

Returning to study abroad in the COVID-19 era: Report on a short-term study abroad program in 2022

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Abstract

As the world continues to adjust to the COVID-19 pandemic, Japanese universities and students have begun deliberating about restarting their short-term study abroad programs. The current article reports on a study abroad program which was held during August and September 2022. Program participants included five students enrolled at a small public university in northern Japan, who joined a 1-month study abroad program held at a major public university located in the eastern United States. The focus of the study abroad program was to improve the participants' English linguistic abilities, as well as introduce aspects of American culture and society in an effort to foster greater cross-cultural understanding. As a measure of linguistic ability, the five program participants took part in a TOEIC Speaking Test prior to their departure and after returning to Japan in a pre-test post-test manner. *T*-test results showed statistically significant gains in the participants' English speaking abilities over the 1-month study abroad program. Qualitative data was also collected to gauge how Japanese study abroad participants perceived the prospects of studying abroad during the current COVID-19 era. It is hoped that results of the current study will encourage and support future short-term study abroad programs.

1. Introduction and Literature Review

English education in Japan faces a challenge due to the fact that Japan is a geographically isolated island nation, which is ethnically and linguistically homogeneous. Because of this, Japanese students of English generally have little chance to use the language outside of the language classroom. As English has gained influence in the 20th century as the global *lingua franca* (Marlina & Xu, 2018), various aspects of Japanese society and education have changed, affecting English students and educators alike. In the post-World War II decades, Japan began looking outwards, primarily to modern Western liberal democracies as role models of sociocultural and economic progress (Leonard, 2020). This resulted in a push for English as the studied foreign language and an increased role of English education and study abroad programs for Japanese students. Many of such study abroad programs have taken place in “inner circle” (Kachru, 1985) native-speaking English countries. Consequently, many Japanese university students wanted to live and study abroad in English-speaking foreign countries during the decades of the 1970s and 1980s (Leonard, 2020). Study abroad programs offered several benefits to Japanese students: unique opportunities for linguistic skills and communication development (Hernández & Alonso-Marks, 2018), an increased awareness of Global Englishes, an increase in cross-cultural understanding, opportunities for personal growth, as well as increased language learning motivation (Humphreys, 2022). However, this booming market for study abroad has been disrupted at several junctures in recent years due to various socioeconomic and political factors.

One such disruption was economically grounded. Japan was propelled through the 1980s, during which time Japanese financial world experienced significant economic gains. This rapid expansion culminated in the bursting of the Japanese ‘bubble economy’ in the early 1990s. As a result of this economic downturn, suddenly Japanese parents—who traditionally bore the burden of financing most of their children’s university studies—found themselves having to make difficult decisions. Many parents chose to have their children’s educational experiences occur domestically rather than sending them abroad (Matsumoto, 2012; Ikemoto, 2013). These predicaments have continued as the period of economic stagnation known as The Lost Decade(s) remains (Callen & Ostry, 2003).

Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic put a stop to the way business and education was conducted. Examining the figures, it can be interpreted that COVID-19 has become the most defining and limiting factor that Japanese students currently face when contemplating study abroad. In the pre-pandemic world, Japanese students were quite actively taking part in study abroad programs, with one report claiming that 115,146 Japanese students studied abroad in 2018 (Japan Student Services Organization, 2018). Since COVID’s arrival, the situation has been quite different. In one study, it was reported that the number of Japanese students that studied abroad plummeted from 77,953 in 2019 to just 18,374 in 2020 (Japan Association of Overseas Studies, 2020). Another source reported that the number of Japanese students studying abroad was reduced by as much as 98% in 2020 (The Japan Times, 2022). As global societies slowly adjust to the COVID-19 pandemic, Japanese universities and its students are once again looking at possibilities for study abroad. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA):

Due to the impact of COVID-19, travels of Japanese students and exchange programs between universities had been temporarily suspended or postponed. However, exchange programs are being resumed at universities and other educational institutions on the premise that they will take all possible measures to ensure the safety of students. There is a global trend in demand for talented individuals who can take an active part in the ever globalizing world with valuable skills in foreign language and intercultural understanding. For this reason, MOFA encourages Japanese students to study abroad, bearing in mind the situation of COVID-19 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022)

Going forward, it has been noted that, “the education ministry has set a goal of boosting the number of

Japanese students studying abroad to pre-COVID-19 levels of around 100,000 a year by 2027” (Miura, 2022, paragraph 1). It is clear that the broader educational systems and administration in Japan are anxious to get study abroad programs back on schedule after several years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Study abroad programs available to Japanese university students have taken several forms. Traditionally, semester and year-long programs abroad have been offered to Japanese students looking for unique educational opportunities. However, since the early 2000s, Japan has experienced an increase in “super-short-term” study abroad programs and the number of students who participate in them (Shimmi & Ota, 2018, p. 13). “Super-short-term” study abroad refers to study abroad programs that last from one week up to one month (Shimmi & Ota, 2018). Reasons for the sharp increase in this type of program can be attributed to several factors. For example, these programs generally take place during the spring and summer vacations in the Japanese school calendar, making them accessible to many students. Secondly, economically speaking, Japan remains frugal and short-term programs are less expensive than long-term programs. This makes short-term study abroad more affordable for Japanese parents (Matsumoto, 2012). Thirdly, short-term programs that focus on language study are popular among Japanese students who believe they might not have the linguistic abilities to participate in semester or year-long study abroad programs, where they would be placed in mainstream classrooms alongside native English-speaking students (Shimmi & Ota, 2018). Given these three factors supporting super-short-term study abroad programs, it is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of such programs. Can students really benefit from participating in such a short excursion abroad? It is also important to assess how study abroad programs can be implemented in the live-with-COVID era. The current study aims to address these issues.

2. Methods

Due to the prevailing global political and economic climate and the desire of Japanese students to study abroad, it is important to measure the success of short-term study abroad programs. The current paper reports on the effectiveness of a 1-month study abroad program in the United States on the English speaking proficiencies of the program participants. It is also necessary to contemplate the feasibility of studying abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic, as students and parents weigh their options in a cost-benefit analysis of these programs.

2.1 Research Questions

The following two research questions served as the driving force behind the current study. This mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2008) incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analyses. Research Question 1 derives from a quantitative pre-test post-test analysis of participants’ TOEIC Speaking Tests scores. Research Question 2 aims to qualitatively analyze participants’ experiences with studying abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions in the current study are as follows:

1. To what extent are Japanese students’ TOEIC Speaking Test scores affected by a 1-month study abroad program in the United States?
2. How do Japanese study abroad participants perceive the prospect of studying abroad during the COVID-19 era?

It is hoped that the current report will inform future short-term study abroad programs for Japanese students.

2.2 The Participants

Program participants included five Japanese university students presently studying at a small public university in northern Japan. The five program participants were students enrolled in a School of Food and Industrial Sciences, School of Nursing, or a School of Project Design. None of them were English majors. All participants were females in their first, second, or third year of university. None of them had previously studied abroad, however several had traveled overseas on at least one occasion for tourism or other personal reasons. All the participants had studied English formally beginning in the first year of junior high school, progressing through to their second year of university studies. The authors estimated that prior to the beginning of the short-term program that all 5 program participants had obtained a CEFR B1 level (see Council of Europe, n.d.) of English language proficiency.

2.3 The Short-term Study Abroad Curriculum

The short-term study abroad program took place during mid-August to mid-September 2022 at a major public university in the eastern United States. Prior to departure from Japan, program participants attended four pre-departure seminars. These seminars lasted from two to three hours each, and the focus of these seminars was on team building, familiarizing the participants with the finer details of the program and traveling abroad. Time was also spent preparing them for being in an English immersion environment for an extended period—one month—where they would be communicating and interacting with their non-Japanese-speaking teachers, classmates, and host families. Upon arrival in the United States, the program curriculum began with one week of American Culture and Society classes. This 1-week curriculum was taught by a professor from the participants' university in Japan, who was known to the program participants prior to the beginning of the short-term program abroad. The American Culture and Society course consisted of two class periods of 90 minutes each day, for a total of ten 90-minute classes. The focus of this 1-week course was to learn about important aspects of American culture and society while simultaneously practicing English listening and speaking skills through classroom discussions, debates, and presentations. The one-week course on American culture was largely based on the textbook *American Ways* (4th Ed.) (Datesman et al., 2014), which takes a value-based approach to introducing and examining traditional American culture. Class topics were based on *American Ways* chapters, and included topics such as American history, values and beliefs, religious influences, westward expansion, business culture, education, leisure time, politics, as well as ethnic and racial diversity. From the second week until the end of the fourth week of the program, program participants joined English reading, writing, listening, and speaking classes taught by faculty members at the host university. Prior to departing Japan, participants took an online placement test designed by the host university and were placed in classes according to their English proficiency level (i.e., the 5 participants were not placed in the same class). This language-oriented course was based upon unpublished educational materials produced by the individual faculty members in charge of each class. However, the general teaching approach for all classes was communicative language teaching (CLT) (Brandl, 2008), and aimed to develop the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing. The CLT approach is based upon the constructivist belief that learning takes place in the classroom through interaction, and that knowledge is co-constructed by the teacher and students during class time. Classmates were also study abroad participants from various countries around the world, including Europe, Asia, and South-East Asia. The five Japanese study abroad program participants joined two 90-minute classes in the mornings, and engaged in various fieldwork activities, both on and off campus, in the afternoons. During the fieldwork, participants were encouraged to use English to interact with locals, as well as with their teachers, program assistants, and classmates. Two weekend day-trips were also scheduled—one to New York City, and the other to Washington D.C. The remaining two weekends were left open so that the program participants could spend time with their host families and friends. (See appendix A for a summary of the short-term study abroad program and fieldwork activities)

2.4 Data Collection

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in the present study.

2.4.1 Quantitative Data Collection

As a measure of the short-term study abroad program's effect on program participants' English proficiency, the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) Speaking Test (Institute for International Business Communication, 2022) was employed in a pre-test post-test manner (see Figure 1). The TOEIC Speaking Test is a 20-minute speaking test conducted online. The test requires test takers to verbally answer various questions in English by recording their voices on an online platform. For example, the participants were required to read a text aloud, answer questions about a photo, express their opinions on a topic, and answer questions based on information presented to them during the test. Test takers were evaluated on pronunciation, intonation, accent, grammar, vocabulary, coherency, appropriateness, and completeness of content. Test participants received a test score ranging from 0 to 200, with 200 being a perfect score.



Figure 1: Summary of the pre-test post-test procedures

All program participants took the TOEIC Speaking Test one week prior to their program departure in mid-August 2022. The program participants then traveled to the United States, met their host families, and participated in all program classes and extracurricular activities for one month. Upon their return to Japan the program participants again took the TOEIC Speaking Test three weeks after arriving home. The data collection in this effort was driven by Research Question 1: To what extent are Japanese students' TOEIC Speaking Test scores affected by a 1-month study abroad program in the United States?

2.4.2 Qualitative Data Collection

As part of the study abroad program requirements, upon returning to Japan the five program participants were asked to write and submit a report on their experiences. In this report, they were asked to reflect on and describe (a) their motivations for joining the study abroad program, (b) their class activities in America, (c) their host family and extracurricular activities in America, (d) their reflections on the study abroad program as a whole, and (d) to give some advice to future study abroad participants at their home university. The participants wrote their reports in Japanese, however the current researchers translated the participants' reports into English for analysis and dissemination of the results.

3. Results and Discussion

The pre-test post-test TOEIC Speaking Test results were input into Microsoft Excel for statistical analysis. Figure 2 gives the reader a visual representation of the pre-test and post-test results. In the pre-test, program participants' scores ranged from 70 to 110 (Mean=86, SD=18.17). In the post-test participant scores ranged from 100 to 120 (Mean=106, SD=8.94). All participants showed an improvement in their English speaking proficiency through the 1-month short-term study abroad program. Participant scores improved in the post-test, with a mean increase of 20 points (SD=10), when compared to their pre-test scores. Figure 2

below offers a visual representation of the TOEIC Speaking Test results.

To determine whether differences in scores of the pre-test and post-test were statistically significant, an independent *t*-test (Creswell, 2008) was conducted. Statistically significant results would suggest that participation in the short-term study abroad program played an important role in helping the participants to improve their spoken English abilities in a significant way. Results of the *t*-test were considered to be significantly different if they resulted in a *p* value, where $p < .05$. The *t*-test in this report resulted in a *p* value of 0.01. In this case $p < .05$, meaning that the pre-test and post-test scores are significantly different, statistically speaking. The results show strong support for the idea that even a short-term study abroad program can yield important improvements in participants' English oral proficiencies.

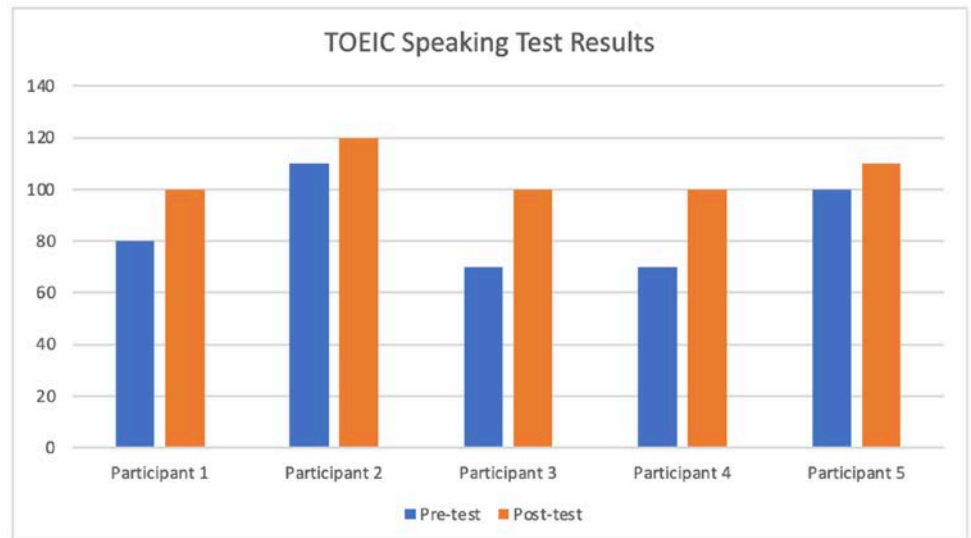


Figure 2: Results of the TOEIC Speaking Test pre-test and post-test

3.1 Qualitative Data and Analysis

The qualitative data in the current study have been divided into two categories for clarity of the analysis. The first category relates to the participants' perceptions of their English language skills progress through the study abroad program. The second category concerns the participants' perceptions of participating in a study abroad program during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1.1 Participants Perceptions of Program's Impact

Program participants reported a perceived difference in their English-speaking proficiencies through participation in the 1-month study abroad program. For example, participant 1 related:

At my homestay, at first I couldn't understand anything. Gradually I became used to using English, and before I knew it I was able to communicate with my host family. When my host family told me that I could speak much better than when I first arrived, I was so happy to hear that, and I agreed too.

Likewise, when prompted to reflect on her experience abroad, participant 5 wrote:

Looking back on my experience, I was able to use English to participate in class discussions, and interact with a lot of study abroad students in my spare time . . . It's normal in America for students to say their opinions in class, and that was a big hurdle for me, but I learned the skill of communication.

Participants' reflections and comments such as those listed above suggest that the participants themselves believe that short-term study abroad programs can yield valuable results.

3.1.2 Participants' Reflections on Studying Abroad During the COVID Era

When writing their reports, participants were not asked directly to comment on studying abroad in relation to COVID-19, but as the pandemic was one of the most influential factors affecting their decisions to study abroad, all five participants naturally commented on the situation. Several participants referenced their desire to study abroad stemming back to secondary school. They mentioned how the pandemic had initially stifled their hopes of international academic experiences, leading them to eventually join the study abroad program reported in this article. For example, participant 1 wrote:

I wanted to study abroad ever since I was a high school student. In my first year in university, we could not go anywhere due to the coronavirus, and I thought I would not be able to study abroad as a university student. In the spring, when I learned about this study abroad program, I thought I would regret it if I didn't participate

Participant 2 shared a similar experience:

I had planned on studying abroad when I was in high school, but that was all canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic. My desire to study abroad continued and I decided to participate in this program.

Knowing that the Covid-19 pandemic was limiting students' abilities to physically go abroad to study, some participants were aware of the possibility of joining "online study abroad programs" to advance their cultural and linguistic knowledge. Participant 3 had entered the university at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. She wrote:

Before I entered the university, I had heard about the online study abroad programs and was interested. But when I heard about this study abroad program being offered in America, I thought it would be a good chance to actually go abroad and experience other cultures, so I decided to join.

The COVID-19 pandemic is as pervasive in today's society as ever, and when contemplating study abroad opportunities the pandemic remains an issue with students, as well as with their families. Study abroad is a transformative experience that can fundamentally change a person's world view. In the case of the current analysis, the study abroad program in America also changed the way the participants viewed and experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon returning to Japan, the study abroad program participants reflected on their experiences in America in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 4 commented on the difficulty she faced when debating studying abroad during the pandemic, "It was not easy to go abroad considering the coronavirus situation, but I think studying abroad during my university years was a really valuable experience." Participant 2 made the following comment:

We are still the influenced by the coronavirus, and before I left Japan part of me was worried about it. But when I actually went to America, I felt that the Japanese notion of the corona crisis had disappeared, and I felt that the value of daily life had in some way returned.

The participants' comments suggest that different cultures experience living with the pandemic in different

ways. Participant 2's comment confirms Japanese society's continued hardline response to the pandemic by sticking with mask regulations and facilities' entrance requirements. The Japanese participants experienced firsthand that many Americans had already returned to pre-pandemic lifestyles in a lot of ways. It should be mentioned that during the one-month long study abroad program in America, masks were only required in the classroom for two weeks (i.e., participants did not have to wear masks in any on-campus areas, other than classrooms), otherwise masks were not required in classroom or other campus areas—including all common and recreational areas, study areas, cafeterias, restaurants, and administration facilities—for the remainder of the 1-month program.

It would be appropriate to end the data analysis here by looking at some of the participants' opinions concerning their overall experiences in America during the 1-month study abroad program.

Through this study abroad program, I learned the value of finding your place in the world and about the importance of interpersonal relationships (Participant 3).

The biggest difference with universities in Japan was on the weekends. Many students would come to campus to study or play games and socialize in club activities or at events. When so many different people come together like this it makes us respect each other's cultures (Participant 1).

I can't write all of them, but in just one month I was able to make friends from America, France, Germany, Afghanistan, Cuba, Pakistan, Korea, and China. I had trouble using English at first, but now I am more motivated than ever (Participant 4).

4. Conclusion

As countries around the world continue to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and all the limitations it has imposed, students, faculty members, and administrators in Japan are reevaluating the potential of study abroad programs at their institutions. These programs—such as the one reported here—help to foster cross-cultural understanding, personal growth, global citizenship, and offer many linguistic benefits for participants. Regarding Research Question 1, all participants reported on in this paper were able to increase their spoken English proficiency in an important and impactful way through a short-term one-month study abroad program in the United States. This important increase was made evident in the pre- and post-test TOEIC Speaking Test scores. Regarding Research Question 2, according to the participants' comments about the effectiveness of the study abroad program, the participants perceived a noticeable increase in their English language proficiencies, despite being in the United States for a relatively short period of time. Health risk is also a feature of studying abroad today that concerned the participants. However, their comments and reflections have shown that they perceived an acceptable and manageable amount of risk in studying abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that overall the benefits studying abroad outweighed the risks. Their successful completion of the 2022 program has shown that it is possible for short-term study abroad programs to return and be effective, and for Japanese universities to resume sending students abroad in numbers that begin to approximate pre-pandemic levels. It is hoped that the data reported on here will be used to encourage and support future study abroad programs and the Japanese students participating in them.

This study is not without limitations. Given the small number of participants, and the idiosyncratic and varied nature of the English courses completed by the participants at the host university, replication of this study may be difficult, and the results therefore may lack overall generalizability. However, given the gist of the study abroad program as described in the current study, it is possible for future program

coordinators to conduct a “quasi-replication” of the program described here, and positive results can be expected with confidence.

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Appendix A

Summary of the short-term study abroad program

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
						Japan Departure. Arrival in USA	Host family placement
Week 1	Settling in with host family. Campus tour	Morning: American culture and society class Afternoon: on-campus fieldwork, meet program assistants. Language center tour	Morning: American culture and society class Afternoon: on-campus fieldwork, visit university student-run creamery	Morning: American culture and society class Afternoon: on-campus fieldwork, visit student center, enjoy student life	Morning: American culture and society class Afternoon: on-campus fieldwork, introduction to public transport, mall visit	Morning: American culture and society class Afternoon: on-campus fieldwork, meet program assistants, hike near campus	Host family activity
Week 2	Host family activity	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork, orientation	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork/free schedule, purchase textbooks	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork/free schedule	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork, meet program coordinator, NYC trip introduction	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork, international coffee hour	New York Trip

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Week 3	Host Family Activity	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork /free schedule	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork/ campus scavenger hunt	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork/Health sciences department/ campus tour	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork/free schedule	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork, meet program director, Washington D.C. trip information session.	Washington D.C. trip
Week 4	Host family Activity	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork , Meet and greet with local students	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork, Food bank volunteer activity	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork, college of agriculture tour	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork, campus hike and bike activity	Morning: Reading, writing, listening speaking class Afternoon: campus fieldwork	Homestay check-out United States Departure
Week 5	Travel day	Arrival in Japan					