

8 The role virtual exchange could play in helping prepare students for real-life study abroad

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Abstract

More and more Japanese students are studying abroad and the Japanese government has set a target of 180,000 students to study abroad each year by 2020 and is providing financial assistance to students to help achieve this goal. However, is financial assistance enough? Surveys conducted with students from a national education-focused university in northern Japan, before and after their study abroad experience, show that they feel underprepared before they leave to go overseas and regret not fulfilling the opportunities they had while abroad. The key areas identified where they needed assistance were with their English language ability, confidence building, and intercultural awareness. This paper suggests that doing a Virtual Exchange (VE) before they travel could help students in all of these areas. It could provide much needed language support, motivation to explore other cultures and share their own, and deliver the confidence to enable them to become more outgoing and make the most of the opportunities presented by studying overseas. Additionally, there is a case to be argued, that VE could help reduce the impact of culture shock. Overall, it is very likely that the use of VE prior to departure could improve students' study abroad experience. The author also understands that more research is needed on this and proposes a further study comparing students who have studied abroad without

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conducting VE in advance to those who have, to try and assess its impact on the study abroad experience.

Keywords: study abroad, virtual exchange, student exchange, intercultural communication, language learning, ESL.

1. Introduction

The number of Japanese students who study abroad is increasing. Some students join long-term exchange programs, many more short-term intensive language courses, others take part in cultural exchanges or research trips. This increase has been driven by the Japanese government who, in 2013, set a target of doubling the number of university students who went abroad from 60,000 to 120,000, and high school students from 30,000 to 60,000 by the year 2020 (Lee, 2018).

To achieve this goal, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology introduced the ‘Tobitate’ scheme, which uses a combination of public and private money to provide 10,000 scholarships for university and high school students to study abroad (MEXT, 2015). According to the Japan Student Services Organization, the number of students studying abroad steadily rose from 36,302 in 2009 to 105,301 in 2017 (JASSO, 2019). With more and more students deciding to study abroad, it is important that they are given the preparation to allow them to make the most out of their overseas experience, both in terms of formal education, but also, what can be learned simply by living in a different culture. Clearly, students will be given advice and help by their teachers in their home institution but what role could VE play in helping them succeed while abroad?

To assess this question properly it is important to understand the feelings of the student. Firstly, their concerns and fears about studying abroad. If these can be eased then they might have a more productive and enjoyable time at their host

institution. Secondly, the regrets returnee students feel need to be investigated. If these are assessed and acted on then future students may not make the same mistakes as their predecessors.

2. Method and study details

To discover students' anxieties before they go overseas and their regrets after they have returned, two surveys were conducted. The first (Survey 1) regarding students' concerns about study abroad involved 25 undergraduate students from a national education-focused university in northern Japan; all were traveling abroad to study (Table 1).

Twenty-one of these students were studying English education while the other four studied humanities (2), school nursing (1) and technology (1). All the students were between 19 to 21 years old and consisted of 15 female students and ten male students. The vast majority were mainly studying English while overseas with the opportunity to take some other undergraduate courses. However, the students who went to Norway, Korea, and Taiwan had the opportunity to study other languages. Two students did not study at all, they went to America to complete teaching internships working in elementary and middle schools.

Table 1. Number of students and their destination and duration of their planned study abroad

Country	Duration	No. of Students	Country	Duration	No. of Students
USA	10 months	5	Norway	12 months	1
	6 months	2		4 months	2
	4 months	1	Canada	4 months	1
	10 weeks	1	New Zealand	10 weeks	1
UK	12 months	2	Korea	3 months	1
	6 months	4	Taiwan	4 months	1
Australia	11 months	2			
	8 months	1			

The second survey (Survey 2) was conducted with students who had returned from their overseas experience (Table 2). This time 21 undergraduate students from the university previously mentioned were questioned.

Table 2. Students and their destination and duration of their study abroad

Country	Duration	No. of Students	Country	Duration	No. of Students
USA	10 months	2	Norway	12 months	1
	6 months	2		4 months	2
	4 months	1	Canada	4 months	1
	10 weeks	1	New Zealand	10 weeks	1
UK	12 months	1	Korea	3 months	1
	6 months	4	Taiwan	4 month	1
Australia	11 months	2			
	8 months	1			

In the survey prior to departure, the students were asked to assess the following statements (Table 3) and if they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with each statement.

Table 3. Statements contained in Survey 1

1	I am anxious about making friends.
2	I am anxious about communicating with my host family or roommates.
3	I am anxious about finding food that I like.
4	I am anxious about finding health care if I get sick.
5	I am anxious about being homesick.
6	I am anxious about not understanding the culture of my host country sufficiently.
7	I am anxious about having enough money.
8	I am anxious about communicating with my classmates.
9	I am anxious I will not be able to speak in class.
10	I am anxious about the level of my second language reading skills.
11	I am anxious about the level of my second language listening skills.
12	I am anxious about the level of my second language writing skills.

In the survey after the students had returned, they were asked to assess the following statements and, again, if they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with each one (Table 4).

Table 4. Statements contained in Survey 2

1	I regret not being more outgoing.
2	I regret not communicating more with my host family or roommates.
3	I regret not being more adventurous with food.
4	I regret not learning more about the culture of my host country.
5	I regret not traveling enough in my host country.
6	I regret not taking more photographs or documenting my experiences.
7	I regret spending too much time with other Japanese people.
8	I regret spending too much time thinking about my home country.
9	I regret not communicating more with my classmates.
10	I regret not speaking more in class.
11	I regret not studying harder in class.
12	I regret not doing more home study.
13	I regret not joining a club or society.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Survey results

The following two tables, [Table 5](#) and [Table 6](#), show the results of the surveys both before the students left Japan and when they returned.

Table 5. Results of Survey 1

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
I am anxious about making friends.	9	36	11	44	5	20	0	0
I am anxious about communicating with my host family or roommates.	10	40	13	52	2	8	0	0
I am anxious about finding food that I like.	6	24	11	44	6	24	2	8
I am anxious about finding health care if I get sick.	7	28	16	64	2	8	0	0
I am anxious about being homesick.	6	24	12	48	6	24	1	4

I am anxious about not understanding the culture of my host country sufficiently.	4	16	12	48	6	24	3	12
I am anxious about having enough money.	3	12	12	48	9	36	1	4
I am anxious about communicating with my classmates.	11	44	12	48	2	8	0	0
I am anxious I will not be able to speak in class.	11	44	12	48	2	8	0	0
I am anxious about the level of my second language reading skills.	7	28	16	64	2	8	0	0
I am anxious about the level of my second language listening skills.	8	32	16	64	1	4	0	0
I am anxious about the level of my second language writing skills.	7	28	16	64	2	8	0	0

Table 6. Results of Survey 2

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
I regret not being more outgoing.	10	47.6	8	38	3	14.3	0	0
I regret not communicating more with my host family or roommates.	9	42.8	9	42.8	3	14.3	0	0
I regret not being more adventurous with food.	2	9.5	8	38	8	38	3	14.3
I regret not learning more about the culture of my host country.	4	19	9	42.8	7	33.3	1	4.8
I regret not traveling enough in my host country.	5	23.8	13	61.9	3	14.3	0	0
I regret not taking more photographs or documenting my experiences.	1	4.8	9	42.8	10	47.6	0	0
I regret spending too much time with other Japanese people.	4	19	12	57.1	5	23.8	0	0
I regret spending too much time thinking about my home country.	2	9.5	10	47.6	8	38	1	4.8
I regret not communicating more with my classmates.	4	19	16	76.2	1	4.8	0	0
I regret not speaking more in class.	5	23.8	15	71.4	1	4.8	0	0

I regret not studying harder in class.	0	0	9	42.8	11	52.4	1	4.8
I regret not doing more home study.	0	0	5	23.8	15	71.4	1	4.8
I regret not joining a club or society.	0	0	11	52.4	10	47.6	0	0

The main point to be taken from Survey 1 is the students' concerns, worries, and fears. When traveling abroad, especially for the first time, for many students everything is new and frightening so the majority of students agreed with all the statements. However, when drawing together the two surveys and linking the fears and regrets then it can be seen that the concerns the students felt before going overseas may have actually become a reality (Table 7).

Table 7. Connected points from surveys 1 and 2

Statement	Agreed to some degree
I am anxious about making friends.	80%
I regret not being more outgoing.	85.6%
I am anxious about communicating with my host family or roommates.	92%
I regret not communicating more with my host family or roommates.	85.6%
I am anxious about not understanding the culture of my host country sufficiently.	64%
I regret not learning more about the culture of my host country.	61.8%
I am anxious about communicating with my classmates.	92%
I regret not communicating more with my classmates.	95.2%
I am anxious I will not be able to speak in class.	92%
I regret not speaking more in class.	95.2%

From examining the table above it would appear that students need assistance in three main areas. Firstly, they need the confidence to meet people and communicate with those around them. Secondly, their English language ability needs to be of a required standard to enable them to communicate

with classmates, those they live with, and others they meet. This, of course, is connected to the first point, a higher communicative ability will give the student more confidence. Finally, more knowledge about other cultures would stand them in good stead when going abroad and hopefully inspire them to learn more about their chosen destination before they depart and while they are there.

3.2. The role of VE in improving students' English language ability

Firstly, does VE help improve students' English language ability? A number of studies would suggest this to be the case. Clearly, communicating with others in English in a meaningful way will help improve language ability and the motivation to study (Chen & Yang, 2014). The students who undertake the International VE Project definitely believe this to be true. Hagley and Cotter (2019) surveyed a group of 594 Japanese students and 402 Colombian students, who had completed eight weeks of VE, and found that 81% of the Japanese students thought the exchange was beneficial to learning English, with 90% of the Colombian learners in agreement. In a separate questionnaire completed at the end of an exchange in 2016, Hagley and Harashima (2017) found that 240 out of 272 Japanese students, or 89%, considered the exchange to be beneficial to learning English. In a study conducted in 2017, after surveying 254 Japanese students, who had completed nine weeks of VE, Hagley and Thompson (2017) found that 60% wanted to learn English more because of their experience.

A further point to mention when considering the communication benefits of VE, is that all the students, from all the assorted countries, use English as a lingua franca. The majority of Japanese students who study abroad go into English language programs, generally with other second language learners from across the globe. Each group of second language learners will have their own traits and idiosyncrasies, and it is useful for students to be aware of this, and this knowledge can be gained through VE before a student travels overseas (Guth & Helm, 2012).

3.3. The value of VE in increasing cultural awareness

The second issue to be addressed is if VE raises cultural awareness and the desire to learn more about another country's culture. [Guadamillas Gómez \(2017\)](#) notes that there is a case for this. In her study involving one hundred participants, in equal numbers, from the Faculty of Education at the University of Castilla-La Mancha and the Language Center at Warwick University, she found that students actively participated and highly valued the opportunity to meet and learn from people from a different cultural background. This is backed up by the survey mentioned previously, conducted by [Hagley and Cotter \(2019\)](#), which found that 77% of Japanese respondents and 86% of Colombian students had become more interested in other countries due to VE. Also, [Hagley and Thomson \(2017\)](#) found in their survey that 81% of those questioned wanted to exchange information with students in other countries. VE not only stimulates students to learn more about other cultures but it also creates a desire to share information about their own.

This enhanced wish to learn more about other cultures should lead to students who go abroad spending more time and effort exploring and learning about their host country. This, in turn, will naturally lead to more opportunities to communicate with foreign people, thus improving their knowledge base and language skills. It should also give the students a more fulfilling study abroad experience. During VE, the students talk about their own culture with their partners. This is valuable preparation for when they travel abroad, where they will be asked similar questions, and so will be able to respond in more depth and with greater accuracy. Hopefully, this will lead to their partner replying in kind and so will increase the amount of communication and shared knowledge.

3.4. Building confidence and problem-solving skills with VE

Clearly, the improved language skills and preparation VE would give a student before they travel abroad would improve the student's confidence, and therefore may make him or her more outgoing and communicative. A further advantage of doing VE can be found in the feedback that students gave to [Hagley and Harashima in 2017](#). Students were asked for positive and negative comments

about their experiences. Some students reported that their partners sometimes made mistakes and that confusion had been caused by this. Far from being a negative point about VE, this is an overwhelmingly positive point. Firstly, it could reduce the anxiety caused by the possibility of making errors. Students are often held back by the fear of failure. Seeing others make mistakes could help reduce their own unease. Secondly, it will help the students develop toleration for others, and thirdly, and most importantly, it gives the chance for students to build problem-solving skills (Long, 1996). They will have to find strategies to end any confusion that has been caused by the mistake. This is extremely valuable as when they travel overseas there will be many occasions where they are confused or do not understand something.

3.5. The value of VE to assist in cultural acclimatization

When students go overseas, especially for long-term study, almost all suffer from some form of culture shock. There is no real way to define culture shock, as it is different, in terms of symptoms and severity, for each person. After a period of time, the student will generally settle down and become acclimatized to their new surroundings. Hagley and Harashima (2017) suggest that VE gently introduces a new culture to the student, thus avoiding the shock experienced by students who go abroad. Hagley (2016) describes the possibility of students becoming culturally acclimatized by undertaking VE. It is possible that if a student does VE before they travel, thereby opening themselves up to an alien culture and new points of view, the shock they feel when they travel may be reduced. It is highly unlikely that it would be removed altogether, but if the students have started the cultural acclimatization process before they depart for their destination this could help to ease the severity of the experience.

4. Conclusion

Taking the leap to study in a different country is an incredibly brave thing to do. A new culture, a new language, and no familiar faces make it a daunting task. Any assistance students can receive to assuage their fears and help them make

the most out of what is generally a wonderful opportunity is very welcome. In VE there is, it appears, a highly effective tool to help the students prepare for their study abroad and give them the skills to thrive in their new environment. Language ability, cultural awareness, and confidence were identified as the areas where students need the most assistance and VE could play a role in all three. The meaningful communication VE provides with those from abroad should motivate students to improve their language skills, and the experience of communicating with other second language learners could prove to be extremely valuable when they travel overseas. Also, the drive it creates to increase cultural sharing not only builds the students' knowledge base but also establishes a genuine reason to communicate. The students' experiences, both positive and negative, during VE provide valuable preparation for their overseas study and mixing with people from other cultures. Traveling overseas to study will never be easy and nothing could completely eradicate the anxiety students feel before they depart, but in VE there is a system which could reduce students' apprehensions and enable them to have a more productive and satisfying study abroad experience.

It would appear that VE could be an extremely useful asset to help students prepare for overseas study, however, in this paper, this is not proven; it is merely a hypothesis. Further study needs to be conducted to assess the validity of this claim. The author is preparing a second study to compare students who have studied abroad without conducting VE in advance to those who have, to try to assess its impact on the study abroad experience. It is hoped that this study will be conducted during 2020-2021 and the results will be available shortly after. In the meantime it is important to remember and understand that anything educators can do to improve the study abroad experience for their students, even if they are unsure of the outcomes, should be done. VE is one method to do this and possibly an extremely valuable one.

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