

In Our Own Words: Japanese and Foreign University Students and Their Reflections on Cultural Adjustment

自分たちのことばでー日本・海外の大学生の文化適応
に関する省察ー

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Abstract

Many Japanese university students expect immediate improvements in language skills, as well as cultural awareness, from study abroad programs. Yet complexities may arise beyond what students may foresee. Psychological factors of uncertainty avoidance and dynamics of emotional regulation all profoundly influence homestay students' cognitive behaviors. This paper analyzes selected video interviews with homestay participants on how they viewed their experiences at the time and in retrospect. The video project proved to be beneficial for individual students by enabling them to analyse and better understand their emotional responses to unfamiliar cultural practices, as well as for other students by providing them with role models and authentic cross-cultural issues for discussion. The project also has great potential as a growing database of student stories for further research on study abroad and intercultural learning.

概要

多くの日本人学生は留学プログラムに参加することで、文化的意識だけでなく言語能力においても即座に成果が得られると期待している。しかしながら文化的な困難は、学生の予測を超えたところから引き起こされることもある。曖昧さの回避や感情制御のダイナミックスの心理的要因は、ホームステイを経験する学生の認知行動に大きく影響する。本論は、ホームステイを経験した学生を対象に、ホームステイ時とその後の振り返りを通じた自身の経験に対する見方に関するビデオインタビューを分析したものである。このビデオプロジェクトは、留学プログラムに今後参加予定の学生にロールモデルを提示し、異文化間でのリアルな議論のテーマを提供するという点だけでなく、個々の学生が馴染みのない文化習慣への情緒反応を分析し、理解を深められる点においても有益であることを明らかにした。また本プロジェクトは、留学や異文化学習に関する更なる研究のための学生の「物語」を集めたデータベースとしても大きな可能性がある。

Keywords

homestay, study abroad programs, video reflections, cultural adjustment, emotional regulation
ホームステイ、留学プログラム、ビデオ、振り返り、文化的適応、感情制御

Introduction

For many Japanese university students, homestays and study abroad provide enriching experiences of life and learning outside Japan. Homestay programs have been the subject of a large number of studies to date, and numerous benefits for students across cultures have been identified. Such experiences include improvements in

language skills, networks of friendships, and “adoptions” of host families. In the Japanese context, Yashima (1999) finds that such sojourns have an affirmative impact on academic success and enhancement of international orientation among Japanese students upon return, while Hadis' (2005) study in the United States involving around 200 university students reveals similar

expansion of global awareness after even brief stints abroad.

The commensurate experiences of foreign students at Japanese universities may serve alongside those of Japanese engaged in homestays and study abroad as a ripe area for cross-cultural examination, and such experiences may be all the more compelling when they are captured in the students' own voices. This paper details an initial effort of the English Communication Arts (ECA) program at Seigakuin University to document Japanese and foreign students' accounts of their own intercultural experiences abroad and in Japan through short video interviews. The immediate purpose of making such videos is to present the experiences of learners in the processes of adjustment outside their cultures and make these available as learning resources for other students in ECA classes. In the longer term, we hope that, by sharing their experiences, the students recorded in the videos may help contribute to inculcating a sense of intercultural consciousness among the Seigakuin student population.

Research on Homestay-Study Abroad Research

Investigations into homestay and study abroad programs initially focused on their linguistic benefits. Carroll's (1967) intensive research on language acquisition was pivotal in endorsing the benefits of overseas study, finding that even short-term language courses abroad may enable motivated tertiary-level second language learners to make up ground with their peers who had begun their L2 learning comparatively sooner. Subsequent research has nonetheless uncovered psychosocial stresses, particularly as revealed in language learner diaries compiled during overseas sojourns. Jones (1977) extensively details her numerous struggles even as she made significant gains in the target language during a three-month sojourn in Indonesia. Further diary studies (Schumann, 1980; Bailey, 1983; Schmidt & Frota, 1986) reveal other difficulties such as peer competitiveness, pedagogical differences of host educational systems, and

obstacles in forming realistic expectations of language development. Later diary studies by Ellis (1989), Peck (1996), Sachs (2002), and Huang (2005) confirm that such issues may hold true for many learners abroad over time.

Our interest is in such experiences and issues with Japanese and foreign students of Seigakuin University. How do Japanese students at Seigakuin adjust to life outside their cultural boundaries? How do foreign students at Seigakuin cope with life and study in a Japanese environment? While some key sociocultural concepts may explain how students operate outside their cultures, we feel that it is also useful to explore how students reflect on their experiences afterward and how they may come to see them in a different light.

Issues Concerning Cultural Adjustment

In the field of cross-cultural studies, Hofstede's (1980) concept of uncertainty avoidance, which focuses on the degree to which ambiguity is tolerated within specific sociocultural contexts, may be the most emblematic of research about differing cultures and the way in which people are seen to function within them. As insightful as his findings have been, however, they also form a dualistic sociocultural conception, between the West and other cultures, with the West as the normative measure.

Ultimately, it has been difficult to avoid characterizing Japanese cultural dynamics in collectivist terms given the influence of Hofstede's schema, as his research shows that at least some Japanese outside their cultural bounds may indeed feel constrained in situations involving ambiguous outcomes. Yet members of societies do not fit simplistic generalizations of individualism as opposed to collectivism over a wide range of situations; Americans, for example, may not always be as fully individualistic as what members of their society have often been characterized as, while Japanese are not always as collectivist as observers have described them to be from within their society.

Alternatives to dualistic characterizations may yield more nuanced accounts about

individuals and how they handle sociocultural unfamiliarity. The psychosocial concept of *emotional regulation* may offer a more nuanced model for how individuals adjust themselves to the dynamics they encounter in different sociocultural spaces.

Emotional Regulation: Reappraisal and Suppression

Matsumoto et al. (2008) sum up the role of emotional regulation in goal-orientation and goal-setting as “the ability to manage and modify one’s emotional reactions in order to achieve goal-directed outcomes” (p. 926). They cite Gross (1998) and Gross & John (2003) in defining two main factors of emotional regulation, *reappraisal* and *suppression*, that determine how individuals evaluate, engage with, and adapt to or reject situations they encounter.

Reappraisal may be thought of as an individual’s cognitive strategy of situational reinterpretation, where the circumstances of a given situation prompts one to reevaluate what may differ, perhaps radically, from a similar situation in one’s own culture. To give two examples, a strategy of reappraisal may allow an individual to determine how “safe” it may be to participate in a social gathering in the host culture, or deliberate on when to expect and receive assistance, including even material aid, from local people during travel abroad when they would avoid such situations in the home culture. Situations such as these trigger mechanisms of evaluation, within which possibilities to adjust to or reject the dynamics at play can be processed and acted upon. Reappraisal thus entails a shift in the individual’s belief system.

Suppression, on the other hand, is another type of emotional response. It can be seen as a means of regulating an individual’s response to a given situation, such as acting differently to conform to a local custom. A common manifestation of this might be seen in a Japanese business executive shaking someone’s hand instead of bowing when outside of Japan. While an overuse of suppression can be unhealthy as it can stifle true emotional expression, Gross and Levenson (1997) see some level of

suppression as contributing to a healthy equilibrium that avoids extremes on either end of the spectrum (p. 96). This may make it possible, with regard to the examples shown above for reappraisal, for a person to turn down an invitation to a social event although in one’s own culture it would probably cause offense or lead to a feeling a guilt, or inquire about assistance and material need in a foreign country and receive it, however inappropriate it may seem to a person in a similar situation in the person’s own culture. In contrast to reappraisal, suppression allows individuals to accept alternative beliefs or practices as valid in host cultures while retaining their beliefs about appropriate practices in their own cultures.

Emotional regulation may thus open the door for individuals to respond to cross-cultural situations in ways that do not always necessarily follow the patterns described of their cultures, and that do not cast them as passive, impudent, or guilty—emotions that they may experience if they encountered similar situations in their own cultures. The ability to regulate emotions in the process of cultural adjustment may be increasingly valuable in educational systems that are becoming increasingly multicultural.

Foreign Students in Japan

As Japan has become attractive for foreign students pursuing higher education given its wealth and relatively stable political climate, cross-cultural dynamics become as salient an issue for foreign students in Japan as they are for Japanese students abroad. According to Project Atlas Japan (n.d.), there were a total of 139,185 foreign students studying at Japanese universities by the end of 2014, with 55.9%, or 77,792, coming from China. Such an influx is significant, and foreign students are as ubiquitous on the Seigakuin campus as on other university campuses around Japan.

Despite this presence, a gap has nonetheless been anecdotally noted by faculty and students alike between international students and their Japanese counterparts on a number of university campuses, including Seigakuin. Foreign students tend to socialize more with their

peers from the same countries both on- and off-campus, indicating that there may not be enough contact between them and Japanese students to promote mutual understanding. Similarly, Japanese students often seem to be too busy with school, work, and club activities to make time for meaningful interaction with their foreign cohorts. Foreign students are not immune to such conditions either, as many also put in long hours of study on top of part-time work schedules, all while adjusting to their new environment.

While a small percentage of Japanese families host international students for short periods such as a few weeks, many are unwilling to accept them for the longer term and thus the majority of foreign students stay in dormitories or in apartments. As a result, contact with their Japanese counterparts may often become limited even on campus.

Given these sociocultural dynamics, how might foreign students adjust to Japanese sociocultural space? And how might Japanese students benefit from the experience and perspectives of foreign students? These are the kinds of issues that we sought to address in the video interview project.

The Seigakuin University Student Video Interview Project

Every year, a number of students participate in Seigakuin University's study abroad programs ranging from 3 to 7 weeks in countries such as Australia, Canada, South Korea, and the United States. Participating students usually have opportunities to share their overseas experiences with other students upon return, but these occasions, which are usually organized by the institution, have been rather infrequent, with low attendance.

For the purposes of this study, as well as for cross-cultural communication and to heighten awareness, we explored ways to more efficaciously publicize the overseas experiences of participants among the general student population at Seigakuin. We sought to create a format for participants to reflect on their experiences while at the same time demonstrating how stepping out of

their comfort zones can bring benefits. These include "appreciation of diversity, the importance of opinions, and open communication" along with "cooperation, the value of individualism and taking care of oneself, and the value of different ways of thinking" (Jones, 1997, p. 31).

The idea of a video interview project was discussed among all five of the full-time ECA program teachers. It was decided to include not only Japanese students, but also international students on campus, in order to capture a fuller spectrum of cross-cultural experiences of our students. Interview questions were prepared in advance and reviewed by the teachers. We sought to find out what impact the students' experiences have had on their interpersonal skills; how they have reflected upon their experiences and tried to analyze them critically; and how they could deal differently with similar issues or problems in future.

Some situations that mainstream Seigakuin students face the first time abroad are usually common to Japanese overseas participants in general and, though they may cause stress, can ultimately benefit them if managed properly. Many Seigakuin students who have not previously traveled abroad may still unwittingly hold misperceptions and fears before departure, such as what their host family members look like, how they would be treated by them, and whether they would be able to find friends from other countries. The immediate aim of the participant video accounts was to break down any lingering apprehensions or misperceptions among students who have yet to go on homestays.

Methodology, Aims, and Student Voices

In the first year of the project, ten students were individually interviewed on video, each in 5-minute segments. Each student was given a set of questions in advance to answer in writing and the answers were discussed and refined with teacher help before each of their recordings took place. The interviews were then transcribed and each clip subtitled. While it would be more rigorous to analyze the videos of every

participant so far, we decided, for the purposes of this study, to focus on a small segment: two female students, one Japanese and the other Chinese, and one male Japanese student.

The three selected participants represented a variety of experiences abroad, and possessed the English proficiency to voice their perceptions comprehensively within the time limit of the videos. While we wished simply for the participants to literally speak for themselves, we also felt they would be capable of articulating responses that would enable us to explore the degree to which they regulated their emotions through reappraisal and/or suppression.

From here on, the students are referred to by pseudonyms: “Yuka” and “Kenji” (each Japanese) and “Jenny” (Chinese). Jenny, Kenji and Yuka had done homestays in Australia, but Jenny differed from the two Japanese students in that she had more cross-cultural experience as a Chinese national, studying full-time in Japan. She was therefore asked to focus on her experiences as a foreign student in Japan given that this was the greater of her experiences and the one that may reveal different insights from those of the Japanese students. Although she was interviewed and recorded in the same way as the other students, her comments serve as something of a gauge by which Kenji and Yuka’s interviews might be compared, based on her comparatively stronger background of intercultural experience. Such insight as well may enable other Japanese students viewing the videos to reflect on their own reactions to particular cultural situations.

Each student felt the homestay experience had been fruitful, albeit with some common problems. Even in these short video segments, their reflections demonstrated a strong sense of where they had been and how they had grown, with a nascent sense of greater self-awareness and self-direction in future sojourns.

Yuka’s Interview

Yuka came away from the experience feeling grateful to have undertaken it. However, having never previously traveled

outside of Japan, her homestay almost ended shortly after arrival in Australia. Overwhelmed immediately by the differences in people, customs, and environment, she became severely homesick, to the extent that she constantly called home to her parents in Japan, wanting to give up and return. While her mother was concerned about her daughter’s wellbeing, she encouraged her to stay the course and make the most of her time there. Realizing the opportunity she had by being on the sojourn, Yuka decided to make the effort to adjust to her host family life and school setting, and make friends with her Australian and other foreign classmates. Gradually, her experience became a positive one.

Within her interview she evinced a matured attitude to her time abroad, most notably in her realization that what overwhelmed her in the beginning required her to take the initiative in adapting herself within her new setting. She stated:

I realized that I need to reevaluate my way of thinking and adjust to the new environment better. The change has to start with me.

I need to find out more about who I am as an individual and a Japanese citizen. We can overcome inhibition and fear of making mistakes by being open and seeking advice of people around us.

Jenny’s observation of Yuka’s comment above is reflective of where she saw herself when first settling into her Japanese life and study:

I came to understand that we live in a diverse world and ought to expose ourselves to different situations in order to eliminate prejudice against certain nationalities.

Kenji’s Interview

Kenji had an overall more affirmative experience from the start. He appeared to realize from the beginning that he was not going to be in his comfort zone and therefore required from himself a proactive approach in a variety of situations, most notably such as in connecting with people, exploring on his own, and orienting himself to the pedagogical differences of study at his

institution in Australia. In those terms he was more pragmatic in his outlook up to departure and throughout his sojourn, and consequently had a successful homestay, making friends and showing an eagerness to return. He nonetheless admitted to being shy in certain situations involving groups of people and wanted to try to adjust further in future sojourns. Here were some of his key comments:

- *Being shy is not an option for me when it comes to communicating with strangers.*
- *I have to adapt to the host family's lifestyle and way of doing things.*
- *Next time, I would make a list of goals to accomplish before going overseas.*

Jenny's view on what Kenji experienced also was summed up as follows:

Approaching people and making yourself approachable is a good way to learn about yourself and others.

Jenny's Interview

Given Jenny's background, she could draw on both of her experiences as a foreign student and as a homestay participant to reflect on changes in her understanding about life away from her own culture. In her clip about life and study in Japan, she noted some of the following:

- *My perceptions about Japan have changed. I have realized that stereotyping is wrong.*
- *I have come to appreciate many aspects of Japanese culture, which I did not realize before.*
- *Working in Japan has taught me different ways of communicating with customers, co-workers, and people in general.*

Upon further reflection, she added the following:

- *We, foreign students, need to become immersed in Japanese culture by exposing ourselves to its various aspects. We can learn much more through practical experience.*
- *People act and talk based on their cultural background. If we realize this and respect it, communication becomes much easier.*

Comments such as these come from the longer-term experience she has had living and studying in Japan. Moreover, it forms the kind of insight that she could undoubtedly take with her to Australia in her own homestay there, enabling her to further compare and contrast with greater depth on what is required from herself in emotional regulation. Ultimately, such depth provides valuable insight to others in how they may reflect on their own sojourns, as well as crucial advice for those departing for their first time abroad.

Student Reflections on Cultural Adjustment

Upon review, student perceptions such as these may be revealing, and frank. To cite one example, when asked about points of Chinese culture that she missed, Jenny observed how some Japanese tend to turn down invitations in ways she feels are sometimes too prevaricating, stating that some Chinese would tend to be less so by comparison, and showing how some Chinese would handle such situations. This may indicate that Jenny's sense of emotional regulation contains a healthy functioning of reappraisal and suppression. In her case, she came to terms with a custom different from her own that, while situations with it may cause tension for her, is a difference she has learned to live and deal with that does not change her affirmative views on her life in Japan. This attitude equips her well for sojourns elsewhere.

By contrast, Yuka's study abroad experience started out disastrously. Perhaps due to her lack of previous overseas travel, she was not initially equipped to handle a sociocultural environment that differed considerably from what she was accustomed to. Yet in reflecting upon her experience in her video session, she appears to have been able to reappraise it in a way that may help her to suppress her initial emotional reactions for better outcomes in future sojourns.

Kenji appears to have had some of these strengths from the outset. Even where he initially lacked Jenny's experience, he understood fully that he was not going to be

within his sociocultural space. He realizes that he could not use his shyness as a justification to avoid possible moments of discomfort. Yet he also demonstrates the ability to reappraise his situation, in terms of both reflecting on what he could have done better and projecting how he would organize his aims for future study abroad.

As we wished to use these videos as program-generated examples of cross-cultural material for our classes where they would be relevant, a trial of preliminary viewings accompanied by vocabulary and discussion question worksheets was carried out in ECA program reading, culture, and travel English classes. Observations of some learners' reactions to the videos, especially in comments among each other, indicated affirmative responses to the participant stories. This may open up potential for such stories as classroom material, along the lines of Murphey's (1996) concept of students as near peer role models.

Further Directions for the Video Project

Preliminary findings of the value of such stories for participant research and classroom use alike appear promising, and the video project has so far has provided us with a valuable resource which can be used for research and as material for the classroom. We aim to continue the video interview project with incoming Japanese and foreign students for 2017 and the videos will be shown in ECA classes where cross-cultural content is relevant.

We admit that, from a methodological perspective, the present study lacks rigorous qualitative analysis and that our video interview sample is small. The brief time limit of the videos may have constrained the kinds of questions we prepared in advance, and given us an incomplete picture of the students' experiences and their reflections upon them. The appropriate next step, therefore, to develop the research project by examining a larger sample of videos, and by asking participants questions that would not only effectively bring forth their experiences in their own words, but would also enable them to reflect critically on those experiences

and their reactions to them. Such reflections would be useful to their peers who may be interested in homestays. The next stage of our research would also cover how students who watch the videos react, and reflect, on what they see and hear in participants' stories.

Our hope for the video project is that the student stories will provide various benefits over the longer-term, including:

- promoting English, culture, and communication across borders
- bringing greater awareness and understanding of foreign student presence on campus
- inculcating critical thinking
- breaking down stereotyping and misperceptions.

More specifically, we aim to fill what may be a gap in the existing literature between how university administrators conceive of the benefits and issues of overseas sojourns for their students, and what students themselves see as the benefits and issues. Even more importantly, we aim for the students themselves to:

- identify common problems among participants in homestay stints
- give crucial near peer advice for students interested in going abroad
- provide relevant input to administrators in program planning and student preparation up to departure
- serve as plausible and realistic testimonies as to the benefits of overseas study and homestay sojourns for fellow students.

Our initial foray into what we aim to make into a more extensive study has given us grounds to propose that recording participant stories of homestays abroad may help students to recast their experiences in a more positive and constructive light, as well as provide good role models for their peers who have not yet been abroad. Moreover, through discussions at the LD Forum at the

JALT2015 International Conference, we found that our video project, in which students shared their experiences and their feelings of adjusting to life abroad, resonated with other participants. This has strengthened our belief that the videos can become important tools for enabling students to communicate with their peers valuable advice about life and study abroad. We hope that they will thus contribute to an emergent sense of critical thinking and awareness about global orientation and identity among Japanese and foreign students alike.

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