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## Feature Article

# The Post-Study Abroad Experiences of Japanese University Students

Kristen Sullivan

*Shimonoseki City University*

This study investigates Japanese university students' continued engagement with the target language and interculturality after returning from study abroad, focusing on their perceptions of the utility of the home campus in providing opportunities for this. Immediately prior to graduation, 13 study abroad returnees were surveyed about their participation in on-campus opportunities to use English and engage with international students, their satisfaction with opportunities to use English and engage in international exchange, their perception of their ability to maintain or improve their English proficiency, and the activities they engaged in to maintain their English skills since coming back to Japan from study abroad. The study found that while some students proactively engaged with on-campus opportunities, others did not and instead perceived the home campus as insufficient in this respect. The study also identified a small number of students who creatively made use of off-campus opportunities, taking part in and sometimes creating their own English-using communities. The study considers the use and non-use of on-campus opportunities in terms of affordances and explores the types of interventions that universities can implement to help students maximize their study abroad experiences after returning to the home campus.

### **Considering Learning after Study Abroad**

Study abroad is an important experience for university students, particularly those studying a foreign language. Data published by the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO, 2015, 2019) indicates that the number of tertiary education students in Japan participating in study abroad through an academic exchange agreement increased from 45,082 to 66,058 between 2013 and 2017. Although participation in shorter programs that are one month or less is more prevalent and accounted for most of the rise, participation in three-month or longer programs is also increasing. While such overall increases in the number

of students doing study abroad are encouraging, we also need to consider what these students are doing after their study abroad to build upon their study-abroad experiences.

Recent commentary suggests that the post-study abroad period is widely overlooked as both a research target (Jackson & Oguro, 2018; Plews, 2016) and as an area where universities offer support to students (Brubaker, 2017). This is perhaps because, as Kinginger (2009) noted, “study abroad is construed as the end of the language learning process, with further attention to language development deemed unnecessary” (p. 84). This common misunderstanding overlooks the limitations of what can be achieved during study abroad and what is really involved in becoming proficient in a second language. As Kinginger argued “students’ return from a sojourn abroad is prime time for teachers’ investment in their language learning” (p. 85). Jackson and Oguro (2018) made a similar point regarding the development of intercultural competence: “the development of intercultural competence entails a lifelong journey and does not begin with study abroad experience and end when students return home” (p. 3).

Indeed, the period after completion of the study-abroad program is the longest in duration for the participant and arguably the most important, because it is when the experiences and learning that occurred during the study abroad can be acted upon in a new context and thus extended and enhanced. More attention in terms of both research and practical endeavors needs to be paid to students’ experiences after completing their study abroad. This is particularly so as we cannot assume that post-study abroad learning will occur naturally. Regarding the actual study-abroad period, many researchers argue that students often do not achieve the language, intercultural competency, and emotional development they are expected to from study abroad without pedagogical interventions (Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012; Jackson & Oguro, 2018). The same can be said for continued learning post-study abroad.

The concept of affordances can help to understand this. Affordances refer to the range of potential opportunities existing in an environment but which exist to be acted upon only in relation to how they are perceived or interpreted by the actors within that environment (Menezes, 2011). In this sense, students

returning from study abroad are potentially surrounded by various affordances that can be used to support their continued engagement with the target language and interculturality both on and off campus. However, they may perceive and interpret these affordances in different ways depending on their differing understandings of the world and their belief systems. As Menezes stated, “[i]t is up to the learners to perceive what their niches offer them and act” (p. 68). However, at the same time we also should realize “that learners must be empowered to perceive affordances in their niches” (p. 71) and that we, as teachers and university administrators, need to help our learners to see and make use of the opportunities surrounding them and at times co-create new opportunities. This paper considers this issue somewhat retrospectively through an investigation of university students’ engagement with the target language and particularly campus-related learning opportunities after returning from study abroad.

### **Overview of the Study Aims, Research Site and Participants**

This study developed from dual concerns about whether learners returning from study abroad were actively trying to maintain and further improve their language skills in general, and whether they were using opportunities on campus to do this. The author starts with the presumption that the university where the research was conducted offers opportunities to learn and use the target language English and to engage in intercultural activities that are open to all students, regardless of study-abroad experience. The study investigates whether students returning from one- or two-semester study-abroad programs to institutions providing English-based instruction made use of these opportunities and whether they felt they could maintain their English ability post-study abroad. There were no interventions in place to systematically encourage participation in the campus-related activities. Through considering the reasons for engagement and nonengagement with both campus-related and other learning activities, the study aims to gain a better understanding of learner agency and to suggest ways that home institutions can support students who have returned from study abroad.

The research site is a single-faculty economics university in regional Japan

that in 2018 had 2,219 students in total. Depending on their department, students take 10 to 16 foreign language credits out of a total of 124 credits needed for graduation, and for their main foreign language they can choose from English, Chinese, and Korean; international students are required to take Japanese. In addition to these languages, French and German are offered as languages that can be studied as a second foreign language. One- and two-semester study-abroad programs are available to institutions in Australia, Canada, China, Germany, South Korea, Taiwan, Turkey, and the United States, and short-term study abroad programs are offered during vacation periods. The language of instruction at the institutions in Germany and Turkey is English.

This study reports on the experiences and perspectives of 13 students who completed a one- or two-semester study abroad at an institution offering instruction in English. The type of institution where they studied (university, community college, university-affiliated ESL institution, or a combination of these), the subjects they took (ESL, non-ESL subjects related to their major, non-ESL subjects not related to their major, or a combination of these), and their type of accommodation (homestay, room share, dormitory, or a combination of these) differed greatly. Background information for the respondents is shown in Table 1.

The research site does not have a specific program for students returning from study abroad. However, it offers a number of opportunities to learn or use English and engage in international exchange which are available to all students and thus can be used by students returning from study abroad to extend their study-abroad experiences (Table 2). For example, in addition to optional English language classes and humanities and specialized courses that involve the use of English, students can conduct a research project in English through an Independent Research unit or participate in an international internship that involves the use of English.

In addition, there are opportunities to interact with international students and exchange students. The home institution has a small annual intake of international students mainly from China, South Korea, and Vietnam and also hosts exchange and auditing students from partner universities and through

Table 1  
*Background Information About the Respondents (n = 13)*

Criteria	Details	Counts
Gender	Male	6
	Female	7
Study Abroad Destination	Australia	6
	Germany	4
	The United States	3
Study Abroad or Exchange	Study Abroad	4
	Exchange	9
Length of Study Abroad	1 Semester	3
	2 Semesters	10
Grade when Commenced Study Abroad	2nd Year	3
	3rd Year	7
	4th Year	3
Time between Return and Graduation	1 Semester	2
	2 Semesters	2
	2 Semesters (Including 1 Deferred Semester)	2
	3 Semesters	5
	4 Semesters	2
Delayed Graduation Due to Study Abroad	Yes	4
	No	9
Previous Study Abroad Experience Prior to Study Abroad	No Previous Experience	5
	High School Only	2
	University Only	4
	High School & University	2
Additional Study Abroad Experience Post-Study Abroad	Yes (International Internship)	2
	No	11

Table 2  
*Potential On-Campus Opportunities to Use English or Engage in International Exchange*

Credit-Bearing Courses	International Exchange	Other
English language courses	Being a tutor for international students	Engaging with English teaching staff
Non-language courses (Humanities: Foreign Studies; Specialized Courses: English for Commerce; English for Economics; Guided Reading)	Engaging with international students	Helping students interested or selected to participate in study abroad
Career education courses	Engaging with other study abroad returnee students	Attending study abroad information sessions
(International Internship; Project-Based Learning)	Visiting the International Center	Taking English courses run by the university co-op
Independent research project	Participating in events run by the International Center	Clubs
Short-term study abroad		

scholarship arrangements. Interaction with international students can occur informally through classes or club activities or on a more official basis as a tutor who is paid by the university to provide academic, social, and language support to new international students. Approximately 30 students work as tutors or unpaid tutor supporters each semester.

## Methods

### Data Collection and Analysis

In March of 2017 and 2018, 22 students who had gone on study abroad to one of the university’s partner institutions that provide instruction in English and who were scheduled to graduate in those months were contacted by the researcher by email or SNS and asked to respond to an open-ended survey written in English about their experiences and perspectives on several study-abroad-related topics.

The survey questions were written in English rather than Japanese to indicate that the researcher saw them as peers and users of the target language. The students were informed that participation was voluntary and that the researcher may request their participation in a follow-up survey. Permission was sought to use all responses in an anonymized form for research purposes by the researcher.

Students who agreed to participate wrote their responses in either English or Japanese and emailed them back to the researcher. The researcher then created a list of follow up questions specific to each student based on their responses with the aim of clarifying responses or seeking further information; this also helped deal with short or unclear responses. Of the 22 students who were contacted, 13 responded, including nine who responded to both survey requests and four to only the first; data from all 13 respondents are used in this paper. Responses were read over several times before being coded by hand and summarized in Word and Excel. The survey itself was wide ranging; however, this paper will consider responses to the following five questions which are most relevant to the study aims:

Question 1: After coming back from study abroad, did you take any English classes or classes that involve English at our university? Why/why not?

Question 2: After coming back from study abroad, have you had much contact with international students or exchange students studying at our university? Why/why not?

Question 3: Do you think you have had enough opportunities to use English or engage in international exchange activities since returning from study abroad? Why/why not?

Question 4: Do you think you have been able to maintain or further improve your English ability after returning to Japan from study abroad? Why/why not?

Question 5: After coming back from study abroad, what kind of things have you been doing to maintain or improve your English ability?

## **Results**

### **Question 1: Enrollment in English or English-Related Classes Post-Study Abroad**

Out of the 13 respondents, six (46%) reported that they did not take English language or English-related classes after coming back from study abroad. The reasons given were being busy with job hunting, needing to prioritize enrollment in other courses to meet graduation requirements, timetabling issues, and having already received credit for available courses. Wanting to use and not learn English was also mentioned.

For the seven students (54%) who did take classes, needing the credit to graduate and the fact that the class involved the use of English were the main reasons given. It is worth noting that two of the respondents who said they took Foreign Studies A/B, an English Medium Instruction course, because it involved the use of English had already taken the classes and received credit for them before commencing study abroad. These two students audited the classes simply for the opportunity to use English and interact with other students in the class, including exchange students from partner universities.

### **Question 2: Contact with International Students Post-Study Abroad**

In all, eight respondents (62%) reported having contact with international students after returning from study abroad. These students primarily met and engaged with international students through opportunities available on campus such as the tutor system or classes. For the five students (38%) who did not have contact with international students, not having the chance due to being away from university for long periods of time for job hunting, not taking many classes in general due to already fulfilling graduation requirements, and not knowing any international students were given as reasons. Many of these students seemed to spend little time on campus, and it is possible that this general absence from university is connected to their lack of contact with international students. A lack of engagement due to the perception of there being few English-speaking international students on campus was also mentioned.



In total, five respondents (38%) had experience as a tutor, with some working as a tutor both before and after their study abroad, and some also helping as a voluntary tutor supporter. On average, 30 students each semester work as a tutor at the research site, which is just over 1% of the entire student body; tutors are often future or past study-abroad students, students who have participated in a short-term study-abroad program, or international students. Given the prevalence of being a tutor among the respondents, those who had not been a tutor were asked if they had considered becoming one at any point during their time at university. Of the six students who responded to this follow up question, three answered yes and three no. The reasons given for not becoming a tutor can be classified into issues of time constraint, issues to do with a lack of knowledge or agreement with the tutor system, and the perception that there were not many English-speaking international students, thus seemingly making the program less attractive.

### **Question 3: Enough Opportunities Post-Study Abroad?**

Students were asked if they had enough opportunities to use English or engage in international exchange activities since returning from study abroad. In all, five students (39%) responded positively. Participation in campus-related activities was given as a reason for this by three. The remaining two students cited off-campus activities as fulfilling their needs, which suggests that proactively searching for opportunities off campus is something some students might do instead of or in addition to using campus-related opportunities.

One of these students became strongly involved in a local chapter of Toastmasters International, a communication and leadership skills NPO ([www.toastmasters.org](http://www.toastmasters.org)). He went on to participate in management roles in the club as well as regional and national-level competitions. This student also became involved in the English Speaking Society (ESS) club at a university in a neighboring town, as he was unsatisfied with the ESS at his own university. It is worth noting that this student learned about Toastmasters International from a poster on campus and about the ESS club through Toastmasters.

The other student moved back to her hometown some 150 kilometers away

after coming back from study abroad and rarely visited the university during her last semester prior to graduation. This student had friends studying at a university in her hometown which had a large international student population. Her hometown also had an active community-based international exchange center holding events and other meetings which she regularly attended. In this way, this student could find opportunities to meet her needs by making use of her personal networks and environment made available in her hometown.

In contrast, eight students (61%) responded that they did not have enough opportunities. Of these, two respondents replied that they were busy with job hunting and other classes and were thus unable to participate in events on campus. However, the remaining six respondents referred to a lack of opportunities to talk in English on campus, there not being enough classes that use English, and a lack of international students who can speak English as reasons for the lack of opportunity. It is interesting to note that three of these students hedged their responses to indicate that while they were not satisfied with the opportunities on campus, they had found their own ways to maintain their English skills or they believed students need to proactively look for opportunities themselves.

#### **Question 4: Maintenance of English Ability**

Being able to maintain one's proficiency in the target language after returning from study abroad is something that most study-abroad returnees worry about, and the ability to do this can be perceived as being connected to the frequency of opportunities to use the target language. When asked if they felt they have been able to maintain or further improve their English ability after returning to Japan, five students (39%) answered positively. These students made comments such as "I have been continuing to use and study English as much as possible" and "I am always looking for chances to maintain my skills", which suggests they are proactively engaging with their post-study abroad environments to make the most of available affordances. In contrast, the eight students (61%) who answered negatively gave reasons such as "there are fewer chances to use English" compared to the study abroad environment and "it is difficult to recreate the study abroad environment."

**Question 5: Activities to Maintain and Improve English Ability**

Regardless of their perception of their ability to maintain or improve their English skills, all respondents reported engaging in multiple activities to achieve these aims (Table 3). These activities can be roughly divided into three categories: on-campus activities, off-campus activities, and other language learning activities. The third category consists of a wide range of activities including the use of cultural artefacts such as movies, television shows, and music, with many of these being accessed by students via the internet.

Keeping in touch with friends, particularly through SNS, was a common activity again emphasizing how the internet is being used by learners to facilitate their language use and learning. Connections made during study abroad are extremely valuable for students, and SNS has made it much easier to maintain these relationships. In her research on life post-study abroad for Japanese language learners, Campbell (2015) found that most of her informants' Japanese-speaking contacts were first made during study abroad and that they "continued to draw upon the valuable linguistic affordances provided by their networks developed during study abroad" (p. 258) after returning to their home countries. Connections made with friends around the world are valuable, and maintaining these connections can be considered an investment in one's language using future.

The use of member-based internet services not specific to language use or learning but which students used to create opportunities to interact with others in English face-to-face offline also stands out as worthy of attention. For example, one student registered with a couchsurfing software application and occasionally hosted travelers from around the world with whom she would talk mainly in English. Another student made use of Airbnb to find cheap accommodation while job hunting, specifically choosing this service as he felt it was often used by foreigners and would thus give him opportunities to use English, which he reported were many. Another student used the Meetup service to find a café which hosted English speaking events in a neighboring town. These examples all demonstrate the creative agency of these students in seeking out opportunities to engage with people potentially through the target language and how these

Table 3

*Activities Engaged in to Maintain or Improve English Ability Post-Study Abroad*

On-Campus Activities	Counts
Being a tutor	1
Using English at the International Center	1
Speaking with teachers in English	1
Off-Campus Activities	Counts
Joining Toastmasters	2
Joining another university's ESS club	1
Part-time job using English	1
Guiding foreign friends around Japan	1
Using a couchsurfing app and hosting foreign travelers	1
Using Airbnb to find accommodation during job hunting	1
Attending an English speaking café found through Meetup app	1
Other Language Learning Activities	Counts
Watching movies/TV shows	10
Keeping in touch with friends via SNS	5
Listening to English music	4
Chatting with foreign friends in English	3
Talking with friends on LINE/Skype	3
Watching YouTube in English	3
Taking English proficiency tests	2
Studying for TOEIC	2
Reading English novels	2
Listening to the radio in English	1
Vocabulary practice with vocab book	1
Using TED Talks	1
Using SNS for writing/making friends	1

online services can open up these possibilities. It is also useful to consider where students learn about these services and come up with these ideas. For example, the student who used the couchsurfing application was introduced to it by a friend on the home campus. Thus, even though these are activities conducted off campus, the ideas for them may have on-campus sources.

## **Discussion**

The results show a range of experiences and perceptions. There were a number of creative examples of learners finding and creating chances to use the target language in ways not necessarily connected to the campus. There also seemed to be several cases of missed opportunities and perhaps a resignation to the inferiority of the home institution environment for the purposes of language learning and use. In order to consider ways to encourage more students to make use of potential opportunities connected to the campus, some of the reasons given for nonengagement and dissatisfaction will be explored in further detail in this section.

### **Considering a Lack of Opportunities**

A lack of opportunities to use English on campus was mentioned by several students. This perceived lack of opportunities can be understood in various ways: there may simply be a lack of opportunities in terms of quantity, the opportunities available may not meet the needs of students, or information about opportunities may not be adequately communicated to students. Another way to understand this issue is that there may be a lack of support or intervention to encourage participation in available opportunities. Students may not see the relevance in participating in certain activities, and the benefits of this may need to be more clearly outlined for them, and perhaps even packaged into a series of activities that they need to be involved in as study-abroad returnees.

**Helping learners see the value of activities.** What may appear to one student as a worthwhile activity may not even register as a learning opportunity to another student. Two examples of this introduced above are the students who responded that they did not take any English classes post-study abroad as they wanted to use the language and not learn it, and those who did not engage

with international students on campus or become a tutor because they did not see the point in doing so when there were so few obviously English-speaking international students.

Regarding the first example, for students who have used the target language out of the classroom to achieve self-set goals, returning to classroom-based language learning may feel regressive. However, this is perhaps a narrow view of what an English class has to offer. Putting aside the obvious learning opportunities, classrooms also function as spaces to meet people, both teachers and fellow students, with whom one can build relationships and communicate with in and outside of the classroom using the target language or not. Moreover, these relationships might lead to currently unidentified opportunities. Offering more challenging learning opportunities is important. However, it is also important to encourage students not to dismiss classroom-based opportunities hastily.

Regarding the second example, while there are students who only see benefit in speaking in English with international students, there are others who feel there is value in engaging with students from other backgrounds, regardless of their perceived ability to speak English. These students might remember the difficulties they had on study abroad or the help they received and want to support someone in a similar situation. Or they might be interested in learning about and developing relationships with people from different backgrounds. In addition, these students might understand that international students have their own social networks and that becoming part of those networks is of value and may lead to other unexpected opportunities.

These two examples concur with Menezes' (2011) argument that learners may need help to recognize and utilize the various affordances that surround them. In response to Question 4 on maintenance of English ability, several students responded that they felt they could not maintain their English ability as it is difficult to recreate the study abroad environment. This kind of response is connected to the perception of affordances. Of course, precisely recreating the study-abroad environment is always going to be difficult if not impossible, but students need to understand that there is still much, if not more, that they

can achieve at home if they think creatively. Indeed, students will not be able to make the most of the opportunities available back home if they believe that the home environment is innately inferior. In this way, universities need to help students returning from study abroad to see and value opportunities available on campus, and to recognize that the campus is a space within which they can create their own communities and affordances.

**Ideas for universities.** The results and previous discussion suggest that some kind of intervention is necessary to support students' continued learning post-study abroad. Given the potentially different aims, interests, and needs of learners, perhaps the first step should be to provide learners a structured chance to reflect on and process their experiences, formulate post-study abroad goals, and consider what opportunities exist on and off campus to help them achieve these goals. This could be done through a credit-bearing course that students take after returning from study abroad or in a fully or partially online mode that learners are encouraged or required to engage with toward the end of their study abroad. Alternatively, or in addition, more informal debriefing sessions conducted in person or online could be used. If existing opportunities are found to be unsatisfactory or inappropriate, new ideas can be co-created. Students can be encouraged to participate in activities individually, in groups with other returnee students, with students who plan to study abroad, and with international students, and in this way a study-abroad alumni community might be established.

There are more obstacles to offering support to study-abroad returnees compared to students just about to start their study abroad. For example, students return from study abroad at different times of the year, at different stages of their university curriculums, and with differing degrees of credit recognition for their studies at the host institution. Moreover, some do not return to university immediately due to job hunting or difficulties with securing accommodation near the campus. Nonetheless, as study abroad is something that students do as part of their university studies and is something that universities encourage students to participate in, universities should have a responsibility to actively support students through all phases of their study abroad. How to support

students during the post-study abroad phase is something that more universities should actively think about.

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## Author bio

Kristen Sullivan is an associate professor at Shimonoseki City University where she is also involved in managing the university's study abroad programs. She is interested in study abroad, student exchange between Australia and Japan, internationalization of regional universities, learner-oriented assessment, curriculum design and the development of learner autonomy. [kris@shimonoseki-cu.ac.jp](mailto:kris@shimonoseki-cu.ac.jp)

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