

## **Pre-Departure Training Effectiveness: A Study of the Effectiveness of an Elective Course for Non-Native English Speakers Preparing for Overseas Study**

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At the encouragement of the Japanese government and as a way to attempt to attract more students at a time when the number of young people is gradually declining, an increasingly large number of Japanese universities have begun to offer lecture courses taught in foreign languages—predominantly English—and establish programs which require students to go abroad to study for a year or more as part of the curriculum. Despite the requirement to go abroad for study, pre-departure training and debriefing upon returning to Japan varies widely. This paper will examine an elective intercultural communications course at one university and its effectiveness in pre-departure training. An online survey along with formal and informal interviews have been utilized to gather course participants' views of the usefulness of not only course topics, but education methods used as well in order to understand the course's effectiveness.

The Japanese have always been interested in other countries and foreign things. In the past, the Japanese government has promoted such ideas as internationalization and globalization. Recently, the Japanese government has perceived a need for a more cosmopolitan population and has been encouraging Japanese universities to send an increasing number of students overseas while accepting larger numbers of non-Japanese students from outside of Japan. With the encouragement of the Japanese government and as a way to attempt to attract more students at a time when the number of young people is gradually declining, the number of Japanese universities that have begun to incorporate more non-language courses taught in foreign languages, predominantly English, and establish programs which require students to go abroad to study for a year or more as part of the curriculum, has been increasing. Despite the requirement to go abroad for study, pre-departure training and debriefing upon returning to Japan varies widely. This paper will examine an elective intercultural communications course that is part of one university's pre-departure training and its effectiveness, in an attempt to facilitate the acquisition of intercultural communication abilities, in particular, knowledge, awareness, and skills.

### **Overview**

In order to understand the course's effectiveness, it is necessary to define what is meant by effectiveness and to explain the context in which the study was carried out. For the purposes of this study, Spitzberg's definition of effectiveness is used. Spitzberg (1997) defines effectiveness as:

The accomplishment of valued goals or rewards relative to costs and alternatives.

With these dual standards, therefore, communication will be competent in an intercultural context when it accomplishes the objectives of an actor in a manner that is appropriate to the context and relationship. (p. 380)

The study was conducted with 65 female university students in Japan. The program in which the study was carried out was recently established and less than five years old. Since the first group of students had only returned when this study began, the number of participants in the study was somewhat limited. Despite this drawback, students answered questions and made significant contributions to the research both formally and informally.

To further understand the study, it is helpful to know about the types of courses students in the program are expected to take when they go overseas. Students are required to study for three years at the Japanese home institution and study at a university in an English-speaking country (Australia, Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand, or the United States) for one year from the latter half of their second year, through the beginning term of their third year. While studying overseas, some of the students take mainly English as a Second Language courses or some regular university courses, and other students take both types of courses. Which kind of courses they take often depends on their Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores upon entering the English-speaking universities and the criteria of the institutions studied at. In addition, students experience various living situations, including on-campus dorm life, off-campus shared housing, and homestays.

With the wide variety of courses and living conditions, students are expected to experience the pre-departure education, where students focus on practical skills and knowledge. During the first year, emphasis is placed on general skills that students are expected to need in an academic setting at an English-speaking university. Importance is placed on language skills more than knowledge, with language and communication skills taught mainly through training for the TOEFL Internet-based Test (iBT), which emphasizes all four core language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Students practice giving brief academic responses to academic questions using speaking and writing skills while working in small classes of no more than 14 students every day. In addition to learning language skills, students are expected to learn such skills as note-taking and computer skills to help ensure academic success when they go abroad.

While they practice language skills, note-taking skills, and computer skills, students are also required to attend courses focusing on general cultural information about the country they ultimately will study in as well as about Japanese culture and some general intercultural communication skills. In the beginning of the second year, before the students go overseas, only a few language skills courses are required, and focus is on taking actual lecture courses in English involving longer research papers, academic discussions, and presentations. Students are required to take courses on such topics as international relations and area studies, and can choose from other subjects such as international business, global studies, and intercultural communication. There is recognition that language skills are essential; however, it is not sufficient enough to guarantee success when they go abroad.

Table 1

*Intercultural Communication and Language Education Course Topics*

Introduction to culture
Categories and labels
Learning styles
Cultural identity
Perceptions and stereotypes
Multiculturalism in Japan
Culture/transition shock
Communication styles
Cultural values and beliefs
Intercultural conflict management styles

As Barnlund (1998) points out, “Even concentrated exposure to a foreign language does not guarantee human understanding, and fall short of what is needed for a ‘global village’ to survive” (p. 37).

This research is concerned with the intercultural communication course that students can choose to take before departing Japan. It was a 14-week course for students who have completed the first year of study, and who will go overseas after completion of the term. The goal of the course was to encourage awareness of such things such as identity issues, perceptions and stereotypes, communication styles, values and beliefs, and conflict management styles. Students were encouraged to learn about their own tendencies in order to help them understand and improve relations with people from other cultures. This is congruous with Ting-Toomey’s idea of “mindfulness” (1999):

To increase our knowledge, we need to be mindful of what is going on in our own thinking, feelings, and experiencing. The concept of “mindfulness” can serve as the first effective step in raising our awareness of our own systems of thinking and judging. Additionally, through mindfulness, we can learn to be more aware of the commonalities and differences that exist between dissimilar individuals and groups. (p. 51)

Moreover, focusing on students’ own cultural assumptions is viewed as necessary to encourage them to make a habit of utilizing their own culture in order to better cope when they go overseas. Martin and Nakayama (2001) explain that improving one’s own communication skills by becoming more conscious of one’s own communication, improving one’s own observation skills, and expanding one’s own intercultural communication repertoire can help improve one’s skills in building better relationships with others. In fact, Weaver (1993) goes so far as to pose the question, “How can sojourners understand the impact of culture on the behavior, perceptions, values, and thought patterns of ‘those people’ if they do not understand the impact of their own culture on their personality?” (p. 161). Table 1 shows topics included in the course with the goal of focusing on a more cultural-general

approach to help students make the most of their overseas experiences.

### Scope of the Study

This study was carried out as an attempt to judge the effectiveness of the content and methods of the intercultural communications course in preparing students for overseas study at an English-speaking university. In other words, it was an attempt to discover if the course objectives were met. The research was carried out during a five-month period in the summer and fall of 2009. Sixty-five female students between the ages of 20 and 22 were asked to answer an online survey before or after returning to Japan, while approximately ten students were interviewed informally about their experiences of studying abroad after returning. Participants were asked to answer questions concerning the usefulness of the topics covered in the course as well as the various educational methods used in the course in an attempt to discern if students acquired intercultural communication abilities that are construed as necessary for creating successful relationships. Intercultural communication abilities viewed as being necessary include awareness, knowledge, and skills, and were incorporated into the foundation of the course (Grove & Torbiorn, 1993; Hofstede, 1997). It should be noted that students were given surveys at the end of the course as well to evaluate the course overall and that generally, feedback was positive. In fact, course evaluations indicated that most students who took the course felt that they gained valuable knowledge and skills in the course that would be helpful to them when they went abroad as well as in the future after they returned.

### Results

Overall, 23 students answered the online survey. Of those who responded, all found the topics and activities from the class to be useful tools they could use during their study-abroad experiences. Examining the effectiveness of the topics covered in the course and the activities individually, one can see aspects which students found most useful. Figure 1 shows the usefulness of individual topics. Students found all of the topics useful, but knowledge and awareness of culture/transition shock was deemed to be the most useful. This was followed closely by perceptions and stereotypes, cultural values and beliefs, cultural identity, and intercultural conflict styles.

Survey results show the effectiveness of what students learned in the Intercultural Communication and Language Education course; however, comments by students give even more evidence of its effectiveness. One student, Student A, illustrated that she was aware of her experiences of culture shock. She wrote:

I've experienced some stages including like "honeymoon stage" or others while I was in the US. Personally, my "honeymoon stage" lasted way short, and soon I came to miss Japan. But as time flew, I adjusted myself to the life there and made bunch of friends that helped me a lot. So I seriously didn't want to go back to Japan. Since I got back here, I've been missing my friends and America . . . seriously, I want to go back.

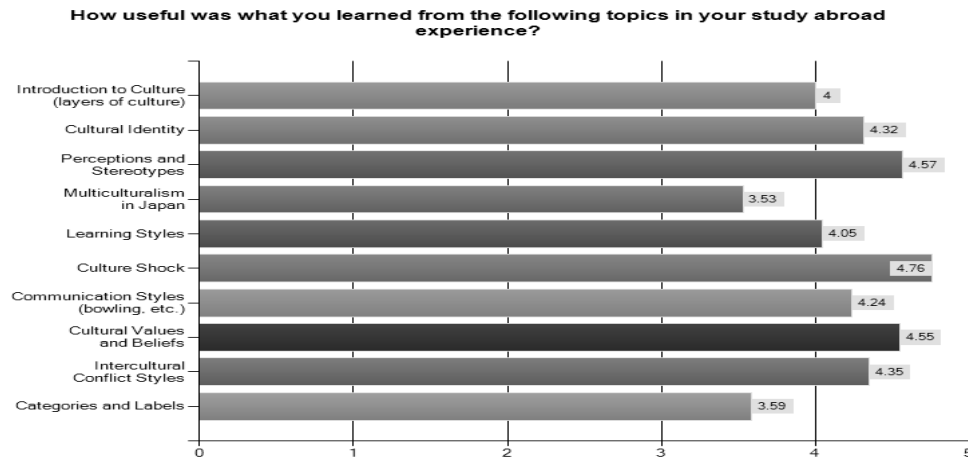


Figure 1. Usefulness of topics to the overseas study experience.

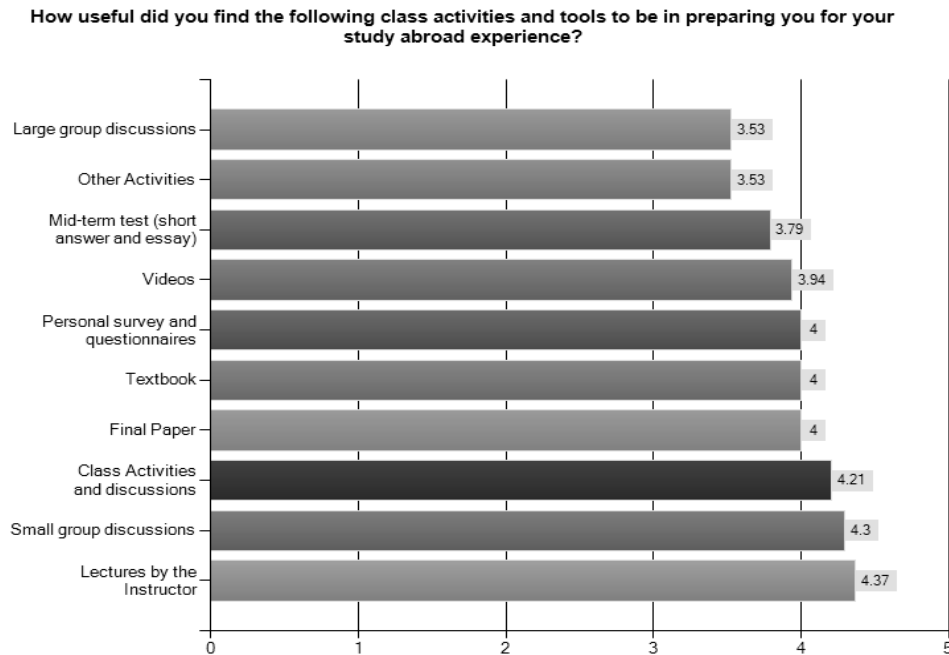
On the same topic, another student commented:

I think this course almost fully covers what the students should learn about the topics, but “culture shock” (I’m not sure but something which included “honeymoon stage” or sort of stuff is useful because I could feel those stages there and could be prepared for the worst stage.)

Another student, Student B, made the following comments regarding identity:

I have a friend who has Korean father and half-Japanese mother, was born and raised in Australia, moved to Canada when he was a junior high school student, and lives in America now. I have asked him one simple question, “What are you?” Then he answered, “It is a really difficult question for me.” And he ended up not answering to my question exactly. I thought he really didn’t know what he was, or he might not even want to think about it because it just did not matter for him. And I felt just bad asking that stupid question to him. He has an Australian passport, by the way.

I have some friends who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. I really respect them and like them, because they know how to respect themselves and how to be proud of themselves just being themselves. I think students should learn more about those people. I love to learn more about them and what kind of difficulties they have now too. It is not for my interest or something, I just feel knowing is my responsibility. I did not know about those people too much. One of my friends who is lesbian has told me that she had lost her friends only because she was lesbian because of their religious beliefs, and she still had difficulties to be herself perfectly in society. She is



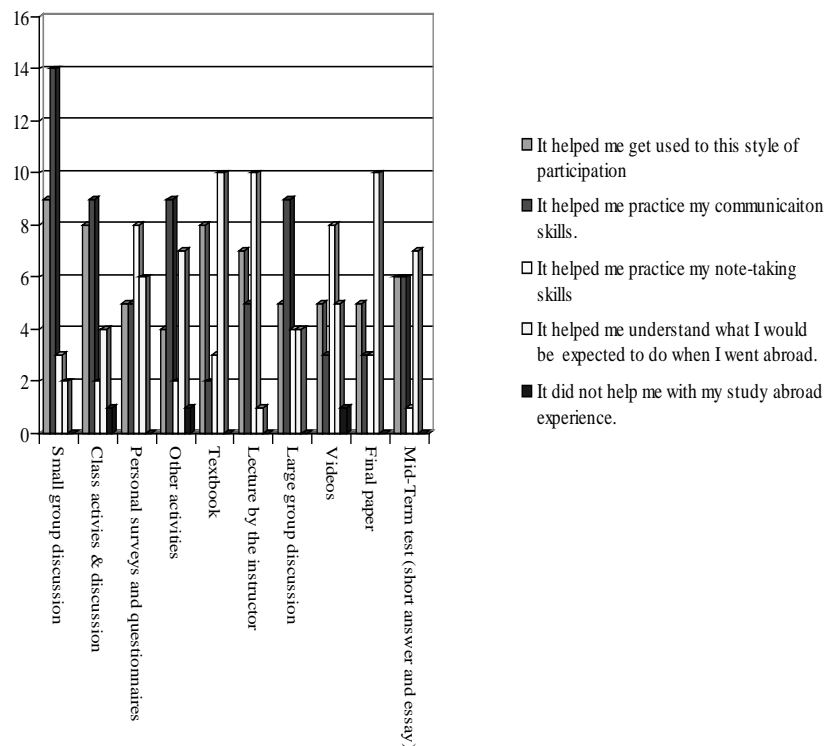
*Figure 2. Usefulness of class education methods.*

Figure 3 shows the main reasons students found these activities useful in preparing for their study abroad experiences. For most activities, most of the respondents answered that it was helpful in improving their communication skills. This was followed by the view that it helped them know what to expect when they went abroad, and that it helped them get accustomed to this participation style.

As for the actual education methods used in the class, one student had the following to say:

I think this course helped me a lot. In the course, we needed to think by ourselves and share opinions within the large or small group. The discussion and sharing each opinion were the most essential parts of the university courses in Canada, even if most Japanese students don't get used to it.

**In what way(s) did the class activities and tools from Question 6 help you when you went abroad? (More than one answer is possible.)**



*Figure 3. Reasons for usefulness of class activities.*

Another student wrote:

Regarding “Large group discussions” and “Small group discussions”, I think those were good practices for the future discussions while studying abroad, because it was always required to say something in discussion class and time, and our contribution greatly affected on the final grade. Other than that, I did many surveys and interviews in the ESL class. What I did in this class was useful and well contributed to my studying abroad experience.

These comments made by students would suggest that the educational methods incorporated in the intercultural communication course they participated in were effective as part of their pre-departure training.

### Conclusion

After examining the survey results and comments made by research participants, it can be said that the intercultural communication course was largely effective in preparing them for their study-abroad experiences. Many of the comments made by students show a clear awareness of ideas studied in the course and their relations to what they actually experienced while abroad. It can be assumed from some of the comments that the students have actually been capable of using the tools they learned in the course to analyze their experiences. However, it is uncertain whether this ability was used during the time they actually had the experiences, or whether they simply analyzed and synthesized these experiences partly in response to doing the survey for this research project. This may somewhat cast doubt on the actual effectiveness of the course as a pre-departure training device. Nevertheless, whether it has been an effective means of giving students skills for their overseas study experience is not a major concern. More importantly, it has given at least some of the students who took the course skills, awareness, and knowledge that they can have access to during their lifetimes, and not only while they are participating in this university program.

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