I had studied English more.” Other participants wrote about the perceived friendly nature of local people and felt, “I would not have been worried about coming to Canada before leaving Japan,” and “I could have not worrying about going to Canada before came to Canada.” There were also some cautionary tales in relation to

the local community. One participant experienced the loss of some food from the common kitchen in the student residences and said in retrospect, “I wouldn’t have put my precious pizza in the refrigerator.” Another participant, having experienced an injury and experiencing challenges with the local health care system, wrote: “I would care more ourselves.”

There was also a sense in the data that if they had known there were so many interesting opportunities to enjoy themselves in the local community, the participants would have done more research beforehand about what to do. For example, some participants felt that more knowledge about local restaurants would have been useful. There was regret about not having “searched healthy restaurants more.” Along these lines, there a wish amongst the participants to have sought out new restaurants earlier in the program, “I would totally have gone there [Tim Hortons] sooner,” and new types of food and drink, “I would have ordered it [Dragon Drink] earlier.” This sense of not knowing early enough what to do was echoed by a different participant, who wrote, “I would have searched and thought what we could do for free time.” Still another participant supported this feeling by saying, “I found a lot of thing that I didn’t known and sometimes it bothered me. That’s why, I will search information about the country which I will go and I think it will help me a lot to lead a life convenient in that country.” By the time some participants did learn of opportunities to pass the time, they felt that they would have spent more time doing the things they enjoyed if they had known about them earlier. For example, one participant “would have watched them [wild animals on campus] all day.” Another participant “would have played basketball for a long time.”

Participants also mentioned what they would have done if they had known more about the local shopping culture and money matters in general. In reaction to different store hours than those in Japan, a participant stated, “I would have got up earlier and visited there [a local mall] in the morning.” In addition, if they had known what was available in local stores, they would have made better efforts to go to where they needed to buy certain things: “I would have been to Superstore or Walmart and bought a lot.” They also felt they didn’t know what to buy, and one participant wrote about how, armed with better knowledge of local products, “I would have bought them [souvenirs] for my family.” While shopping, a participant noted the widespread use of credit cards: “I would have charged my visa debit care more, and tried not to make many changes, especially coins because I am not sure if I use it in the future.” Money was also a concern in relation to paying gratuities. A couple of participants mentioned how they would have “prepared some coins” for tips, or even have learned more about “how to pay a tip” and “pay the tips to waiters at restaurants.” Also in connection to money, participants didn’t seem to be aware that there was widespread Wi-Fi available in the local community, and a participant wrote about how it wasn’t necessary to rent a mobile Wi-Fi router: “It costs 300 dollars to lend pocket wifi, so I have regrets about what I did.”

Discussion

The data analysis uncovered some interesting aspects of the participants’ short-term study abroad experience that surprised them. Six main areas that the participants wished they had known more about before arriving in Canada included food and drink, local facilities, money matters, shopping, climate and geography, and personal characteristics of locals. When asked what they would have done if they had known about those aspects of their stay in Canada, the

main responses related to how they would have packed their luggage and what they would have done to prepare and make better use of their time on arrival.

What the participants didn't know and what they would have done had they known reveals a view of the short-term study abroad host community that was unique to the participants. Regarding the food they encountered in the local community, some of the participants felt that the local options were limited, nutritionally poor, and not particularly appetising for the Japanese palate. In response, the participants would have brought their own Japanese food, drink, and condiments with them, such as cup noodles, tea bags, and soy sauce. There were other aspects of their short-term study abroad program that were also unexpected and not necessarily seen in a positive light by the participants, such as the health care facilities, cost of living, tipping practices, mall hours, cool mornings, dry climate, and perceived trustworthiness of other people on campus. For these aspects, many of the participants expressed a wish that they had better prepared for their travels abroad, particularly in terms of packing, planning and learning more about the local area. The participants also felt that they would have done some things differently had they known what they knew by the end of the program, thus being able to take better advantage of their limited time in Canada at the start of the program. There was a sense of regret for missed opportunities because of an initial lack of knowledge on arrival in Canada. It seemed like the participants felt they lost time because of an unfamiliarity with opportunities for enjoyment and exploration in the local community. This lack of local knowledge before they arrived was felt to have hindered the participants' ability to fully enjoy their time at the start of the program.

What all of these wishes and hypothetical responses have in common is that they seem to be focused on surface aspects of the local culture as understood through their particular experiences in that culture, with little reflection on deeper cultural differences that may have existed between the participants and the local community. The participants also appeared to take singular events and overgeneralize them as a defining trait for the local community. Examples of this overgeneralization include not finding a particular kind of food in a convenience store and then generalizing that unavailability to the whole community, or finding a store closed on a particular night and thinking that all stores closed early in the city where the short-term study abroad program took place. The participants reacted to what was readily visible to them as visitors to a new community, but didn't seem to go beyond those surface aspects to elements of the local culture that were possibly less easy to observe. What the participants saw and reacted to is analogous to the tip of Hall's (1976) iceberg model of culture, with that tip consisting of a culture's external features, but the majority of the iceberg consisting of a culture's hard to observe elements, such as the deeper beliefs, attitudes, and core values. However, that is perhaps to be expected when the participants spent such a short time in the host community and they didn't seem to have extensive and meaningful intercultural interactions with local people in that community, something which has been identified as an important element of an ideal short-term study abroad experience (Benson, Barhuizen, Boycott, & Brown, 2013; Douglas, 2015).

Implications

Taking into consideration that some of the participants would have packed their luggage differently, wished they had done more research about the local area before arriving, and would

have perhaps had sought alternative experiences during their short-term study abroad program, a new approach to pre-departure planning may be called for. It is important to consider what is included in pre-departure preparations, how these preparations are delivered, and the rationale for them. With well thought out pre-departure programs, students have the opportunity to prepare for the challenges they might encounter while studying overseas (Hockersmith & Newfields, 2016). In particular, students should be prepared for success academically and socially with information about the institution, program of studies, and local area they will be visiting. Considerations related to safety and making the most out of a short period of time should also be taken into account.

The participants did receive some pre-departure training, and a slide presentation was prepared by the host institution and shared with the participants before they arrived. However, as Hockersmith and Newfields (2016) have pointed out, lectures to share information in a quick and efficient manner don't necessarily encourage students to take the time to reflect on their upcoming voyage overseas, and an "over-reliance on lectures to convey information is problematic" (p. 5). For example, in the current study, some of the information that students wish they had known seemed to have been included in the pre-departure information shared before arrival. Instead of lecture-based approaches, Hockersmith and Newfields have proposed pre-departure training involving task-based activities and experiential learning as an alternative to lectures so that students can better engage with the knowledge needed to make their upcoming trips a success.

One idea for a pre-departure activity that might have benefited the participants in the current study is an inquiry project in which, rather than simply presenting information about the host community and the short-term study abroad program, the students come up with questions about things they want to know about and then they put together a plan to find out the answers to those questions (for more information on inquiry-based learning, see Watt & Colyer, 2014). Inquiry-based learning has the potential to turn students from passive recipients of knowledge to active partners in shaping their short-term study abroad experiences. For example, before coming to Canada, the participants may have been curious about the availability of Japanese groceries in the host community and asked the question "what kinds of Japanese food are available in [name of town] close to the university?", and they could have put together a plan to explore the websites of Canadian grocery stores to find what might be available, and then use local transit websites to determine how to get to those grocery stores. A student carrying out an inquiry project such as this would have found out that the food items they might want to purchase in Canada are available in the local area in grocery stores on convenient bus routes close to the university. In fact, one grocery store with a wide range of products is only a three or four minute bus ride away from the university. Another larger grocery store with an extensive deli and Japanese products is a 13 minute bus ride away from the university. At the larger store, in addition to take-away food items such as fresh salads, sandwiches, sushi, and a hot deli area, Japanese brand name groceries such as Nissin instant noodle bowls (CA\$1.99), Sapporo Ichiban original noodle soup cups (CA\$1.99), Maruchan instant yakisoba (CA\$2.49), Ito En green tea bags (CA\$6.49), and Kikkoman soy sauce (CA\$3.19) are readily available. Other items too, such as tabasco sauce (CA\$2.99) and vegetable juice (such as V8 vegetable cocktail at CA\$4.79 for six cans), that participants mentioned they would have packed in their luggage, are stocked in local grocery stores (Save-on-Foods, 2019). By preparing in advance using

inquiry-based learning to find the answers to the questions students may ask, it can prepare them to make the best use of their time as soon as they arrive in the host community. It can also help them decide what to pack. In this case, without exploring grocery stores before arriving, students may look for the types of items they want in the wrong places, such as convenience stores, or not see them when they are looking around a grocery store for the first time.

Using pre-departure tasks can also potentially be helpful for lowering student anxiety before leaving for abroad, such as in the Brunotte and Hastings (2019) study that explored the use of virtual reality. Another way to lower anxiety might be to assign students a task to plan a schedule of their free time using websites and information from the host university. This type of task might avoid situations such as the one which occurred to a participant who didn't know what to do during the free time in the first week of the program and spent that time watching YouTube videos rather than leaving the room and exploring the local area. Schwieter & Ferreira (2016) have pointed out that making the best use of free time is important for learning about the local culture, particularly when that free time involves using the additional language to interact with local people. Perhaps that use of free time would lead to learning more about the local culture than just surface features immediately evident at first glance. These opportunities might be missed if students stay in their rooms when not involved in pre-planned activities. Other possible tasks students might explore include mapping out locally known popular restaurants, putting together shopping lists of items to buy at grocery stores for the evenings when they are responsible for their own meals, creating top ten lists of "cheap" eats, and putting together a list of recommendations of popular souvenirs. These types of pre-planning on the part of the students can contribute to Inoue's (2019) recommendations for short-term study abroad programs that include a rich variety of activities.

Finally, role playing activities could also help prepare students for travelling abroad and serve to lower their anxiety. For example, students could role play visiting restaurants that they find on the internet, practice ordering meals, and act out paying the bill and giving a tip at the end of the role play. Students might also find out where the local tourist information office is and role play asking questions and providing answers. These types of activities can lower the element of the unknown and encourage students to actively explore the local community early on during their short-term study abroad program.

While part of the excitement of travel is discovering new places and overcoming challenges, a certain level of preparation is necessary to help students take advantage of the opportunities short-term study abroad can offer. Pre-departure preparations that make use of inquiry-based and experiential learning facilitate students finding answers to their own questions related to where they are going and what they can do once they are there. Students need enough preparation so that they hit the ground running once they arrive. Of course, not everything will always go according to plan, and these misadventures may lead to lasting memories and valuable learning experiences, but knowing more about where they are going has the potential to help students avoid feelings of regret related to lost opportunities because of a lack of knowledge. Instead of thinking about what might have happened if only they had been more prepared, there is more of a chance that students will return home with feelings of satisfaction and motivation to continue their studies.

Limitations and Future Studies

These findings only pertain to a unique group of participants at a particular time in a certain place. Because of the qualitative nature of this study, the goal wasn't to produce findings that could be generalized to other groups of students on different short-term study abroad programs. Rather, the goal was to understand what was happening for the participants in this study, and describe their perceptions of their experiences (Mills & Gay, 2019). However, the findings do provide interesting insights for stakeholders involved in organizing and delivering short-term study abroad programs to students from other countries.

The current study also focused on what participants wished they had known and what they would have done differently, which could have led to findings that seem to highlight the negative impacts of missing knowledge and possibly inadequate preparation. However, short-term study abroad programs, such as the one that is the focus of this investigation, have been in place for a number of years at the host institution, and general observations indicate that students do, in fact, enjoy themselves, and they do appear to have rich and meaningful experiences (Douglas, 2015; Douglas, Sano, & Rosvold, 2018). Further study is called for to examine the extent to which what students wish they had known before a short-term study abroad experience impacts their overall experience and learning outcomes. The impact of what students wish they had known specifically on English as an additional language learning and development is also an important topic to consider in future research studies.

Future studies could involve revising pre-departure programs for short-term study abroad students to involve more inquiry-based and task-based learning approaches and then examining the impact of these types of pre-departure activities on the students' experiences. It would also be interesting to explore the counterfactual reflections of students from other cultural and language backgrounds to see if similar patterns emerge for non-Japanese students.

Conclusion

Counterfactual inquiry involves exploring what participants would have liked to have known before an experience and how that knowledge would have changed how they prepared for and took part in that experience. In the current study, the participants wished they had known more about the food and drink, local facilities, money matters, shopping, climate and geography, and personal characteristics of local people. On reflection, if they had known more about those aspects of their short-term study abroad experience, they would have altered what they would have brought with them as well as how they would have spent their time in the host community. These findings point to the importance of pre-departure preparations that encourage students to find out more about where they are going and how they can prepare to make the best use of their time while they are there.

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