

Making Sense of the Ryugakusei Experience: Japanese Students' Reflections of Classroom and Homestay-based Intercultural Experiences in a Short Term Australian University Language Center Program.

留学体験の意義：オーストラリア主要大学付属語学学校短期プログラム参加日本人留学生の異文化体験について

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This article reports a study of 25 Japanese students studying for 6 weeks at a language center attached to a major university in Australia. It focuses on the students' interactions with classmates from other countries, especially those from Asia, as well as on their homestay experiences with Australian families. Respondents to a pre and post-course questionnaire were asked to first predict and later report on their experiences in the classroom and within their homestay families. In addition to issues of language proficiency, they were also asked about their confidence in explaining their own culture and lifestyles to other international students and their willingness and ability to participate in informal or formal exchanges in which both personal and impersonal topics were discussed. The pedagogical implications for Japan-based university instructors, who may teach these students both before and after their overseas academic and intercultural experiences, is discussed, and some curriculum-related recommendations are suggested.

この論文は、オーストラリア主要大学付属語学センターにて6週間の短期プログラムに参加した日本人留学生25人の調査に基づくものである。他国、ことにアジア出身のクラスメートとの相互影響力やオーストラリア人家庭ホームステイにての経験に焦点を当てた。またこれは、生徒による短期プログラム受講前後二回にわたるアンケートをもとに分析したものである。この中で言語スキルに加え、自らの文化・ライフスタイルおよび、一般的なトピックにおける言語表現上の自信度・参加能力・意欲についても調査した。ここでは、日本の大学指導者が留学前後の学生指導にあたる際の教授法や、カリキュラム関連の事項についても論じる。

キーワード

[留学] Overseas study・[異文化間のコミュニケーション] Intercultural communication
[ホームステイ体験] Homestay experience・[アジアの国々からの留学生] Asian students
[英語教育] English Education

Recent years have seen the publication of several academic articles focusing on the experiences of Japanese students studying abroad. Geis & Fukushima (1997), Drake (1997) and Tanaka and Ellis (2003) have looked at the motivational gains of students in programs in the U.S and New Zealand. The work of these mostly linguistics scholars has been supplemented by that of researchers in education and sociology, such as Kudo and Simkin, (2003), who used extended interviews to look into the social networks and friendships of Japanese students on short-term group study trips in Australia. These studies have given us an insight into several important aspects of the study-abroad experience. None of them, however, deals directly with the practical concerns that Japan-based university language educators have vis-a-vis their own students' experience, both inside and outside the classroom. Indeed while it is not uncommon for Japanese or native English speaker faculty to accompany students on short term programs and help make changes to these programs based on informal observation, very little has been done by researchers to identify what students perceive to actually be happening inside the classroom or in their homestay environment. Nor have educators made use of data on these experiences to systematically consider what can be done to enhance and build on them with appropriate pre-and post-overseas study language classes. In order to work towards this long-term goal, the author's research, conducted as part of a series of interviews with Japanese students during a sabbatical stay in Melbourne, Australia, attempts to consider possible answers to the following three questions:

- What are the main overt or conscious goals of Japanese students who undertake short (4-6 week) and medium term (3-6 month) homestay overseas study courses?
- What classroom, extra-curricular and homestay-related experiences most profoundly enhance students' learning and fosters increased motivation and interest in language study?
- What seem to be the main strengths and weaknesses of the Japanese educational system in preparing overseas study students for interactions with potential classmates from other cultures and countries and with homestay families?

Designing and Piloting the Instrument

The researcher met informally on numerous occasions with several students from his own institution who had participated in short term study-abroad programs and, based on the latter's responses, designed a preliminary research instrument for use on an extended stay in Australia. This instrument, a combination of questionnaire and interview, was then piloted with small groups of Japanese students from various universities who were studying in Australia for between 6-25 weeks in the winter of 2005-06. After numerous revisions based on student feedback, a pre- and post- course questionnaire was administered to a group of 25 students from a well-known university in the Kanto area. These students were studying in mostly mixed classes—i.e with

students from other countries—at a language center attached to a major university in Victoria. Participants were aged between 18-20, had taken English classes with a native speaker in their Japanese institution and had a strong background in English in their high schools. The goal of the questionnaire, which was conducted in English—but with oral translations into Japanese when needed—was to gather both qualitative and quantitative data on the participants' actual classroom interactions with students from other countries, as well as comments about their homestay experience. Taken together, it was hoped that this data would allow some insight into what aspects of these experiences were the most and least rewarding for them. While students were given the chance to write comments in the “other” or “none of the above” section, the choice and range of possible answers given, was both detailed and extensive, since these were the answers that had been identified in focus groups and numerous informal discussions with students as the most common. In contrast with those that might be asked by educational sociologists, all questions were conceptualized and designed so that the results obtained had direct potential implications for future or current teachers of the students in either Japan or an overseas institution. More specifically questions were designed so that the results might:

- allow teachers of future study-abroad students to refine their classroom orientation and/or preparation for overseas programs;
- boost students' confidence in their ability to cope with their likely classroom experience, especially when interacting with other international students and homestay families;
- enable students to work on those aspects of their language proficiency and intercultural communication skills that would be most useful in an Australian educational or homestay environment;

Questionnaire Results and Potential Implications of Student Responses

The pre and post-questionnaire was divided into three sections, A, *Classroom Culture and In-Class Activities*; B, *Interactions and Comparisons with Classmates from Other Countries* and C, *Homestay Experiences*. The results, with pre-course and post course results side by side, are presented in table form with the most common responses of the post-course questionnaire (those above 20% of all respondents) in bold italics. This is followed by interpretation and some comments about the possible implications of this data. (Note: The original order of questions is retained.)

Section A Classroom Culture and In Class Activities

The goal of the four questions in Section A was to get useful qualitative and quantitative data on the kinds of experiences Japanese EFL students were expecting and actually underwent in their 5-6 hours of classroom study in Australia. For Japan-based educators who are preparing students

for overseas study, it is essential to know if our curriculum is in fact preparing students well for the full range of academic, interpersonal and intercultural situations that they will encounter on a daily basis in mixed classes and in a homestay environment.

1. Which of these did you expect to find/did you find most difficult in your mixed classes? Please circle up to 3.

	Pre-Course		Post-Course	
	N=25	%	N=25	%
(a) how to make friends with students from other countries	10	40	3	12
(b) how to reach a balance between making Japanese and non-J friends	3	12	3	12
(c) how to do group work with students from other countries	9	36	5	20
(d) how to give an oral presentation in front of your group	15	60	12	48
(e) how to write a report	4	16	2	10
(f) how to express your views in a discussion	15	60	17	68
(g) how to keep up with the reading assignments	4	16	2	10
(h) how to study for tests	3	12	0	7

As Marriot and Tse Hoi Ling (2001) suggest in their study of Asian students in longer-term programs, and indeed as many other studies have suggested, Japanese students often lack confidence in their ability to make presentations or express opinions in discussions. Few researchers, however, have looked into why this is the case, usually repeating the common mantra of Japan's supposed rote-learning based education system and its failure to help students develop higher order and critical thinking skills. While this explanation seems reasonable, another possible reason, and one which was suggested by several of the author's informants and are implicit in the results of Question 2, may be the small number of discussion-based classes of any kind that are available to students in their first two years at university. In the case of the author's institution, this is largely confined to a once-a-week "seminar." Whatever the explanation, those involved in Japanese university curriculum need to explore ways to expand and develop courses in which these skills-clearly important when studying abroad-are developed. The results of (a) also suggest that Japanese students may underestimate their own ability to make friends with non-Japanese as well as the degree of interest in Japanese students by other Asian students.

2. What aspects of your classes here in Australia do you *expect to/did you actually* find most rewarding in comparison with your language classes taught by a *native speaker* in Japan? Please circle up to 3.

	Pre-Course			Post-Course	
	N=25	%		N=25	%
(a) smaller class size	2	8		5	20
(b) <i>being able to meet with and talk with students from other countries</i>	23	86		23	86
(c) informal atmosphere of the class	5	20		1	4
(d) longer length of the class and chance to do projects	2	10		1	4
(e) chance to do classroom activities which are continued every day	2	10		0	0
(f) <i>more opportunity to talk in groups with other students</i>	9	36		9	36
(g) more opportunity to talk one-to-one with the teacher	4	16		0	0
(h) using non-textbook materials or authentic materials about Australia	0	0		4	20

There can be little doubt from this study as well as from many informal conversations, that Japanese study-abroad students are highly motivated by the opportunity to meet and interact with students from other countries. Indeed not one student indicated a preference for closed classes (for Japanese students only), although these are not uncommon among shorter programs. Another area of dissatisfaction regarding their home universities is the large size of many of their language communication classes, and this would explain the preference given to smaller classes in which students can exchange ideas and information with their counterparts from other countries. Students can prepare for such opportunities in their Japanese university classes by becoming familiar with aspects of contemporary life in those countries—mostly Asian—from which their future classmates are likely to come. Other useful activities are role plays or other simulations in which they take on the background or identity of a potential international student in Australia and exchange information with a “Japanese” classmate. Clearly the enthusiasm for intercultural exchange that exists even among high school students—perhaps in part because of the JET program and the wide array of overseas exchange programs in Japanese secondary institutions—is something that university teachers can more effectively build on in their regular classes or in classes with students who plan to study abroad.

3. Which of the following topics relating to Japan *do you expect/did* students from other countries [*will*] ask you questions about? Choose the 3 most common topics.

	Pre-Course		Post-Course	
	N=25	%	N=25	%
<i>Anime and manga</i>	2	8	6	24
Samurai, geisha and ninja	4	16	1	4
<i>Japanese Language</i>	4	16	15	60
Traditional Japanese Food	15	60	4	16
Martial Arts	4	16	0	0
Mobile Phones and High Technology	0	0	5	20
Traditional Arts (kimono, tea ceremony etc)	3	12	0	0
Fashion and Brands	1	4	0	0
Japanese Students' University Life	12	48	5	20
Japanese Politics or history	6	24	5	20
<i>Japanese Pop Music or TV</i>	7	28	7	28
<i>Family life and human relationships</i>	9	36	7	28

For many Japanese students, their classes in Australia will be the first time for them to have spent more than a few minutes talking with students from Asian, middle-eastern or European countries. Many will be surprised at the extent to which these students will already be familiar with Japanese food and this may explain the gap between expectation and reality. By contrast they may be unprepared for the high degree of interest in Japanese (language) and find themselves frustrated at not being able to explain the writing systems or grammar structure in English to other students. Not surprisingly, the average student feels more confident talking about the immediate world of Japanese popular culture than about language or traditional arts and cultural expressions. Yet several students expressed some surprise and even frustration at the relatively high degree of interest shown by many of their classmates in manga and animation movies—an interest that many of them did not in fact share. Nor were they well prepared for questions about political issues such as terrorism and war, religion and Japan's historical role in past conflicts. Again appropriate actions can be taken in pre-departure courses to prepare students with some ways of explaining their views or giving a coherent and understandable reason for their lack of interest or knowledge. They also need instruction and practice in explaining the basic rules of the Japanese language in English—a by no means easy task. At the macro level, the Japanese educational system clearly must look for ways to better engage students in contemporary history, especially in issues connected to Japan's relationship with Asia, since this topic will almost invariably arise in classes with large numbers of students from Asian countries.

4. Which of the following do you think *will be/were* the most important factors in making your overseas study experience a “successful” one? Rank them from 1-3 in order of importance.

	Pre	Post
(a) Establishing a good and lasting relationship with my host family		2
(b) Making a concrete improvement in my spoken English/listening proficiency		
(c) Making a concrete improvement in my academic English proficiency		
(d) Experiencing daily life in Australia and learning about Australian culture	1	1
(e) Having many oral communication classes with Australian teachers	3	
(f) Communicating and making friends with students from other countries	2	3
(g) Making and strengthening friendships with other Japanese students		

In both focus groups and informal conversations as well as in the formal survey itself, students repeatedly stressed that meeting and making friends with students from other countries was as important as any other factor in making their trip a success. They repeatedly reported that they had made good friends and planned to continue this relationship through e-mail or even trips to the friends’ home country—usually in Korea, Taiwan or Thailand. It is perhaps surprising, however that in the pre-questionnaire, relatively few students selected their relationship with their host family as being a major factor. Language teachers might also note that developing language proficiency was also a relatively low priority, strongly suggesting that students were realistic about the concrete gains they were likely to make. Clearly, the opportunity for a new life experience in general and cultural and personal interactions with non-Japanese in particular, were the primary motivating factors for the decision to study overseas, and as such, educators should focus on how students can maximize the quality of these experiences and interactions.

Section B: Interactions and Comparisons with Classmates from Other Countries

The questions in Section B were designed to identify some of the strengths and weaknesses of Japanese students in comparison with their Asian counterparts—the latter usually making up half or more of their EFL classes. By so doing, educators can give students a more realistic idea of what kind of classroom environment they are likely to encounter overseas and develop activities which allow them to interact effectively with these students. Students can be made aware of how their junior and high school experiences have allowed them to develop a number of strengths and advantages—especially in the area of study skills—that will stand them in good stead, while also breaking or at least refining some stereotypes they might have about the Japanese students’ supposedly very high degree of reluctance to participate in discussions. At the same time, clear weaknesses in the area of explaining Japanese “culture” or lifestyles or talking about global or world issues can be addressed.

5. In which of the following areas do you feel that Japanese students in general are *likely to/did in fact* participate *less well* or *less often* than students from other Asian countries). Choose up to 3

	Pre-Course			Post-Course	
	N=25	%		N=25	%
(a) raising hands to ask or answer a question	19	76		6	24
(b) giving personal opinions when there is a discussion	21	84		3	12
(c) playing a leadership role when working in a group	16	64		2	8
(d) working well together with partner	5	20		0	0
(e) handing in homework on time every day or week	1	4		1	4
(f) scoring well in vocabulary and grammar quizzes and tests	2	8		0	0
(g) giving an oral presentation in front of the group	17	68		4	16
(h) explaining their own (Japanese) culture and lifestyle	10	40		7	28
(i) talking about political or global events, issues and trends	15	60		5	20
(j) using the Internet to get information	3	12		4	16
(k) not worrying about making a mistake when speaking	23	92		11	44

6. In which of the following areas do you feel that Japanese students in general *are likely to/did in fact* participate *more often* or *more successfully* than students from other Asian countries). Choose up to 3.

	Pre-Course			Post-Course	
	N=25	%		N=25	%
(a) raising hands to ask or answer a question	1	4		7	28
(b) giving personal opinions when there is a discussion	6	24		5	20
(c) playing a leadership role when working in a group	0	0		12	48
(d) working well together with partner	6	24		7	28
(e) handing in homework on time every day or week	12	48		14	56
(f) scoring well in vocabulary and grammar quizzes/tests	14	56		22	88
(g) giving an oral presentation in front of the group	4	16		3	12
(h) explaining their own (Japanese) culture and lifestyle	1	4		2	8
(i) talking about political or global events, issues and trends	1	4		2	8
(j) using the Internet to get information	1	4		0	0
(k) not worrying about making a mistake when speaking	1	4		3	12

Japanese study-abroad students typically arrive in the host country with a wealth of self-stereotypes about their strengths and weaknesses vis-a-vis students from countries—especially those from educational systems perceived to be freer or less rigid. Prior to entering the course,

most students seemed to expect that they would be the least likely of the Asian students—usually well over half the class—to offer personal opinions in discussions or to play a leadership role in groups. However several of them indicated that they found most Korean students—the second largest Asian contingent in most cases—were in fact only marginally more likely to speak in an informal setting or to ask questions. They also found that once placed into small groups they were as able as other Asian students to play an appropriate and equal role in researching and preparing for group oral presentations. While other self-stereotypes relating to explaining their own culture or lifestyles, talking about global issues or worrying about making mistakes, proved to have some element of truth, the extent to which Japanese students found themselves to be less able or knowledgeable than their counterparts from Korea, Taiwan and Thailand was considerably lower than they had expected. In short, most Japanese students came away with a feeling that their weaknesses were much the same as those of students from other Asian cultures, especially those from Korea. Furthermore, as the results of Question 6 suggest, they also discovered that they possessed considerable strengths and advantages derived perhaps from the methodical skill-development emphasis of the Japanese educational system. Indeed most students' predictions of Japanese strengths in the area of study skills, completion of homework, knowledge of grammar and the ability to work well in groups were confirmed or even reinforced by their classroom experiences. However they again tended to overstate the alleged “shyness” of Japanese students or their reluctance to play leadership roles in groups.

Section C: Homestay Experiences

While the full homestay experience, with its intercultural communication and interpersonal or psychological dimensions is outside the bounds of this article, the answers to the two questions below can give insight into what aspects of the experience are ultimately of most value to students. While Japan-based educators cannot readily prepare them for the diverse range of families that they might encounter, they can provide them with opportunities to share their concerns and to simulate some situations that they might find themselves in, for example at the dinner table.

7. Which of the following were you most concerned about *before meeting your homestay family/during* your actual homestay?

	Pre-Homestay		Post-Homestay	
	N=25	%	N=25	%
(a) <i>If they would understand my English and I would understand their Australian accent.</i>	16	64	12	48
(b) <i>If their daily lifestyle-time and style of eating, bathing, sleeping would be easy for me to adjust to.</i>	10	40	9	36

(c) If they will include me in their family activities-trips, parties, sports or cultural events.	0	0	0	0
(d) If I will get on well with my host brothers and sisters.	5	20	2	8
(e) If my host mother will expect me to do a lot of housework or childcare or pressure me to do something I don't want to do	1	4	1	4
(f) If I will like the food they usually eat and if not if they will mind my cooking some foods I like.	3	12	1	4
(h) Other: "I didn't have any problem"			5	20

8. Which of the following aspects of your homestay experience do you think *will be/was* the most valuable or important to you? Rank your top 1-3 by writing "1", "2" and "3".

	Pre	Post
(a) <i>seeing the different ways that family relationships can work in a different culture</i>	2	3
(b) <i>making a good personal connection or relationship with my host parents</i>	3	1
(c) making a good personal connection or relationships with my host siblings		
(d) <i>being forced to speak and improve my English in order to communicate and live</i>	1	2
(e) having a chance to express my personality with non-Japanese		
(f) having a chance to experience activities that are rare or different in Japan parties, BBQ, Xmas at home, sports, trips, church services, special family events etc		

In post questionnaire interviews and in areas of the questionnaire earmarked for additional comments, a number of students indicated that their homestay experiences were essentially problem-free. Other students' concerns were mostly at the level of practical or material issues, such as food and meals, bathing and daily habits. Equally significantly from the point of view of language educators, was that less than half the students indicated any significant problems of communication related to their lack of vocabulary or the accents and pronunciation of their host family members. Clearly students were motivated to use their English whenever possible, with 24% of respondents indicating that being forced to speak English in order to communicate was the single most valuable aspect of the homestay and 64% of them ranking this aspect from 1-3. This motivation may well have impacted their feelings about the importance of their relationship with their host parents, since 28% of the sample ranked it as the most important and 64% ranked it from 1-3 in importance, a significant increase from pre-homestay hopes and expectations.

Conclusion

A carefully targeted and piloted instrument for gauging Japanese study-abroad participants' views of their experiences in the Australian language course classroom and homestay environment can be a useful tool for educators charged with maximizing their students' intercultural learning opportunities. The qualitative and quantitative data and feedback gathered from the 25 Japanese study-abroad participants interviewed, suggests a reasonable level of confidence in their basic English proficiency as well as above-average study skills and a positive and cooperative attitude towards communication and friendship-building with students from other countries. It also highlights a range of perceived weaknesses—mostly in the area of participation in discussions, presentation skills and knowledge, ability to explain aspects of Japanese culture and language in English and understanding of political and world issues. Finally it suggests a clear preference for smaller classes in which relaxed discussion or an exchange of views with other students within groups is possible.

A number of implications for administrators and instructors in Japan are suggested by these findings. The most obvious of these is the need to provide classes that allow future study-abroad students more opportunities to develop their presentation skills and participate in small group discussions. Content-wise special attention should be given to helping students talk in simple but clear English about their own country and culture (or subcultures). Students need to know more about the cultures, lifestyles, educational backgrounds and pronunciation patterns of their future classmates-most of whom will be from Asia. They also need to have their confidence-level vis a vis communication with their homestay family boosted since this may be the single most important relationship they make. In the case of those going to Australia, a one-semester Australian Studies class in which students were required to make comparisons with their own culture would be an ideal preparation, especially for the homestay experience. Also important is to give returning students the appropriate acknowledgement of their efforts, and to offer customized or advanced classes in which they have a chance to build on what they have learned.

[4620]

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