

Chapter 29

Language Learners’ Social Interaction during Study Abroad: Opportunities, Satisfaction, and Benefits

Rikki Campbell
Monash University, Australia

ABSTRACT

There is a common belief that one of the best methods for learning a foreign or second language is to develop social relationships with native speakers and to communicate with them using that language. In order to increase such interactional opportunities, participation in study abroad programs where the target language is spoken is frequently recommended. However, language learners often report disappointment in their degree of interaction and friendship development with native speakers while abroad. With a focus on learners of Japanese, the study reported in this chapter examines the contexts in which study abroad students in Japan find opportunities to interact and establish friendships with native Japanese speakers, and discusses the participants’ satisfaction with and benefits of such interaction and friendships. The results draw upon 36 questionnaire responses, as well as in-depth interviews with four focal informants, all of who experienced a study abroad in Japan between 2010-2013.

INTRODUCTION

Students in the 21st Century exhibit a wide variety of motivations for studying abroad, spanning personal, cultural, professional, and economic fields. In particular, one long-standing motive is to improve one’s foreign language proficiency, which is commonly believed to be facilitated by study abroad contexts. There is a widespread assumption amongst educators and students alike that gains in proficiency will occur as a result of immersion in the Target Language (TL) and culture (Allen, 2010) and enhanced opportunities to meet and interact with native speakers (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). Indeed, for this reason, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) throughout the world encourage or require their language major students to participate in a study abroad program in a country where the TL is used.

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Recent study abroad research, however, has challenged these assumptions, finding that study abroad does not necessarily guarantee an immersion environment (Collentine & Freed, 2004; Churchill & DuFon, 2006; Freed, 2008), significant opportunities for interacting with native speakers (Allen & Herron, 2003; Hernandez, 2010; Magnan & Back, 2007; Mendelson, 2004; Xu, 2010) or gains in communicative competence (Churchill & DuFon, 2006; Collentine & Freed, 2004; Freed, 2008). Considering the diversity of contexts in which this research has been conducted—Asia, Australasia, Europe, and the United States (US)—it appears that low levels of immersion and sojourner-host interaction is a common issue for educational institutions world-wide. A question likely considered by language educators, students, and program developers, therefore, is: *How can students best establish opportunities for interaction with native speakers while on study abroad?*

BACKGROUND

The study reported in this chapter responds to the call of several researchers (e.g., Mendelson, 2004; Segalowitz et al., 2004; Spenader, 2011) for more focused investigation of students' opportunities for, and the nature of, social interaction during study abroad. Spenader (2011), for example, suggested that 'language educators should examine this contact to inform our understanding of how these interpersonal relationships are supported by program environments and what role they play in the individual language learning experience' (p. 15). Although the current study does not investigate second language acquisition specifically, it examines the opportunities learners have for interaction with native speakers, and the perceived contribution of this to gains in communicative competence and other outcomes. Furthermore, because this study investigates learners who participated in a variety of different study abroad programs, it is also able to elucidate some features of program design that influence learners' interaction. This study will expand upon the current literature by examining the experiences of 40 learners of Japanese who studied abroad in Japan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Study Abroad for Language Learners

Herein, literature pertinent to the understanding of language learning and social interaction during study abroad is discussed. Although focus of the current study is on learners of Japanese, the sections below provide a broader discussion that would be applicable to study abroad students in most, if not all countries.

There is a shared assumption amongst students and faculty in most universities that living and studying in TL countries plays a crucial role in language learning trajectories (Schrier, 2011, p. 3). This is because it is inferred that immersion in the native speech community, combined with formal classroom learning, is the best environment for second language learning to take place (Freed, 1995, p. 5). This view is supported by several reviews of the relevant literature showing that students studying *abroad* achieved more proficiency than students studying at *home* (e.g., Freed, So & Lazar, 2003; Isabelli, 2004). Study abroad is, therefore, often an educational goal for many foreign language learners, and for degrees in foreign languages, is often compulsory.

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