

Learning Outcomes and Self-Perceived Changes Among Japanese University Students Studying English in the Philippines

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Abstract

Study abroad destinations for Japanese students, particularly those aiming to improve their English language skills, tend to focus on the “Inner Circle” (Kachru, 1992) of English-speaking countries. However, over the last two decades, Korean and Japanese-owned English language schools in the Philippines started to appear, leading to over 6,700 people from Japan going to study English in the Philippines in 2018. In this paper, I aim to document the effects and self-perceived changes that occurred as a result of studying abroad in the Philippines by drawing on a case study of 103 Japanese university students on a four-week intensive English language program. Data collection was conducted over the course of May to December 2018 by means of interviews, questionnaires, and ethnographic observations. Among the common themes that emerged was a shift in focus from grammatical form and accuracy to communication-oriented goals for learning. Such changes in beliefs toward language learning triggered by a study abroad experience can be accounted for using the concept of language ideologies (Surtees, 2016). While this study only accounts for learner impressions shortly after their return, it illustrates the potential impact of a cross-cultural experience on students’ overall belief systems regarding language learning and communication.

With increasing opportunities to study abroad to and from destinations around the world, greater numbers of people are traveling overseas for the purpose of language study. Japan is not an exception to this trend. Although government statistics show the number of students registered at university-level institutions overseas temporarily declined from around 2007 to 2011 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, MEXT, 2019), these numbers did not include those in study abroad programs at private language schools or in non-academic cultural exchange programs (Grimes-MacLellan, 2017). Since a separate national survey was added to account for such programs in 2009, numbers of students studying abroad both formally and informally have increased steadily (Japan Student Services Organization, JASSO, 2019). In this paper, I focus on a case situated within the latter category, specifically that of Japanese university students studying abroad in the Philippines.

Study abroad from Japan has traditionally focused on “Inner Circle” English-speaking countries (Kachru, 1992), especially for the purpose of learning English. However, the Philippines has also become a popular short-term destination. In 2017, 6,755 people reportedly studied abroad in the Philippines, according to the Japan Association of Overseas Studies (JAOS, 2018). This number ranks the Philippines fourth after the United States, Australia, and Canada. In the case of the Philippines, the purpose of studying abroad is predominantly for language learning, and the majority of sojourners stay for less than three months. Because tuition at language schools is much less expensive than in Inner Circle countries, and such programs typically offer one-on-one classes with English-speaking teachers, the cost performance factor is high for learners who would otherwise not have sufficient exposure to English in Japan. Currently, there are 154 English language schools in business in the Philippines, of which about half are Japanese-owned, and most of the rest are run by Korean business owners (Saito, 2019).

There is very little academic research focusing on English language learning in study abroad contexts outside of Inner Circle countries, despite growing numbers of students from non-English speaking countries studying abroad in other parts of the world (Plews & Jackson, 2017). Choe’s (2016) study on Filipino English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher identity is situated in the Philippines, where Korean learners go to learn English. He explains, “the status of the Philippines as an English-speaking country and of Filipino ESL teachers as English language teachers is unstable,” suggesting that the lack of credibility associated with non-native contexts makes them less attended to in formal research. Nevertheless, the increasing diversification of study abroad experiences calls for the documentation of such cases. Even when the main purpose of studying abroad is not to learn English itself, English often plays a role for students aiming to gain international experience, as it is likely to be resorted to for communication in circumstances when there is no other common language.

In the current study, anecdotes given by 14 Japanese university students who participated in a four-week English language program in the Philippines serve to exemplify one such newly materializing perspective. The findings include participants noting changes in self-perception related to test-taking skills, English communication skills, and their attitudes toward English learning and use.

The Filipino Context for Japanese Learners of English

The status of English in the Philippines is complex, with ongoing debate regarding the extent it should be used officially for government, education, and the media (Bautista & Bolton, 2008). What is clear, however, is that English is used indispensably for business and everyday life within the country as well as for an exceptionally large number of migrant workers around the world. One prominent example of Filipino labor being exported to foreign markets is the outsourcing of U.S. call center operations (Friginal, 2007). This is in stark contrast to the situation of English use in Japan, where proficiency levels are among the lowest in Asia and very few people choose to work overseas (Pew Research Center, 2019).

For Japanese learners of English, traveling to the Philippines not only immerses them in a foreign culture but also into a multilingual environment where English is commonly used for intercultural communication. Being from a largely monolingual society, exposure to various languages competing for attention simultaneously can come across as chaotic and give a sense of culture shock to learners. In this regard, the sociolinguistic climate of the Philippines, characteristic of an “Outer Circle” country, is a welcome change compared to that of Japan in terms of being able to see how English can be used for practical, every day transactions as well as play a part in bridging multiple cultures.

Such sociolinguistic difference among countries within Asia inspired Korean and Japanese entrepreneurs to start language schools catering to English as a Foreign Language (EFL), or “Expanding Circle,” learners at around the turn of the 21st century. The first schools of this nature were established by Korean business owners who aimed to meet the demands of corporate sponsors seeking to globalize their workforce (Fukuya, 2015). The practice has since spread to Japanese-owned institutions, and target audiences now include younger populations such as university and high school students. For these younger students, programs based in the Philippines are a new, more practical alternative to short-term courses offered in North America, Europe, and Oceania. Quality of instruction differs in that teachers in schools in the Philippines are typically non-native English speakers who have graduated from a local college or university. While teachers receive educational training within a language school, they do not necessarily have a formal certificate or academic degree specializing in TESOL. At the same time, lower wages and economic standards allows schools to offer one-on-one classes all day long for students, instead of larger group classes for a more limited amount of time. This makes it possible for students to receive extensive individualized attention and feedback, making it a valuable learning environment particularly for beginning-level students who are not used to speaking and using English.

Literature Review on Student Perceptions Toward Language Learning During Study Abroad Experiences

In order to understand the nature of learner experience, paying attention to what learners themselves say is necessary to complement quantitative data such as test scores and questionnaire results. While qualitative studies relying on learners’ individual accounts exist dating from the 1960s, criticisms against their reliability and generalizability compared to larger scale, quantitative research prevented them from having a more prominent role in the field of language learning, and consequently, for issues concerning study abroad (Freed 1998; Pellegrino, 1998). The case studies that do exist focus mainly on Americans and other Anglophone learners studying languages other than English. Qualitative research on Asian learners studying abroad are further limited (Durbidge, 2017). Thus, documenting the perspectives of Asian learners studying EFL in the context of study abroad is important for diversifying perspectives in TESOL.

The main difference between traditionally documented study abroad in a predominantly American context and study abroad among non-English speaking countries is the multiplicity of functions the target language has, perhaps most easily understood with Kachru’s (1992) definitions of World Englishes. In the American case studies, the target language and culture are defined as a unitary, “native” proficiency to be acquired (e.g. Russian language and culture to be acquired in Russia with Russian “native” speakers). English as an international language, however, is not spoken only by those who are born into an Inner Circle, English-speaking family. It can also be used as a second or foreign language by ESL and EFL learners, and target cultures and competencies vary. In particular, learners in the Outer and Expanding Circles may seek to learn English not only to communicate with people in an Inner Circle English-speaking country, but also in other intercultural contexts at home and abroad for business, academic studies, or leisure. The existing American-focused studies have yet to incorporate this perspective.

On the other hand, study abroad destinations in case studies on learners from Japan focus exclusively on Inner Circle countries. Those which address gains in linguistic competence are typically measured quantitatively (Sato, 2012), while studies which take a more holistic approach to study abroad experiences stress the value of social interactions beyond classroom instruction (Douglas, Sano & Rosvold, 2018; Gay 2016; Horness, 2014; Kato & Reeder, 2015; Tanaka, 2007). Similarly, studies which asked Japanese students about their ideal short-term study abroad

experience suggest they favor Inner Circle countries as well as prioritize cultural and experiential elements over formal language instruction (Douglas 2015; Inoue 2019). The current study differs in that Filipino cultural experiences and social interactions outside of the language school were not considered primary learning goals.

Additional factors to consider when comparing case studies in study abroad include the duration of travel and type of program. The main focus of most existing cases target more formal, for-credit programs (Savage & Hughes, 2014). During short-term programs, there are often considerably less opportunities to explore the local environment due to time constraints. In the current study, the curriculum is specific to language study, in contrast to programs with a substantial academic or cultural component.

With these contextual factors in mind, this study explores changes in students' self-perceptions regarding foreign language learning and use as a result of a study abroad experience. In a comprehensive review of student perspectives toward study abroad, Pellegrino (1998) discusses a couple of common false assumptions about language learning which appear relevant. The first of these assumptions is that the values and beliefs learners acquired from their previous classroom instruction will affect the way they perceive language learning when they study abroad. For example, many students tend to focus on correct forms and expressions they learned at school over actual instances of communication as indicators of progress (Miller & Ginsberg, 1995). Another learner assumption, or "myth," is that by spending time in a foreign country, learners will automatically become able to use the language of that country without effort (Wilkinson, 1998). In reality, sojourners may not always have the opportunity to use or practice the target language. Themes similar to these appeared in the current case study.

As a theoretical framework to interpret the changes reported by students in this study, I draw on the concept of *language ideology* as applied to study abroad experiences (Surtees, 2016). Language ideology, defined by Woolard and Schieffelin (1994), refers to "ideas about speech... how communication works as a social process, and to what purpose." Each person has their own internalized philosophy about language, constructed and influenced by language ideologies in particular cultural contexts. Incorporating the concept of language ideologies expresses how learners' home and host countries' cultures and educational systems created the basis of their perceptions. It also captures how belief systems evolve over time.

The main questions I seek to address are:

1. What are the self-perceived changes in a group of Japanese university students studying in a short-term English language program in the Philippines?
2. Are these findings comparable to existing cases on student perspectives in study abroad?

In line with qualitative studies on general study abroad issues, an ethnographic approach (O'Reilly, 2012) was taken to collect data and examine naturally occurring themes reported in participant interviews and as observed by the researcher.

Case Study: Japanese University Students on a Short-Term Trip to Cebu

In order to investigate self-perceived changes in beliefs and attitudes towards English among Japanese EFL learners, I draw on a case study following a cohort of 103 university students on a four-week intensive study abroad trip to a language school in Cebu, in the Philippines. The trip took place from August 26 to September 22 in 2018, and formal data collection was conducted during May to December of the same year.

The main purpose of the trip was to support students in achieving 600 or more on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) Listening and Reading Exams, and for the more advanced students, to obtain a bandwidth of 5.0 to 6.5 on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The participants were all freshmen in the same internationally-oriented department in the same national university in a rural part of Japan. While participation in the trip did not count for credit towards graduation, all students in the current department were encouraged to go as part of their preparation to study abroad in exchange programs the following year. The test scores were required in order for them to apply to their preferred exchange program.

All participants were of Japanese nationality, and their age ranged from 18 to 21. Among the 103 participants, 78 of the students were female, and 25 were male. The average of students' highest achieved scores on the TOEIC before departure was 582.4 as of July 28, 2018. At this point in time, 34 students had achieved a score of 600 or more, while 69 had not reached this benchmark.

The language school attended was Japanese-owned and offered a range of courses in conversation, test-taking, pronunciation, and business skills. Students took classes based on a set schedule, focusing mainly on either TOEIC or IELTS (Table 1). On a typical weekday, students had six hours of one-on-one classes, two hours of group classes, and two hours of self-study time in the evening. Housing was in a dormitory with four to six students per room. On the weekends, there were optional day trips to go shopping, island hopping, and to visit a local NGO.

Table 1. Typical Day Schedule for Participants

TOEIC Course		IELTS Course	
8:00-8:50	Conversation	8:00-8:50	Conversation
9:00-9:50	TOEIC Listening & Reading	9:00-9:50	IELTS Phraseology
10:00-10:50	TOEIC Listening & Reading	10:00-10:50	IELTS Writing
11:00-11:50	TOEIC group class	11:00-11:50	TOEIC group class
12:00-12:50	(lunch)	12:00-12:50	(lunch)
13:00-13:50	TOEIC group class	13:00-13:50	TOEIC group class
14:00-14:50	Callan*	14:00-14:50	IELTS Writing
15:00-15:50	News	15:00-15:50	IELTS Speaking
16:00-16:50	Reading comprehension	16:00-16:50	IELTS Speaking
17:00-18:00	(dinner)	17:00-18:00	(dinner)
19:00-20:00	Self-study	19:00-20:00	Self-study
20:00-21:00	Self-study	20:00-21:00	Self-study
21:00-22:00	Self-study (optional)	21:00-22:00	Self-study (optional)

* Callan (Callan Method Organization, 2019) is a method of training for acquiring oral communication skills with a focus on quick reaction time and pronunciation.

Data collection was conducted by means of interviews, questionnaires, and observations accompanying students on the trip as a chaperone (Table 2). The interviews served as the main source of data and were conducted in Japan both before departure and after returning from the trip to the Philippines. I personally conducted all interviews in order to obtain data firsthand. Coordinating schedules with students during the academic school year while teaching classes myself, interviews were carried out a few times a week between May 15 and August 6 for the first

interview, and October 9 through December 10 for the second interview. Questionnaire responses were collected as a way to give contextual information for the students' stories, and these were administered before the trip, on May 11, and after the trip, on October 5, to all students participating in the program. Questionnaire items were written in both Japanese and English.

Table 2. Data Collection Schedule

2018							
May	June	July	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Interviews	Interviews	Interviews			Interviews	Interviews	Interviews
Questionnaire					Questionnaire		
TOEIC		TOEIC			TOEIC		
			Study Abroad Program				

A total of 23 informants cooperated with the interviews, of which 14 completed both pre-departure and post-return interviews. Interview candidates were chosen on a volunteer basis after all of the study trip participants were informed of the current research project in May. Interviews asked about students' background, expectations, impressions, and overall experience in a semi-structured format. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. All interviews were conducted mainly in Japanese, and English translations of the interviews are my own. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Pseudonyms are used to substitute real names.

Informed consent procedures were reviewed before starting the first interview with each informant. Specifically, I gave each interviewee an explanation of how the data collected through the interviews would be accessible only by the researcher and that I would delete all or part of the information or recordings upon their request. They could also opt out of the interviews at any time. Furthermore, their personal information would not be disclosed. Written signatures on forms outlining these terms in Japanese were obtained. In addition, documentation including the details of the questionnaires and interviews had to be approved according to ethical standards established by the university before data collection could take place.

After data collection was completed, interview recordings and notes were reviewed for commonly reported themes regarding the effects the four-week program had on students. Focusing on the informants who participated in both interviews, each profile was examined for self-perceived changes in their skills and attitudes toward English, as well as any reasons attributed to those changes. I am solely responsible for the data analysis and validity of the findings.

Results: Changes in Self-Perception Among Learners

While the official purpose of the study trip was to increase students' TOEIC and IELTS scores, students gave mixed responses regarding how they felt about their test score results after returning from the Philippines. More consensus was reached about their perceived improvement in oral communication skills. In addition, feeling more comfortable using English was a recurring theme reported in the interviews, suggesting implications for changes in affect. These findings were generally supported by the questionnaire responses obtained after returning from the trip (Table 3).

Table 3 Summary of Post-trip Questionnaire Responses (n=98)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I was able to improve my English ability through the four-week trip to the Philippines.	16	74	7	1
I was able to improve my English communication skills.	28	69	1	0
I was able to improve my test-taking skills (for TOEIC, IELTS, etc.).	14	66	17	1
I feel less hesitant about using English than before.	33	56	9	0
I am confident in my English ability.	2	22	55	19

Test-Taking Skills

TOEIC and IELTS scores held high stakes for students planning to study abroad in exchange programs the following year, and many of the classes at the language school targeted specific skill areas on these tests. Interview informants mentioned they feel assured of their improvement when they can see it as a numerical score. Both their actual scores and their perceived test-taking skills improved for the majority of students, though the degree of improvement varied. Among the 103 participants, 100 students took the TOEIC test after returning to Japan on either October 8 or 14, or both. This boosted the average of students' highest achieved scores to 650.6, with 39 more students having reached the 600 point benchmark compared to pre-departure. In the questionnaires, 80 out of 98 students responded positively to the statement "I was able to improve my test-taking skills (for TOEIC, IELTS, etc.)."

English Communication Skills

Most of the interviewees mentioned perceived improvement in their oral communication skills as a result of the trip. This was also reflected in the questionnaire responses given by the larger group of students, where 97 out of 98 respondents answered positively to the statement "I was able to improve my English communication skills." The most popular explanation for this change was that students were in an intensive learning situation where they had to interact with their teachers in one-on-one classes six hours a day, five days a week, for four weeks. While students were nervous at first, they gradually got used to communicating with their teachers and were able to respond more easily using English. Students had speaking and listening practice regardless of class content, since English was used as the medium of instruction, and teachers intentionally made efforts to build rapport with students through casual conversation.

Interestingly, students collectively responded that their English *communication* skills improved more than their general English ability. A commonly reported experience was that participants realized they had to say something to respond to their teachers even if they were not sure what the English word for something was, or if they were not confident in their grammar or pronunciation. It became more important to make efforts to start communicating their ideas, and the teachers would support them in clarifying what they meant. Rather than looking up a translation and using words that were difficult for them, they started to use simple words to try to explain. Students considered such communicative strategies different from improvement in acquiring grammatical accuracy or range of vocabulary.

Misato, one of the interviewees, explains this shift as moving away from a textbook-focused approach commonly taken in high school in Japan:

“Up until high school, we translated English to understand it and answer questions, like we read something, memorized it and solved problems, but in the Philippines we had conversations and it wasn’t like we tried to understand every single word that was written down. There was something we wanted to say and it would be like, oh yeah I get it, that’s what I mean, and I could really use English intuitively, as a tool. So now when I read English, I can catch the contents of it and what it’s trying to say rather than translating it, and that was I think the biggest thing. I think the key point was I could speak naturally with the teacher and have a conversation outside of class.” (Interview #2, October 9, 2018 14:30-15:30, Time: 00:13:00)

Interacting with her teachers helped Misato to avoid having to translate everything into Japanese in order to understand, allowing her to focus on the ideas a person or a text was conveying.

Attitudes Toward English Learning and Use

Linked to students’ perception of improvement in their conversational abilities and success in communicating with their teachers in English, many informants told me that they were able to lower their feelings of inhibition toward using English. Teachers were described as generally “friendly” and patient with them, which encouraged them to speak, and through repeated practice, they became less anxious or scared about speaking or making mistakes. For some, this led to increased confidence, although for others, getting used to talking with their teachers did not necessarily mean they felt confident as English speakers. In addition, two students mentioned that they were surprised by the extent that their Filipino teachers could use English even though they were not “native” speakers. This led to an awareness that there are people who use English proficiently as a second language. One of these students said the encounter with speakers of multiple languages made her want to learn other languages too, not just English. While individual experiences vary, this sense of “getting used to” English was supported by the larger group, where 89 out of 98 respondents expressed agreement to the statement “I feel less hesitant about using English than before.”

Interview data revealed that for some participants, there was a realization that they needed to take more ownership over their learning rather than passively waiting for something to happen for them. Minami, another informant, shared how she became more active in consulting her English teachers for advice after returning to Japan. She also signed up for an online writing class outside of her university coursework. Upon reflection, she explained:

“I thought I need to find the opportunities and time myself, to choose by myself, something like to put it in front of me, I need to make sure to take the opportunities myself, or else my English won’t improve. It hit me that I won’t become able to use English if I don’t. Before I went (on the trip to the Philippines), I had always thought things would sort themselves out, but when I went overseas, I really thought I needed to do something or else it wouldn’t happen. If I hadn’t been looking up videos to watch or studying by myself, I would probably have been along those same lines my entire life... (so because of that realization) I started the online course, and I started asking questions to my teachers. I might not have done that otherwise.” (Interview #2, October 22, 2018 9:00-10:00 Time: 00:48:20)

Although Minami was one of the more exceptional cases, each learner, in their own way, overcame their presupposed assumptions and acquired a better understanding of how to learn English and to use it for communication more effectively.

Discussion

Documenting student perspectives about their experience studying in the Philippines allowed for inclusion of details about the communicative strategies they used with their teachers. Students noticed that when communicating in English with their teachers, they could not look up and find the perfect word for each thing they wanted to say in that moment. Not doing or saying anything was not an option if they wanted to convey their thoughts and feelings to the person in front of them, listening patiently and waiting for them to speak. It was then that they realized they had to actually make efforts to *communicate* with their teachers, not only listen to dictated text or reproduce what they had previously memorized. Having been in a Japanese-speaking environment for all or most of their lives, most had not had many opportunities to interact with others who did not share the same basic cultural assumptions, nor had they had to learn how to deal with such situations in their past education. This demonstrates the difficulty of learning a foreign language within an Expanding Circle country such as Japan where English is seldom used for communicative purposes, and points to the impact a study abroad experience can have for cultivating intercultural communication skills.

Although it is impractical to directly compare the results of this study with other study abroad programs which differ in duration, purpose, or context, parallels can be drawn regarding how students progressed from certain beliefs and attitudes toward another. The initial focus on linguistic forms and accuracy over actual communication seen in this study appears similar to findings in Miller and Ginsberg (1995). The idea that learners are influenced by their previous classroom experience is the same. In the current case study, students had an especially difficult time overcoming the initial hurdle of feeling unable to communicate with their teachers, having been exposed to English classes emphasizing memorization for university entrance exams. Fortunately, students were generally able to break down their inhibition by the second or third week through the individual lessons.

Likewise, the sense of urgency expressed by Minami (quoted in the results section) illustrates how she used to share the commonly reported false assumption that learners would automatically acquire a target language by studying abroad and spending time in a country where that language is used (Wilkinson, 1998). Minami realized that participating in the short-term program in itself was not enough, and decided to be proactive in finding further opportunities to improve her English skills. She dispelled the myth that success in language learning could be achieved by simply signing up and joining a study abroad program.

The most significant implications obtained from the in-depth interviews, however, is in the detailed descriptions of how each participant *changed* their personal ideas about English learning through participation in the short-term program. Studies which discuss erroneous beliefs and myths in language learning are comparable to perspectives which emerged in this study, but it is more useful to focus on the process of change in these beliefs, rather than the beliefs themselves. To this end, the concept of language ideologies in study abroad (Surtees, 2016) can be applied to account for reported changes in student perspectives. In this case study, the initial language ideologies students were exposed to in Japan were newly joined by the ideologies implicated in the ESL program in the Philippines. As a result, participants were generally able to shift their focus from grammatical accuracy to more actively conveying their ideas. In particular instances, they could also realize the need to make efforts to actually use the target language rather than only passively attending a study abroad program. What is important is that each student anecdote serves to represent existing discourses in Japanese education and culture and how these were influenced by that of the Filipino context and language school.

Conclusion

The first aim of this paper was to document the self-perceived changes of Japanese university students studying in a short-term English language program in the Philippines. Overall, the individualized instruction, friendly demeanor of the Filipino teachers, and mutual support given among program participants helped most learners in this study to overcome their initial barrier toward using English. These factors seemed particularly helpful for beginning learners who had not had extensive opportunities to interact with non-Japanese speakers in the past. Considering the affordability of the program financially and the ease of signing up to join the program as a group, students seemed generally satisfied with their progress in English learning.

The second aim was to compare these findings with existing cases on student perspectives in study abroad. Due to contextual differences, it is difficult to directly compare the results of this case with existing research on American learners or more advanced learners from Asia. However, subjective beliefs toward language learning tended to be similar in particular instances. Furthermore, learners in this case study showed progressive change in their beliefs, demonstrating how attitudes and perceptions toward language are dynamic in nature and impacted by intensive cross-cultural experiences.

As this study focused only on the stories of students up to three months after their return, issues regarding the longer-term effects of study abroad have yet to be addressed. Following up with students after their exchange program or graduation from university in the future would provide insights into how the four-week trip to the Philippines helped them or not during their stays in other countries around the world or in their professional lives. Moreover, since this study targeted one specific group of students from the same university, results may differ considerably with students of different backgrounds within Japan or with groups attending other institutions in the Philippines. It would also be of interest to link this study to future research on learners of various cultural backgrounds studying in the Philippines, such as Korean learners attending comparable Korean-owned language schools.

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