

Overcoming common misconceptions about study abroad

Tim Newfields (Toyo University Faculty of Economics)

The Japanese word *ryuugaku* is vague and encompasses many varied nuances. At one time this word implied formal academic study for an extended period, usually in Western Europe or North America. Now this term has come to connote any learning experience over any time span occurring outside of Japan. Although *ryuugaku* is often translated as "study abroad", literally means something closer to "anchored learning". Prior to the 1990s, most study abroad programs for Japanese entailed research in specialized academic fields or else receiving foreign language courses with the intent of streaming into a standard academic program (Asai, 2012, p. 33). Since the 1990s, however, more study abroad programs incorporating alternative activities as such sports, dance, surfing, and so on have appeared – and only some include formal foreign language learning classes.

To understand the study abroad patterns of students, it is important to discover how students actually conceptualize the term "study abroad". This paper outlines a classroom research project exploring how one group of 72 undergraduate economics majors conceptualized the term "*ryuugaku*". It concludes by mentioning some possible ways to dispel common misconceptions about study abroad.

Research questions

This paper explores the following research questions:

- (1) How well can this group of respondents actually make inquiries about study abroad interest in writing in English?
- (2) How much interest in study abroad did the respondents report having?
- (3) How did this particular group of students appear to conceptualize study abroad?
- (4) What positive points did the respondents associate with study abroad?
- (5) What reasons did some respondents give for not wanting to study abroad?

Method

Respondents

A convenience sample of 72 first and second year EFL students majoring in economics at Toyo University comprised this sample. 23 students were in their first year and the remaining 49 were in their second year. 68% of the respondents ($n=49$) were male and 32% were female ($n=23$). All respondents were Japanese and the majority had TOEIC scores of around 422 (± 35 SEM).

A simple translation exercise that was part of the respondents' mid-term exam was employed in this study. Instead of relying solely on formal surveys, I believe interesting information about student attitudes can be obtained from other sources such as classroom presentations, homework, or quizzes. In this particular case I used just one item from a classroom test. In addition to using 40 other exam items that are beyond the scope of this paper, I asked students to translate the question in Figure 1 from Japanese to English, then write an extended pragmatic response in English:

Instructions: *Translate the following questions into English, then also write an answer in English in a "warm" pragmatic style.*

Example: Q: 今の不景気は来年続くと思いますか?
Q: *Do you think the current economic downturn will continue next year?*
A: *Yes. However, I hope the economy will pick up soon. And you?*

#6. Q: 留学にどのぐらいの関心がありますか? Q: _____
A: _____

Figure 1. An EFL translation task for Japanese undergraduates

As you can see, this was a combination of a translation exercise and a short open response task: examinees had ample space to translate the question, and even more space to write out a so-called "conversational" answer. The Japanese question could be translated variously as "How interested are you in overseas study?" or "How much interest do you have you in study abroad?" or "How keen are you about studying in a foreign country?" in addition to a number of other ways.

Why was a translation task used? The main advantage of translation is that the topic was clear and there was no possibility of mishearing. Simple dictation was considered as an option, but the fact that some students would mishear the question made it less suitable for this research.

Moreover, the open response answers provide a chance to write out novel answers that might not otherwise appear in formats such as multiple choice. In addition, I was interested in ascertaining how well students apply appropriate pragmatic responses when responding to the question. During the course they were taught to distinguish "cold" distant pragmatic responses (in which only the minimum required information is offered) from less distant "warm" pragmatic responses (in which additional information is provided and a communicative exchange continues). Obviously, many other pragmatic styles exist. However, for simplicity my elementary level EFL students are taught to focus on two basic communicative styles: (1) "cold"

styles for the sort of formal encounters characterizing most formal bureaucratic situations or conditions when distance is desired, and (2) "warm" styles prevalent in encounters when less formality and extended discourse is expected. This division was informed by Oller's (1983) notion of expectancy grammar and by Bouton's (1988) notion of implicature. The key differences between these styles are summarized in Figure 2.

"COLD" STYLE INTERACTIONS

Person A: Question → Person B: Short Answer + [No Comment] + [No Rejoinder]

Example

Person A: *How interested are you in study abroad?* →

Person B: *A little.* + [No Comment] + [No Rejoinder] → [End of Conversation]

"WARM" STYLE INTERACTIONS

Person A: Question → Person B: Short Answer + Comment + Rejoinder

Example

Person A: *How interested are you in study abroad?* →

Person B: *A little.* + *However, I worry about money.* + *And you?* → [Conversation Continues]

Figure 2. Contrastive features of "cold" and "warm" pragmatic styles

"Cold" style interactions tend to occur in formal exchanges in which very unequal power distributions exist. For example, when addressing police officers or immigration clerks, that style of interaction is appropriate. One problem is that most Japanese overgeneralize this style, attempting to use it for other types of interactions. "Cold" style interactions, for example, are not well suited for interacting with host parents or talking with peers traveling abroad. Surprisingly, most Japanese have never learned the difference between "warm" and "cold" pragmatic styles. Partly for this reason, when traveling overseas, their L2 conversations are often perceived as formal and terse. As Harran (2008) suggests, many Japanese EFL students have difficulty sustaining conversations. Hence, a simple translation task with an open response format such as this may have educational validity. I should point out, however, that it was merely only one of five task types in the exam. Moreover, though each task type could probably be used to as an informal survey, each would have problematic points. Perhaps that is why Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis and Chappuis (2004) assert that an accurate picture of student learning or attitudes is best acquired through multiple tools.

One might ask, "Why was this a *written* exercise rather than an oral/aural conversational exchange?" The answer is simple expediency: it was not practical to interview a large body of

students in the time frame available. I acknowledge that written and spoken discourses differ: uncertainty about word spelling or various grammar points likely make some respondents hesitant to write out responses than they could have said. For this reason, this exercise should not be regarded an indication of how well students might actually *talk*. Instead, it might be better to regard it as an indication of how they might interact in a written exchange such as a keyboard chat.

Procedure

A 41-item written mid-term exam was distributed to students during the first part of their eighth class in the semester. Students had thirty minutes to complete the exam and the particular exam item discussed in this paper represented less than 3% of their total grade for that exam and less than .05% of their total grade for that semester. Although the grading of the item in Figure 1 is not relevant to this research topic, but it should be noted that there was no incentive to answer either positively or negatively. The item itself was positioned mid-point in the examination to reduce the likelihood that respondents would skip it entirely due to lack of time.

After the exams were collected, all questions and answers were keyed in. Questions were tentatively coded into the six categories in Figure 3:

- (1) The English question was grammatically correct and communicated the Japanese meaning.
Example: *How interested are you in study abroad?*
- (2) The English question was grammatically correct, but it conveyed a different meaning.
Example: *How are you interested in study abroad? (≈ What aspects of study abroad interest you?)*
- (3) The core ideas were communicated, but the grammar/syntax was amiss.
Example: *How much interest do you study abroad?*
- (4) Only one or two of the core ideas were expressed, and the grammar/syntax was choppy.
Example: *How interested do you in _____?*
- (5) None of the core ideas were expressed and the question was mostly incomprehensible.
Example: *How concern foreign?*
- (6) No response was written (the space was left blank).
Example: **Q:** _____

Figure 3. The rubric used to code the questions about study abroad.

The answers were then coded independently of their grammatical accuracy or pragmatic appropriateness according to the rubric in Figure 4:

- (1) A strong interest in overseas study was expressed.
Example: *I'm very interested in. I want to English teacher.*
- (2) Some interest in overseas study was expressed.
Example: *I interested a little.*

- (3) A neutral degree of interest in overseas study was expressed.
 Example: *Soso. I would like to go overseas, But I have not enough money. And you?*
- (4) Little interest in overseas study was indicated.
 Example: *I'm not so much. Because I love Japan. And you?*
- (5) A strong disinterest in overseas study was expressed.
 Example: *Not at all. I want to live in Japan now and future.*
- (6) No response was given.
 Example: **A :** _____
- (7) The meaning of the response was unclear.
 Example: *A little. But* _____

Figure 4. The rubric used to code the student responses about study abroad

Results

Let us now examine the results in terms of each research question.

(1) *How well can this group of respondents actually make inquiries about study abroad interest in writing in English?*

Only about 7% ($n=5$) of the students were able to express the question in English correctly. 13% ($n=9$) left the question blank and another 7% ($n=5$) wrote merely a few words of gibberish such as "How do you have _____?" The core communicative idea contained in the kernel subject ["you"] + object ["study abroad"] + verb ["interest"] was expressed by merely 49% ($n=35$) of the examinees. In other words, only about half of the students were able to communicate the basic ideas contained in the question.

This paper examines the respondents' questions in the light of what Lyotard (cited in Ryan, 2008) terms "micronarratives" – collapsed discourses involving very short, small-scale interactions. In this case, the micronarrative consisted of a single question and a short reply. The questions that students wrote could be interpreted as supporting four different misconceptions about study abroad. Let us briefly examine each misconception.

Misconception #1: *Ryuugaku* does not necessarily involve study – just "going abroad"

Five of the respondents asked questions about *ryuugaku* without referring to any sort of study.

Consider these inquiries:

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| <i>How are you interested in going abroad?</i> | - 2 male second year students |
| <i>How interested are you in going abroad?</i> | - 1 male second year student |
| <i>How do you interest in going abroad?</i> | - 1 female second year student |
| <i>How are you interested in living in abroad?</i> | - 1 female second year student |

Perhaps these students thought formal study wasn't a requisite for *ryuugaku*. This begs the question: how does *ryuugaku* differ from simply traveling or living overseas? The legal requirements for overseas study are usually very precise and a number of specific conditions must be met to obtain student visas. However, it would appear that some students believe that merely being overseas is tantamount to studying there.

Misconception #2: *Ryuugaku* does not necessarily involve traveling overseas –
one can study all about foreign cultures without leaving Japan.

Three of the respondents asked questions about *ryuugaku* without specifying any overseas travel by stating:

- | | |
|---|------------------------------|
| <i>How interested are you in abroad?</i> | - 1 male first year student |
| <i>How are you interested in overseas?</i> | - 1 male second year student |
| <i>How do you have interested in oversea?</i> | - 1 male second year student |

These questions could be interpreted as suggesting that *interest* in overseas is sufficient – it is not necessary to actually go abroad to be involved in "*ryuugaku*".

Particularly since the Internet has become more widespread, the necessity of physically traveling abroad is being questioned (Harvard, 2011). It is now easy to communicate directly with foreigners via many different internet applications such as SKYPE, IRC, Yahoo Chat, or Facebook. Moreover Nova, the largest private English teaching company in Japan prior to its 2007 collapse, widely flaunted its programs as "*ekimae ryuugaku*" – a sort of domestic "study abroad" experience. Despite these claims, we should question whether virtual and real world experiences can ever be measured on the same scale. There is something unique about breathing the air in a foreign place and interacting in real time in person with others. I believe that some features of study abroad cannot be virtualized, and merely reading about foreign cultures is different from living there.

Misconception #3: *Ryuugaku* invariably entails doing an overseas homestay.

One student translated the question, "*Ryuugaku ni dono gurai no kanshin ga arimasu ka?*" this intriguing way:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>How is interested in homestay?</i> | - 1 male second year student |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|

It is tempting to suggest that this person regarded *ryuugaku* as an experience involving a homestay. Although many *ryuugaku* programs do in fact include homestays, that is by no means

requisite to study abroad. Hirozumi Asai (2012, p. 34), one of the pioneers of commercial study abroad in Japan, also pointed out that this is a common misconception about study abroad.

Misconception #4: *Ryuugaku* implies attending an overseas exchange school affiliate.

Finally, one student interpreted *ryuugaku* too narrowly as an overseas study experience with a affiliate sister school:

How much exchange school are you interested in? - 1 female second year student

Although many Japanese universities do have formal overseas affiliates, study abroad is not limited to such venues. In fact, many students participate in study abroad during school vacation privately without their institutions ever knowing.

(2) *How much interest in study abroad did the respondents report having?*

To what extent did this sample of students seem to be interested in study abroad? The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Interest in Study Abroad Expressed by Toyo University Economics Majors.*

Academic Year	strong interest	some interest	neutral	little interest	no interest	no response	meaning unclear
1 st year	6 (3/3)	4 (3/1)	0 (0/0)	2 (2/0)	5 (4/1)	4 (3/1)	1 (0/1)
2 nd year	13 (9/4)	7 (6/1)	3 (2/1)	4 (2/2)	4 (2/2)	16 (10/6)	2 (2/0)
Total	19 (12/7)	11 (9/2)	3 (2/1)	6 (4/2)	9 (6/3)	20 (13/7)	3 (2/1)

NOTE: Male/female response ratios are parentesized after the total figures in each category.

42% ($n=30$) of the respondents indicated a positive interest in study abroad. Interest among females appears slightly greater than among males, but a larger sample size is needed to make any conclusive statement. A negative interest was expressed 20% ($n=15$). Unfortunately, 32% ($n=23$) were unable to communicate how they felt about this issue. Because of this significant lacuna, this survey does not provide enough detail to indicate the degree of student interest in study abroad. The low response rate raises serious questions about the accuracy of this instrument.

(3) *How did this particular group of students appear to conceptualize study abroad?*

The most revealing aspect of this survey is the *reasons* that respondents gave for their interest in study abroad – or lack thereof. Unfortunately, 67% ($n=48$) of the respondents offered

no reason for their interest (or lack of interest) in study abroad. A typical response is offered by this male second-year student:

Q: *How interested are you in oversea study?*

A: *I have a little.* + [No Comment] + [No Rejoinder] → [End of Conversation]

This highlights one of the pragmatic differences between Japanese and English: in Japanese it is often not necessary to indicate a rationale for one's degree of personal interest in many topics (Kondoh, 2004). In English, however, it is generally considered appropriate to provide some sort of justification or reason for an important choice involving significant amounts of time and/or money. Unfortunately, Japanese EFL are seldom taught this difference in pragmatic routines. As a result, when communicating English, all too many Japanese university students are unable to back up their opinions persuasively. Indeed, opinions regarding the need for a "logical justification" to reinforce personal decisions or preferences may vary from culture to culture. Many Japanese are apt to regard such rhetoric devices as mere "*rikutsu*" [empty rationalization] or "*iiwake*" [excuses]. By contrast, this concept has been ingrained in the West since Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.

(4) What positive points did the respondents associate with study abroad?

From the total 30 positive responses about study abroad, only nine mentioned any reason for their preferences. From that sample, I was able to codify four reasons some students indicated an interest in overseas study.

Rationale #1: *The touristic process of traveling overseas is fun.*

Four students expressed a desire to simply travel to various destinations, suggesting that merely visiting foreign places would somehow be worthwhile:

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------|
| A: <i>I'm interested in visiting many countries.</i> | - 1 male second year student |
| A: <i>I want to go to America.</i> | - 1 male first year student |
| A: <i>I want to go to London.</i> | - 1 female first year student |
| A: <i>I want to go newzealand [sic].</i> | - 1 female first year student |

It seems these students were voicing a desire to engage in a sort of "grand tour" of key landmarks such as London or New York as part of their liberal arts education.

Rationale #2: *Ryuugaku* was thought to enhance foreign language learning.

One young woman indicated a desire to improve her English in the USA by stating:

A: *Very much. I want to go to America for study English.* - 1 female first year student

It appears this woman held the belief that overseas study would bolster her language ability. It is interesting that she mentioned the USA as a desired travel destination – two other students expressed a similar interest to go there. Although Japanese travel to the USA has declined significantly since 2004, it still remains the most popular study abroad location (Mizutani, 2011, par. 6-7).

Rationale #3: *Ryuugaku* was considered a way to learn more about a foreign culture(s).

Two students expressed an interest in traveling overseas for cultural reasons:

A: *I am very interested in English culture.* - 1 male second year student

A: *I'm very interesting. Because, I like American movie. I wanna go to America* - 1 male second year student

Further studies are needed to ascertain how these students envision the connection between study abroad and foreign cultures. Indeed, the notion of what comprises "culture" might vary widely from individual to individual.

Rationale #4: *Ryuugaku* was deemed a way to enhance career objectives.

One student with an interest in becoming a high school English instructor made this statement about study abroad:

A: *I'm very interested in. I want to English teacher.* - 1 male second year student

At a time when Japan's number of school-age children is declining and the subsequent market for English teachers is becoming increasingly tight, perhaps this person felt that some study abroad experience would enhance his job prospects.

(5) *What reasons did some respondents give for not wanting to study abroad?*

Finally, let us consider the reasons students gave not studying abroad. Of the 15 students who expressed little or no interest in study abroad, twelve offered some reason.

Rationale #1: *Ryuugaku* entails a lack of appreciation of Japan.

Seven students made enigmatic statements that studying abroad would somehow detract from their ability to appreciate Japan by stating things such as:

- A:** *I don't want to go abroad. I like Japan. And you?* - 1 male first year student
A: *I'm not so mach. Because I love Japan. And you?* - 1 female second year student
A: *No. I concern about domestic.* - 1 female second year student
A: *I'm afraid, I'm not interested in it. I want to study more in Japan.* - 1 male second year student

Some of these students have the belief that appreciating foreign countries more involves appreciating Japan less. Teachers can perhaps help students understand that competition is unnecessary: admiring ones birthplace does not preclude respecting exotic lands and cultures. In fact, according to Asai (2012, pp. 33-34) it is one of the hallmarks of being a *kokusaijin* [internationalized individual].

Rationale #2: *Ryuugaku* requires much money.

Four respondents noted that financial constraints dampened their interest in study abroad by stating:

- A:** *A little. I have not money to go abroad. And you?* - 1 male second year student
A: *If I have money I want to go abroad.* - 1 male second year student
A: *Soso. I would like to go overseas, But I have not enough money. And you?* - 1 male second year student
A: *Much money need to study abroad. [sic]* - 1 male second year student

Although it is true that study abroad programs typically cost more than a many students earn in half a year, few students seem aware of study abroad scholarships or low-cost "work abroad" programs. One way teachers can promote study abroad is to make students more aware of these options. According to Kanzaka (2010) teachers need to inform of study abroad options in less expensive venues such as the Phillipines, Taiwan, or South Korea. Another possibility is to consider volunteer work abroad projects.

Rationale #3: Foreign language proficiency is needed for study abroad.

One student from this sample doubted with her linguistic proficiency was adequate for study abroad by stating:

A: *A little. I want to go study abroad, but I don't speak
foreign language, and I'm shy. I worry about [sic]*

- 1 female second year student

One way teachers can help this sort of student is to emphasize that foreign language skill is not a requisite for overseas study – it is something that might develop once students go abroad, but it is seldom needed prior to departure. Indeed, many Japanese delay their overseas trips due to anxiety about communicating in a foreign language. According to Asai (2002, pp. 22-24) this is a mistake: Japanese should study abroad at an early age not only to learn about foreign languages and cultures, but also to acquire a degree of independence.

Conclusion

This article provided a glimpse of some of the ways a small group of Japanese university students conceptualize study abroad. I have also mentioned some ways that teachers can overcome some of common misconceptions about study abroad. Overseas study does not need to compete with love of one's homeland, nor does it necessarily require huge sums of money or high levels of linguistic proficiency.

A good way to conclude would be to acknowledge a few limitations of this study and suggest directions for further research. Micro-narratives such as this offer an imperfect glimpse of how students might regard study abroad. Because the survey item used in the paper was embedded in a larger test and the response was in English rather than Japanese, the task might have been too difficult for some students. Future studies might employ direct surveys in the respondents' native language to reduce this problem. Also, it might also be good to incorporate different response modalities: this study relied entirely on a single written translation question and open response answer. Future studies might explore verbal narratives and include a wider range of prompts.

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