

# **The Impact of Study Abroad on English Language Competence and Intercultural Sensitivity**

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the impact of semester-long study abroad programs on Japanese students in a faculty of foreign studies of a private Japanese university in regard to English language competence and intercultural sensitivity. Pre-departure and post-return questionnaires were administered to 31 second-year students, who participated in study abroad programs at eight different universities in three English-speaking countries. After the study abroad program, the participants were found to have improved their English competence from A1 (Basic Users' level) to B1 or B2 (Independent Users' level) based on the 2001 Common European Framework for Reference of Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment, 2001 (CEFR), and also felt comfortable about minimalizing and accepting cultural differences based on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS).

*Keywords:* study abroad, English language competence, CEFR, intercultural sensitivity, Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

## **1. Introduction**

Encouraging Japanese students to study abroad has become prevalent among higher education institutions in Japan since the Education Rebuilding Council, an extra-governmental advisory body, issued a proposal on “University Education and Global Human Resource Development for the Future” in 2013. With the aim of increasing the number of Japanese students studying abroad to 120,000 by the fiscal year 2020, the Japanese government has substantially increased financial support for both short-time (within a year) and long-term (over one year) study abroad programs. Positive results have already been achieved in that there was a 14 percent year-on-year increase from 69,869 (FY2013) to 81,219 (FY2014) (JASSO, 2017, p. 18) students studying abroad.

Universities or institutes who are increasing their promotion of study abroad programs must be accountable for the learning outcomes of students' studying abroad. Consequently, assessing study abroad programs has become a significant field of international educational

research for the past 10 years. However, more and better data is needed to support existing hypotheses of what study abroad really achieves and how it can be assessed (Whalen, 2015). Furthermore, repeated assessment of learning outcomes over time, with a feasible and narrow focus, is considered preferable to “single-sitting snap-shot measures of learning” (Savicki & Brewer, 2015, p. 4).

The present study is part of a four-year investigation into the effects on students’ learning outcomes and personal growth in the long run of study abroad programs arranged by a Japanese university in collaboration with partner universities overseas. This paper outlines the results of pre-departure and post-return questionnaires conducted in the 2017 academic year, when the study abroad programs took place.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has recently launched nationwide surveys to investigate the effectiveness of study abroad programs from multiple perspectives. This present study can make a positive contribution to the dialogue by providing a detailed and timely analysis of the effectiveness of study abroad in terms of English language competence, as well as intercultural competence.

## **2. Literature Review**

Some research has shown that study abroad programs can exert positive effects on their participants in different aspects of learning outcomes. One of the important changes brought about by study abroad programs concerns language acquisition. This is especially relevant as the primary objective of study abroad programs that the present study deals with is to improve English language competence through immersion and active engagement in an English-speaking environment for a semester. Many researchers have inquired into the influence of study abroad programs in the acquisition of linguistic knowledge (Pinar, 2016). The research areas in focus include oral proficiency, grammatical and lexical knowledge, writing skills, and learning strategies. An overall improvement in these areas has been reported in some studies of American students learning French (Free, So, & Lazar, 2003). In contrast, there are some other empirical studies which show differing effects on language learners’ performance, depending on where they studied. In this respect, Segalowitz et al. (2004) analyzed the differences in performance between Study Abroad (SA) and At Home (AH) learning and found that the SA group made significant gains in both oral proficiency and oral fluency. Regarding grammatical ability, however, the AH group showed superior gains compared to the SA group. In other words, “the study abroad experience did not result in overall improvement in grammatical abilities” (Segalowitz et al., 2004, p. 8). Another interesting implication from this study concerns the sustainability of skills acquired overseas. It turns out that the SA students’ skills

often declined in the course of the semester when compared to AH students. How to sustain the acquired skills and motivation of the SA group is a critical issue, which will be dealt with in follow-up studies to the present study.

Another important change is intercultural sensitivity produced by study abroad programs, which has been examined extensively and found to improve after participating in programs (Anderson & Lawton, 2011; Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004). At the same time, some variables have been identified as influencing cultural learning outcomes of study abroad programs. Medina-López-Portillo (2004), for example, affirmed the hypothesis that the development of intercultural sensitivity of U.S. university students abroad is affected by the duration of study abroad programs. Engle and Engle (2004) also observed that the duration of study abroad programs (full year versus one semester) affected the outcome regarding intercultural sensitivity. For the duration of study abroad programs, Anderson and Lawton (2011) concluded that a semester-length study abroad experience contributes to enhancing the participants' intercultural development. Other variables include housing arrangements, target language proficiency, contact with host nationals, and the role of pre-departure orientation, which are suggested to be grouped into three categories and taken into account when designing study abroad programs (Medina-López-Portillo, 2004). In fact, the students that the present study examined had been sent to eight different universities and had varying experiences in terms of homestay versus dormitory, contact with host nationals and other variables.

Finally, regarding study abroad research in Japan, Ikeda (2014) reviewed previous studies, and categorized them into the following three categories: (1) foreign language learning and study abroad, (2) intercultural sensitivity, competence and study abroad, (3) the basic skills needed to become a fully-fledged member of society and study abroad. Although the effects of study abroad programs on learners' language competence have been researched extensively, Ikeda (2014) argued that "the methods of enhancing the effectiveness of study abroad in educational contexts have not been fully examined and discussed" (p. 24)<sup>1)</sup>.

In order to integrate study abroad programs into university curricula, Adachi (2010) first classified the educational purpose and benefit of study abroad programs into four categories: (1) academic learning, (2) acquisition of foreign language competence, (3) acquisition of intercultural competence, and (4) personal growth based on student development theory. Having laid out the whole picture of educational purposes and benefits, he then discussed the current issues of studying and learning abroad being separated from the rest of learning at home within the university curriculum, and suggested linking study abroad more closely to the on-campus curriculum.

Empirical studies have been conducted to examine the variety of effects of study abroad on Japanese students in that these effects can affect students in significant ways. Suzuki and Hayashi (2015) reviewed previous research and pointed out the methodological issue concerning aggregating the entire body of data to show a general pattern despite a small sample, disregarding detailed information and messages hidden in students' responses. They then demonstrated how a mixed method using quantitative and qualitative data can shed light on affective variables as changes brought about by a study abroad program. Harris (2015) also demonstrated on the effects of study abroad on the attitudinal aspect of Japanese university students by combining a quantitative survey analysis administered to over 130 students and a qualitative follow-up interview analysis with 14 students. In this way, he was able to elicit the personal voice of the students, which provided insights into how students really felt about study abroad learning.

The present study contributes to the study abroad research by presenting an empirical analysis of semester-long study abroad programs with a long-term perspective. Although it is still in the pilot study stage, it is planned to continue to collect and analyze data over a four-year course of learning.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Purpose**

By using questionnaires as one of the quantitative methods, we analyzed how the students who participated in the semester-long study abroad could develop in two main ways: acquisition of foreign language competence and acquisition of intercultural competence. A follow-up interview analysis was conducted using a qualitative method as Demetry and Vaz (2017) demonstrated the effectiveness of a mixed study which can give insights into the students' feelings and their personal development. However, in this paper, we focused on the analysis of the questionnaires for evaluating the self-evaluation of the students' language proficiency and intercultural competence.

#### **3.2 Participants**

Forty second-year Meijo University students who attended a "semester study abroad program" from March 2017 to August 2017 (see Table 1 indicating where, when, how long, and how many students attended) were the focus of this study. Written informed consent was obtained from 31 students, while the other nine students were excluded from analysis because they did not consent, or their data was not reliable. The 31 participants were aged 18 to 20 and consisted of 27 females and four males. Each participant enrolled in an ESL (English as Second

Language) program in a university in Australia, Canada, or the U.S.A. for durations from 98 days to 132 days in the spring semester of 2017. The study was approved by the institutional review board at Meijo University.

Table 1

*Participant Information*

| Country   | University   | Departure and Return Dates | Duration of Stay (days) | Total Participants [Females/Males] |
|-----------|--------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Australia | University A | 3/13, 2017~7/10            | 118                     | 3 [3/0]                            |
|           | University B | 3/17, 2017~7/10            | 114                     | 2 [2/0]                            |
|           | University C | 3/24, 2017~7/17            | 114                     | 2 [2/0]                            |
| Canada    | University D | 4/22, 2017~7/23            | 98                      | 7 [7/0]                            |
|           | University E | 4/27, 2017~8/14            | 107                     | 5 [3/2]                            |
|           | University F | 5/6, 2017~8/21             | 107                     | 4 [4/0]                            |
|           | University G | 3/27, 2017~8/7             | 132                     | 4 [4/0]                            |
| U.S.A.    | University H | 4/23, 2017~7/31            | 99                      | 4 [2/2]                            |
| Total     |              |                            |                         | 31[27/4]                           |

### 3.3 Questionnaires

#### *Language Competence*

Language competence is one of the important changes that is brought about by study abroad programs. As several previous studies have shown, living in an English-speaking environment can contribute to improving linguistic knowledge (Pinar, 2016), and both oral proficiency and oral fluency (Segalowitz et al., 2004).

When it comes to considering what language competence is, one important issue is whether the language learners are aiming to become native speakers or not. Until the 1990s, it was more or less taken for granted that the purpose of language teaching was to get students to speak, as much as possible, like native speakers (Cook, 2012). Cook proposed the concept, *multicompetence*, defined as “the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind or the same community.” Multicompetence suggests that L2 learners preserve their own identities as being from their own culture while still gaining valuable skills when talking to people from other cultures, rather than merely imitating native speakers.

In terms of multicompetence, successful L2 learners decide their own goals and then achieve their language competence. In Europe, the framework language learners, called the CEFR (Common European Framework for Reference of Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment, 2001, based on multilingualism and multiculturalism) was proposed by the Council of Europe. The framework defines levels of proficiency which allow learners to be

measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis. There are six levels: the Basic Users level named A, including A1 and A2; the Independent Users level named B, including B1 and B2; and the Proficient Users named C, including C1 and C2. In order to orient learners and teachers for practical purposes, “Can Do” statements for listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing are provided at each of the six levels.

Teachers or administrators all over the world have been applying the concept of CEFR guidelines and providing a framework according to their domestic situation. In Japan, Tono (2016) produced the CEFR-J, which was applied to Japan’s English education system, and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has also promoted the concept of CEFR. According to a report on English abilities conducted by MEXT in 2014 in order to develop English education, third-year high school students in Japan should reach the A1 CEFR level by the time they graduate, (which is equivalent to EIKEN Grade 3) or A2 (EIKEN Grade Pre 2). MEXT has set the objective that they should be able to reach the B1 level (EIKEN Grade 2) by 2020.

The Faculty of Foreign Studies at Meijo University also uses the CEFR criteria to evaluate English levels. Therefore, these criteria were used for the evaluation system of participants’ English competence. In the questionnaire items, for example, students who self-evaluated themselves as A2 for spoken production would agree with the following statement: “I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.”

In addition to the above five subcategories in each of the six levels, items related to pronunciation were also described in the questionnaire since pronunciation should improve during study abroad. Table 2 shows examples of the CEFR “Can Do” statements through the survey. They were 36 items written in Japanese, consisting of six levels with six subcategories: listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, writing, and pronunciation. The participants in the survey were asked to rate, using a Likert scale, their degree of agreement with each of those questions, from one for “strongly disagree” to five for “strongly agree.”

Table 2

*Examples of the CEFR Can Do Statements in the Survey*

|    |                    |                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A2 | UNDER-<br>STANDING | Listening          | I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment).                                                                                                          |
|    |                    | Reading            | I can read very short, simple texts and find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, and menus.                                                                                                                                                       |
|    | SPEAKING           | Spoken Interaction | I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities and I can handle very short social exchanges.                                                                                                                               |
|    |                    | Spoken Production  | I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.                                                                                                                               |
|    | WRITING            | Writing            | I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate needs. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.                                                                                                                              |
|    | PRONUNCI-<br>ATION | Pronunci-<br>ation | Pronunciation is generally clear enough to be understood despite a noticeable foreign accent, but conversational partners will need to ask for repetition from time to time.                                                                                                                                      |
| B1 | UNDER-<br>STANDING | Listening          | I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programs on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear. |
|    |                    | Reading            | I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the descriptions of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.                                                                                                                              |
|    | SPEAKING           | Spoken Interaction | I can deal with most situations likely to arise while traveling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).                        |
|    |                    | Spoken Production  | I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.                                      |
|    | WRITING            | Writing            | I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.                                                                                                                                                      |
|    | PRONUNCI-<br>ATION | Pronunci-<br>ation | Pronunciation is clearly intelligible even if a foreign accent is sometimes evident and occasional mispronunciations occur.                                                                                                                                                                                       |

Source: Council of Europe (2001), pp. 26-27 &amp; p. 117

### *Intercultural Competence*

There are several criteria or indexes to evaluate intercultural competence. One criterion provided is the Intercultural Communication Model (ICC Model) from the perspective of intercultural communication (Byram, 1997). In addition, a model called “Intercultural Competence,” which was influenced by the ICC Model, which was also developed (Council of Europe, 2008). This model provides a common basis to objectively judge if a person has achieved the goal of becoming a “European citizen” who has accepted the values of multiculturalism. Likewise, the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) has added the new criteria of “Global Competence” to their model for international student assessment (PISA2018) for 15-year-olds. They aim to analyze the capacity to examine intercultural issues, to understand and appreciate the perspectives and world views of others, and to interact with people from different cultures. The above ICC Model, Intercultural Competence, or Global Competence might be effective for evaluating the present situation in regard to one’s intercultural competence. However, these models do not postulate the chronological order in which an individual develops their intercultural competence through contact with other cultures.

Milton Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) can evaluate the change of state of intercultural sensitivity; in other words, it can show how one develops intercultural sensitivity depending on how much one encounters cultural differences in a timely manner (Hummer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). There are six stages (see Figure.1), namely, *denial*, *defense*, *minimization*, *acceptance*, *cognitive adaptation*, and *behavioral adaptation*. The first three stages are considered as indicating ethnocentrism. One tends to deny the different culture (*denial*), and then (*defense*) is the state in which one is threatened by cultural differences. *Minimization* is the state in which one considers cultural differences as stemming from overwhelming similarity of people’s biological nature. One culture is then considered superior to the other and the cultural differences are minimized. The second three states are defined as ethnorelative states, which cause a drastic paradigm shift. People in the *acceptance* state can accept the relativity of values to cultural context. *Adaptation* is the state in which one can perceive and behave appropriately towards the other culture. The final state is *integration*, in which one can construe one’s identity at the margins of two or more cultures. This model underlies the assumption that “as one’s experience of cultural difference becomes more complex and sophisticated, one’s potential competence in intercultural relations increases” (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 423).

In our study, we focused on how the students develop their intercultural competence before and after their study abroad program. Survey questions were selected according to the six criteria of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS).

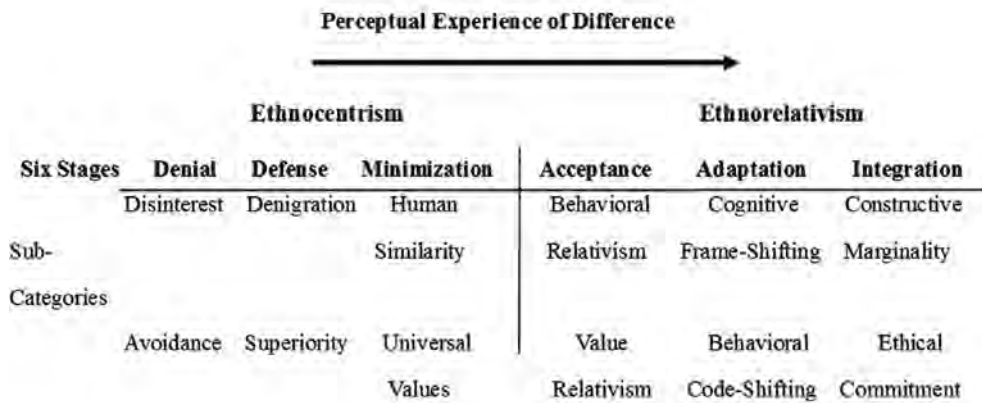


Figure 1. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

Sources: Bennett (2011; 2016), Yamamoto (2014)

Table 3 shows the six stages and subcategories of DMIS as well as the aspects of intercultural sensitivities that the present study has focused on. There are 32 questions in the questionnaire, written in Japanese, with four to eight questions in each category. The participants in the survey were asked to rate their degree of agreement with each of those questions from one for “strongly disagree” to five for “strongly agree.”

Table 3

*The DMIS Framework and Aspects of Intercultural Sensitivities Investigated through the Survey*

| Stages  | Subcategories | Aspects of intercultural sensitivity in question                                                           |
|---------|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Denial  | Disinterest   | - Interest in international issues<br>- Willingness to learn about other cultures                          |
|         | Avoidance     | - Coexistence with other cultures<br>- Interaction with people from other cultures                         |
| Defense | Denigration   | - Inferiority of other cultures<br>- Negative stereotypes of other cultural groups                         |
|         | Superiority   | - Virtues (e.g. sophistication) of one's group<br>- One's way of life as a model for the rest of the world |

|              |                          |                                                                                                                           |
|--------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Minimization | Human Similarity         | - Similarities despite differences in appearance<br>- Similarities despite cultural differences                           |
|              | Universal Values         | - Sharing universal values and norms<br>- Humans as transcendent and spiritual beings                                     |
| Acceptance   | Behavioral Relativism    | - Recognition of different behaviors in cultural context<br>- Acceptance of behavioral variation across cultures          |
|              | Value Relativism         | - Efforts to understand different views<br>- Acceptance of different values and perspectives                              |
| Adaptation   | Cognitive Frame-shifting | - Employment of alternative ways of thinking<br>- Ability to shift perspective into alternative worldviews                |
|              | Behavioral Code-shifting | - Ability to shift behavior into different frames of reference<br>- Willingness to mediate people from different cultures |
| Integration  | Constructive Marginality | - Acceptance of a multicultural identity<br>- Likelihood of participating in a marginal reference group                   |
|              | Ethical Commitment       | - Valuing diversity to become natural and unconscious<br>- Habitual and unconscious efforts to understand diversity       |

### 3.4 Procedures

Questionnaires for the language competence and intercultural competence were conducted before and after the study abroad program. We asked students to participate in this survey at the meetings for the explanation of the program in February or March of 2017, according to the timing of the students' departures. Prior to having students answer the questions, we explained the purpose of our surveys and then received their consent in accordance with the ethical regulations of Meijo University. After returning from the program, the students were asked to answer the same questionnaires as those in the pre-departure in the meeting to report about their experience of study abroad. These questionnaires were paper-based and students were given 15 minutes to fill them out.

## 4. Results and Discussions

### 4.1 Language Competence

A Likert scale was used in the questionnaires based on the CEFR "Can Do" statements, and its scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was utilized for these statements. To analyze the changes in language competence between the pre-departure and the

post-return, paired sample t-tests were used. All analyses were performed using SPSS for Windows. Table 4 shows the results of the analysis. Figure 2 shows a line graph comparing the results of the pre-departure and post-departure surveys.

It was found that overall language competence significantly increased after studying abroad. Before studying abroad, the participants strongly agreed that their English levels were approximately A1 and A2. They could understand and describe sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance, such as basic personal and family information. Thus, they had already reached the Basic User level as defined by CEFR. The questionnaire revealed that students self-evaluated themselves with an average score of 2.95 for the B1 level, which indicates that the participants could understand and describe familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure. Thus, they felt that they only partially reached this level.

The participant's English levels reached beyond A2 and to an extent, B1, so they were assumed to be at a slightly higher CEFR level than the level the 2014 MEXT survey stipulated for high school graduates. The survey indicated that third-year high school students in Japan reached A1 or A2 level and they are expected to be able to reach level B1 by 2020. However, we took into account the fact that the participants showed better scores than ordinary high school students because they have been majoring in English and learning various subjects, including English skills such as reading, writing, communication, and discussion, for a full year at university already.

After studying abroad, the average score for all levels was significantly higher than they were pre-departure. We interpreted a self-evaluation score of three points or more to indicate the participants had confidence to reach levels above B2 or C1.

In addition, we analyzed the changes of the points of the sub-categories (listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, writing, and pronunciation) between the pre-departure and the post-return. The participants evaluated themselves higher in all of the sub-categories (See Appendix).

In terms of language competence, the criteria for the CEFR levels can show how much the participants might improve their language competence, indicating the improvement from A2 to B1 or even to the C levels. In other words, they may be able to attain a higher level of language competence, such as being able to describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly to give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. Thus, it was found that they all had confidence that they improved their English skills.

Table 4

*Pre-departure and Post-return CEFR Questionnaire Data*

| CEFR Level | <i>n</i> | Pre-departure |           | Post-return |           | <i>t-test</i> | <i>p</i> |
|------------|----------|---------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|---------------|----------|
|            |          | <i>M</i>      | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>    | <i>SD</i> |               |          |
| A1         | 31       | 3.77          | 0.56      | 4.13        | 0.63      | 2.65          | 0.013*   |
| A2         | 31       | 3.42          | 0.67      | 3.89        | 0.57      | 2.83          | 0.008**  |
| B1         | 31       | 2.95          | 0.58      | 3.64        | 0.53      | 4.71          | 0.000**  |
| B2         | 31       | 2.26          | 0.51      | 3.11        | 0.45      | 7.67          | 0.000**  |
| C1         | 31       | 2.15          | 0.51      | 3.02        | 0.57      | 7.01          | 0.000**  |
| C2         | 31       | 1.99          | 0.52      | 2.83        | 0.66      | 6.17          | 0.000**  |

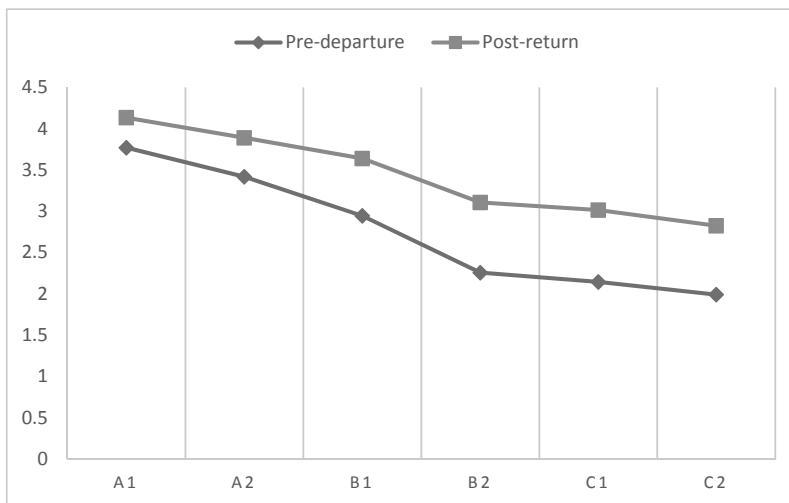
*p*\* <.05, *p*\*\*<.01

Figure 2. Graph of Pre-departure and Post-return CEFR Questionnaire Data

*Intercultural Competence*

To identify differences in intercultural competence, we applied the DMIS statements to make 32 questions for the six stages of *denial*, *defense*, *minimization*, *acceptance*, *adaptation*, and *integration*. The pre-departure and post-return questionnaires were then analyzed using a paired sample t-test. A Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was utilized for these statements. All analyses were performed using SPSS for Windows. Table 5 shows the results of the analysis. Figure 3 shows a bar graph comparing the results of the pre- and post-questionnaires.

The mean scores of the questions for the first stage, “*denial*,” and the second stage, “*defense*” are quite low, 2.00 and 2.02 respectively. The mean scores between the pre-departure

and the post-return were not statistically significant. It should be noted that the statements in this stage were worded negatively, such as “It is appropriate that people do not care what happens outside their country,” “People should avoid individuals from other cultures who behave differently,” “People from our culture are more important compared to people from other cultures,” and “Our culture’s way of life should be a model for the rest of the world.” The mean scores show the participants did not tend to have feelings of *denial* and *defense* towards the cultural differences. This may have been because participants had experience of being taught by native English teachers at their Japanese university. In addition, these scores may have been affected by the fact that the students had an opportunity to chat in English at a self-access language practice area at their university. This is an authentic English-speaking environment that is provided by the university at which students can talk with English native speakers or bilingual Japanese teachers at any time during school hours. In this environment, there is a chance that students had learned about various multicultural matters. Therefore, we could assume that the students had already reached the first or second stages.

With regard to the statements for *minimization*, “Cultural differences are less important than the fact that people have the same needs, interests and goals in life,” and “Human behavior worldwide should be governed by natural and universal ideas of right and wrong” had high mean scores and thus the data indicates their cultural differences seemed to be minimized. The means scores of the pre-post studying abroad were 3.58 and 3.70 respectively, which were not significant.

As for *acceptance*, the students already had the feeling they could recognize different behaviors in a cultural context, accepted behavioral variation across cultures, and made efforts to understand different views. The pre-studying abroad score was surprisingly high at 4.21, and the post-score was almost the same at 4.22. These results show that the participants had already made efforts to understand and learn about cultural differences, enjoy them, and take the differences for granted. From the items on *minimization* and *acceptance*, they seemed to have reached the third and fourth stages before studying abroad.

In the fifth stage, the stage of *adaptation*, one was expected to transact cognitive frame-shifting and behavioral code-shifting, which means one can feel advantages to joining more than two different cultures, evaluating and solving problems from the perspective of two different cultural aspects, and being a facilitator between one culture and another. The pre-departure mean score was 3.10 and the post score was 3.53, of which the difference was statistically different.

For the final stage called *integration*, an individual is likely to participate in two different cultures and value the diversity naturally and unconsciously. The differences between the pre-

and post-mean scores were 3.19 and 3.55, which were statistically significant. The participants were likely to try and adapt to some cultural differences and to integrate two cultures, and the experiences of studying abroad could be helpful to improve these intercultural developments.

We could see that the participants recognized they were developing their intercultural sensitivity. They seemed to believe they had already reached, to some extent, the fourth stage, and the study abroad experience contributed to their intercultural development. Our university environment and the curriculum could thus be considered effective in developing their intercultural sensitivity before the study abroad.

Table 5

*Pre-departure and Post-return DMIS Questionnaire Data*

| DI           | n  | Pre-departure |           | Post-return |           | <i>t-test</i> | <i>p</i> |
|--------------|----|---------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|---------------|----------|
|              |    | <i>M</i>      | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>    | <i>SD</i> |               |          |
| First Stage  | 31 | 2.00          | 0.55      | 2.23        | 0.72      | 1.50          | 0.145    |
| Second Stage | 31 | 2.02          | 0.65      | 2.09        | 0.73      | 0.60          | 0.552    |
| Third Stage  | 31 | 3.58          | 0.58      | 3.70        | 0.58      | 1.19          | 0.244    |
| Forth Stage  | 31 | 4.21          | 0.46      | 4.22        | 0.61      | 0.13          | 0.896    |
| Fifth Stage  | 31 | 3.10          | 0.40      | 3.53        | 0.50      | 4.66          | 0.000**  |
| Sixth Stage  | 31 | 3.19          | 0.43      | 3.59        | 0.56      | 4.78          | 0.000**  |

*p*\*\*<.01

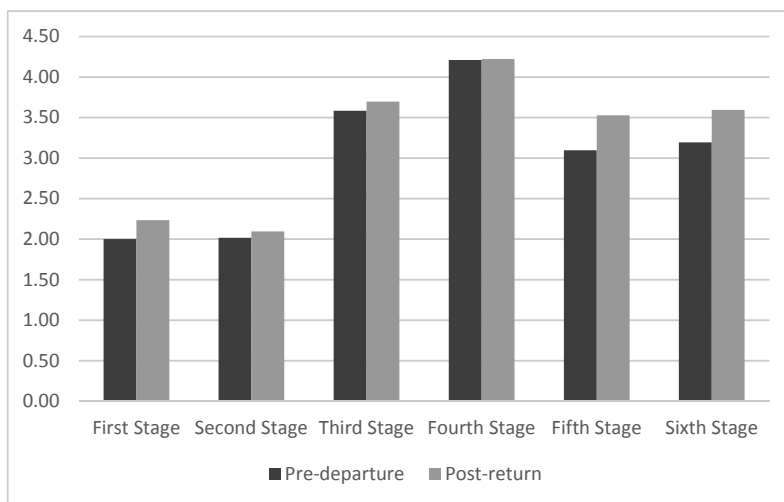


Figure 3. Graph of Pre-departure and Post-return DMIS Questionnaire Data

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated what students who had studied abroad in a semester gained from the perspective of language competence based on CEFR criteria and intercultural competence based on the DMIS. We asked participants to fill out a questionnaire before and after their study abroad.

As for CEFR, we found that students considered their English to be at the A2 level before studying abroad, which was the Basic User level. However, after the experience of studying abroad, their levels reached B1 or B2, which means they became Independent Users. The goal our faculty set was based on CEFR and at the end of the four-year course, they should reach the C1 level. Therefore, the study abroad experience seems to have accelerated their English fluency development.

We also recognized that students had already gained intercultural sensitivity. They did not feel *denial* or *defense* towards cultural differences. In addition, they had already gained the senses of the third or fourth stages of intercultural sensitivity, *minimization* and *acceptance*, and therefore, after studying abroad, their scores increased less but the difference was not significant. Students still seemed to need to experience encountering cultural differences to reach the fifth and sixth stages. However, studying abroad appeared to have helped the participants improve the senses of *adaptation* and *integration*.

In this study, we analyzed only 31 students who finished studying abroad in the spring semester of 2017; however, the number of participants in this research was small, so we intend to analyze more data obtained from the students who are studying abroad in the fall semester. As for language competence, we could see their development from their answers of the questionnaires. This data might be subjective, and therefore more objective data, such as TOEIC test scores, should be analyzed and compared with the results of this study. In terms of the DMIS, the participants had already acquired high intercultural sensitivity, though we selected only 31 items from the original 60 items of DMIS because of time limitations in order to reduce the burden on participants. We can assume the original 60 items of the DMIS might reveal clearer differences in comparison with these current results.

While we acknowledge the above limitations should be considered, overall, we could infer from this study that studying abroad for a semester could help the students improve their language competence and intercultural competence.

This study focused that only how language competence and cultural sensitivity of the participants were affected by the study abroad experience. There are several things to be considered, the types of staying in foreign countries, a dormitory or a homestay (Medina-

López-Portillo, 2004) and the duration of study abroad programs (Engle & Engle, 2004). We have not analyzed the personal growth as Adachi (2010) pointed out the benefit of study abroad.

We are planning follow-up questionnaires will be conducted with the same students in their third and fourth years to see how the study abroad programs will have continuously affected, or not affected, their English language competence, overall learning outcomes, personal growth, and career development.

## Note

- 1) All translations of Japanese sources in this paper have been translated by the authors.

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Appendix

