Beyond English proficiency: A conceptualization of a needs analysis for supporting Japanese study abroad students

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Abstract

Study abroad within EFL（English as a foreign language）contexts is typically viewed as a vehicle for facilitating language proficiency. This opens up the potential for organizers of study abroad programs to overlook other aspects of the study abroad experience, particularly academic skills, intercultural competence, and interpersonal relations. To that end, this paper reports on a study involving interviews with Japanese learners of English who have studied abroad for two academic semesters. The researchers interviewed ten research participants to explore their experiences in depth to identify challenges encountered while studying abroad. An analysis of the interview data explores the aforementioned aspects of their study abroad experiences beyond simple assumptions of language proficiency, which is intended to prompt educators to prepare study abroad students more holistically to ensure greater student success.

Keywords: international students, study abroad, language learning expectations, study expectations, contextual expectations, social expectations

Within foreign language education, study abroad is seen as a vehicle for students to develop their language proficiency and language skills through experiences in educational institutions in contexts where the commonly used language is the students' target language. While this is often a relevant goal, it is also a narrow one within the broader scope of socialization that students are likely to encounter while abroad. Given the scope of potential challenges, it is important to examine the extent to which students are provided adequate preparation for their study abroad experiences.

As a result, this paper provides insights drawn from an interview study of L1 Japanese-speaking students with study abroad experience. The researchers worked with interview respondents to elicit deep reflections of their experiences while abroad to capture their perceptions of the opportunities and challenges in their study abroad contexts. The study calls for analyzing the data through a synthesis of the identification of themes in the interview data（Braun & Clarke, 2012）with discussions of formal and informal support（French & Shockley, 2020; Lee et al., 2020; Metz et al., 2011）. This synthesis identifies elements of academic socialization while studying abroad with the aim of developing a framework useful for the design of study abroad preparation in higher education institutions. Proposal of such a framework can aid educators, textbook developers, and other stakeholders in higher education in designing more effective and encompassing programs for study abroad preparation beyond simple paradigms of target language proficiency.

Study abroad in the Japanese context

In the Japanese higher education, as in other

contexts, study abroad is seen as an essential tool for the globalization of students（Take & Shoraku, 2018）. In broad terms, sending students to overseas institutions to be exposed to a new academic environment and culture is both a useful vehicle for bringing international insights back to local institutions and often an attractive selling point to incoming university students eager to go abroad for new experiences. This has led to the active proliferation of study abroad programs throughout Japan and Asia with the number of students studying abroad in recent years considerably greater than in the 1980s（Take & Shoraku, 2018）, not considering the COVID-19 pandemic period.

That said, the benefits of study abroad on students present challenges in measuring outcomes, both for students and for institutions（Hoffa, 2007; McKeown, 2009）. At least at an institutional level, "short-term evaluation of internationalization which overemphasizes quantitative outputs"（Ota, 2018, p. 94）such as the number of study abroad students holds limitations for more comprehensively measuring the impact of study abroad. The impact on individual students is just as challenging to evaluate, with various strands of research exploring the effectiveness of study abroad on students' intercultural competence（Hanada, 2019）, self-empowerment（Fryer & Roger, 2018）, and gains through language learning（Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014; Shintani & Ellis, 2022）.

This paper attempts a broad view that study abroad has a generally positive impact on students in ways that transcend any particular aspect of internalization. Bradford（2019）problematizes what she perceives as a scholarship and policy overemphasis on language proficiency as the determining factor of the effectiveness of most English-medium instruction programs in Japan. A similar problematization exists in the field of study abroad research which necessitates the study outlined in this paper. Actively engaging oneself as a full-time student at a university abroad and can be an important turning point for Japanese college students too, although the transition from the educational institution in Japan to that abroad, while stimulating, can be strenuous. Not knowing how to access available resources due to language insufficiency and lack of an established support system often deepens the problems experienced in those areas（Smith & Khawaja, 2011）and thus students abroad can exhibit signs of isolation, loneliness, and depression（Wei et al., 2021）. As a result, the challenges and impacts of study abroad are varied in scope, requiring further conceptual development to allow educators and policy makers to more effectively evaluate study abroad programs and the benefits they might convey on students and institutions.

Theoretical background

Ochs'（2004）understanding of expectations within socialization provides a useful theoretical foundation for this study. Socialization requires not just an understanding of the basic language used within a community of practice and the rules and societal boundaries governing that community, but also an awareness of how those rules and boundaries are "*inferred* from practices of conventional, socially coordinated activities, and interpretative practices"（p. 103）. In other words, language is a critical component for participation within any particular community, but only to the extent that it facilitates understanding of and expertise in complex cultural practices complicated by social and emotional factors transcending spoken expertise. This insight thus requires a broader inquiry beyond language to not only capture the various dimensions of study abroad but also the relationships of those dimensions to each other.

Other theoretical discussions in the literature are useful to understanding study abroad through an analytical lens of socialization. Trifonovitch（1977）conceptualized cultural adjustment as series of stages that legitimate peripheral participants（Wenger, 1999）

experience in adjusting into their new environment. These stages are seldom a linear progression given the dynamic factors informing acculturation（Smith & Khawaja, 2011）. Rather, this conceptualization acknowledges that participants require a wide scope of social, cultural, and emotional resources to effectively become fully participating members in any community of practice.

The study

The aim of this paper is to present a conceptual understanding of the impact of study abroad beyond simple discussions of language or acculturation. Conceptual development in scholarly research allows for a visualization of theory for more concrete analysis in areas of insufficient theoretical coherence（Ravitch & Riggan, 2017）. A concrete visualization of the dimensions of study abroad can provide a foundation for researchers, educators, and policy makers to determine the effectiveness of endeavors before, during, and after study abroad.

To identify the dimensions of this conceptualization, this paper relies on data collected from 14 interviews with Japanese learners of English who attended university in Japan and studied abroad for time spans of two semesters during their time in university. Interviews were the chosen mode for this inquiry as "［a］ semi-structured life-world interview attempts to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subjects' own perspectives"（Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 14）.

Whereas much of the materials development for study abroad preparation and education in English for academic purposes in general emphasize target language proficiency, the perspectives of students who have studied abroad can contribute substantially to the broader goals that comprise academic socialization.

Research context and participants

Most interview respondents were students in the same department at a private university in Tokyo, Japan. The university is one of the larger higher education institutions in Japan with an overall enrollment of around 30,000 students, according to Wikipedia. The department sends students on a voluntary study abroad for at least one academic semester and provides some preparation to students prior to their study abroad experiences. The ten respondents went through an informed consent procedure and none opted out of the study.

The preparation program involves courses focused on academic writing and oral communication skills, ostensibly to prepare students for academic challenges abroad. Pre study abroad classes meet twice a week and usually last a year. In order to study abroad, students are also required to take the International English Language Testing System（IELTS）and attain a score of at least 5.0, which the organizers consider equivalent to B1 on the scale provided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages（CEFR）（IELTS, n.d.）.

The main researcher, Ivan Botev, conducted recruitment for this study and, thus, interviewed the respondents. Table 1 provides a basic description of the respondents involved in this study. He conducted initial interviews with all of the respondents listed.

The secondary researcher, Roehl Sybing, is a colleague of the main researcher through professional development in TESOL in Japan. He conducted the follow-up interviews with select students and the subsequent data analysis for this study.

Respondent codename	Gender	Study abroad country	University abroad	Minimum English language requirement	Age at start of study abroad
AK	Female	Bulgaria	Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"	CEFR B1 TOEFL ITP 450	20
AS	Female	Netherlands	Rotterdam Business School University of Applied Sciences	TOEFL ITP 550	20
KA	Male	Netherlands	Rotterdam Business School University of Applied Sciences	TOEFL ITP 550	21
MT	Female	United States	Maryville University	IELTS 7.0	21
SN	Female	Germany	Philipps-Universität Marburg	CEFR B2	21
ST	Male	United States	Northern Arizona University	IELTS 6.5	20
TM	Male	United States	Maryville University	IELTS 7.0	20
TO	Male	United States	Maryville University	IELTS 7.0	21
YK	Female	United States	Lindsey Wilson College	TOEFL ITP 450	19
YM	Female	Canada	Thompson Rivers University	TOEFL ITP 570	20

Table 1 - Description of interview respondents in this study.

Data collection

The study involved initial semi-structured interviews for all research participants with follow-up narrative interviews with select participants. Additional interviews allowed for deeper inquiry and also "an opportunity to comment on the interviewer's interpretations [of the respondents' utterances in the original interview] as well as to elaborate on their own original statements" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 117). At the outset of the study, the researchers determined an initial list of base questions, reproduced in Table 2, that they would ask interview respondents in the initial interviews. Follow-up questions provided for further inquiry of respondents' answers during interviews to allow for contextual development. The language in which the interviews were conducted was English. The preliminary interviews took place in the summer of 2021 and the secondary in spring 2022.

Basic information	Where did you go for your study abroad program (country, university)?
	Why did you choose that university for studying abroad?
Before study abroad	What did you do to prepare for study abroad?
	How did you feel about your language level before you left for your study abroad?
	What were your goals for studying abroad?
During study abroad	What did you do during your study abroad?
	How much did your goals change while studying abroad?
	What challenges did you encounter during your study abroad?
	How were the classes during study abroad different from classes at home?
	How easily did you make friends and socialize with others while studying abroad?
	Did you take any classes that were (not) related to your major?
After study abroad	How did you feel about your language level after your study abroad?
	How much did your university shape what you wanted to do after you graduated?

Table 2 - Base questions for semi-structured interviews.

The researchers selected four interview respondents for further interviews on the basis of discussions leading to a desire for further inquiry based on the respondents' initial answers. These secondary interviews were less structured in nature but were intended to elicit more detailed answers of specific experiences mentioned during initial interviews, and were about 1.5 h in length. In effect, the study follows Brinkmann and Kvale's (2018) guidance that the interviewer "together with the interviewee attempt to structure the different happenings recounted into coherent stories" (p. 83). Where beneficial, follow-up interviews referenced respondents' utterances in their initial interviews, but ultimately focused on challenges encountered by the respondents during their study abroad experience and how respondents addressed those challenges.

All interviews were conducted over the online conferencing platform Zoom and transcribed by the researchers for later analysis. While all respondents' first language was Japanese, both the interviewers and respondents used English during interviews. In all, 13.2 hours of data were collected from 14 interviews with 10 respondents.

Data analysis

All transcriptions were compiled in a database

maintained in Dedoose, an online qualitative data analysis software package that allows for thematic analysis（Braun & Clarke, 2012）. Thematic analysis emphasizes the importance of "identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of those commonalities"（p. 57）. While coding the transcribed data（Saldaña, 2015）, important or prevalent topics became apparent through a perceived abundance of supporting data, warranting their provisional inclusion in the proposed framework. Eventually, those topics formed larger thematic categories that comprise the proposed framework, which is discussed in detail in the findings section.

The thematic analysis for study abroad expectations also relies theoretically on Ochs'（2004）understanding of expectations within language socialization. The researchers employ Ochs' conceptualization of socialization to identify episodes of study abroad challenges co-constructed between the researchers and the interview respondents. As data analysis progressed, the researchers made further distinctions between formal and informal solutions to the challenges that interview respondents addressed during their study abroad experiences. Various strands of research（e.g., French & Shockley, 2020; Lee et al., 2020; Metz et al., 2011）make theoretical distinctions between informal and formal（e.g., institutional or policy-directed）resources of support that individuals employ to address challenges. This allows for discussion of the extent to which institutions provide support for study abroad students to satisfactorily address challenges they encounter as well as the extent to which students are able to address those challenges on their own or with informal networks of support. Finally, a further distinction was made between relying on support to address challenges and expressing resilience without support. The proposed framework this study generates, as a result, is a composite visualization consisting of study abroad expectations as well as resources of

support attending to those expectations, which allows for a visualization of the respondents' experiences for discussion of further guidance for institutions in preparing students for study abroad.

Findings

The thematic analysis outlined above yields four main categories across two themes of study abroad challenges as experienced by the respondents in this study. These categories, which are described in Table 3, comprise the proposed framework to assess the breadth and depth of the preparation educators and their institutions provide to students prior to their study abroad experiences. Topics identified through thematic analysis were grouped together into larger themes and are listed as subcategories in the table.

Theme	Category	Description	Selected subcategories
Academic context	Language expectations	Relating to the language used in the study abroad environment	Pre-study abroad classes Language school
	Study expectations	Relating to the educational or classroom aspects of study abroad	Classmates Tutoring Lectures Study skills Classroom skills
Sociocultural context	Contextual expectations	Relating to students' ability to cope in daily life in the study abroad environment	Accommodations Transportation Food
	Social expectations	Relating to interpersonal relations during the study abroad experience	Friends Classmates Roommates

Table 3 - Expectations encountered during study abroad.

Most certainly, it became clear in this study that language is an important aspect of the study abroad experience, which is why it is listed first. However, as this section will highlight, other expectations for study abroad either overlap with language expectations to some extent or are completely separate considerations apart from language proficiency.

How respondents address these expectations relate to the nature of support resources they employ. Table 4 presents a visualization of the proposed framework with the topics discussed during the interviews situated along the two dimensions of the data analysis to provide the outlines for discussion of

study abroad preparation with the interview respondents involved.

	Formal	Informal	Resilience
Language	Preparation classes	Language school classes	Voice recorder
Academic	Preparation classes Support staff	Tutoring from friends Collaboration with other international students	Study habits Time management
Contextual	Support staff	Paperwork Course enrollment	Local transportation Shopping/daily essentials
Social	Roommate relations	Social media communication Social events	Roommate relations

Table 4 - Proposed framework as applied to interview study data.

The following subsections illustrate each of the major categories with interview excerpts as exemplars of the key themes regarding study abroad preparation.

Language expectations

Across all interviews, respondents characterized language proficiency as a key reason for their decision to study abroad. Indeed, an analysis of the interview data indicates that respondents placed a high value on English proficiency above all other aspects of the study abroad experience, at least prior to studying abroad. The interview excerpt below with respondent ST indicates this singular focus that some study abroad students may devote to language study.

Interviewer: Now the reason I'm asking is because I just wanted to know, you know, what, what you did? Like, if you were thinking, okay, this is my specialty. So, these are the classes that I want to take while I'm abroad. But maybe in your case, that wasn't the case.

ST: Oh, right. Um, well, I wasn't interested in specific majors, but what I was interested in was how to improve my English skills. Oh, that's, that's the main and the biggest focus when I got into [a university in Japan]. So, I focused on ever since I got into

college, I told you . . . I focused on improving my English skills. So I took a lot of English classes and try to also get into higher level of English classes. You know, there was a class you know, classes for students who want to, you know, level up their English skills. And also I, well, yeah, I knew I took those English classes, and that's why I, that's why I went to study abroad. I wanted to improve my English skills.

The excerpt above echoes many of the respondents in this study and their motivations for pursuing study abroad primarily to reputedly build their English proficiency. This singular focus is beneficial in that intrinsic motivation is an essential component to language learning (Nakata, 2006). In respondent ST's case, this focus comes at the expense of other considerations, as he notes that he was not interested in specific majors and studied abroad primarily to improve his English skills.

The importance of language proficiency, of course, should not be underestimated, given that language is situated in the skills and practices necessary to participate in daily life. Respondent MT emphasizes this point when talking about daily conversations with others or lectures in class.

Interviewer: Is there anyone that you talk to for advice or help about [class work]?

MT: Oh, yes. Sometimes the, sometimes the friends of the class helped me the, how can I say? The conversation.

Interviewer: What do they tell you?

MT: Oh, the just the . . . I just keep collecting the words I could not catch out.

Interviewer: Okay. And you hear their advice and after that, are you able to

participate in class because of that advice?

MT: Oh, kind of. I tried. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. So what is different between before you get advice and after you get advice?

MT: Oh, one thing is relief. The, so, I have uh friends who helped me. So while the reason the I could change a little bit is. Yeah, I think the relief, relieved mind.

The emphasis on language study above other aspects of the study abroad highlighted in this study echoes what was found by Çiftçi and Karaman (2018) in that students acknowledge a sort of static, legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger, 1999) in which they remain at the fringes of their community of practice during their experiences abroad. In this case, the goal of study abroad for the respondents in this study is less about attaining a full expertise in a new context and culture and more about building language skills that may prove useful in their future endeavors.

Academic expectations

Despite the overt focus on language, a number of respondents acknowledged a need to adjust to the learning environments they encountered during their studies abroad. There is certainly overlap between language and study expectations as academics during study abroad are seldom conducted in the study abroad students' first language. However, as the proposed framework illustrates, a number of considerations regarding academic expectations are less linguistic and more cultural in nature.

Respondent TM studied politics at an institution in the United States. In the following excerpt, he reinforces the notion that academic success in study abroad is not wholly indexed to communication with L1 speakers. Rather, he relies on

support from other international students, both from Japan and from other countries, in order to understand the objectives of the politics class in which he is enrolled.

Interviewer: Interesting. You said, you said, um, you said it wasn't American friends. Um, was it a Japanese classmate that you were, that you asked for help?

TM: Yeah, there was one Japanese in a class. Also, I asked him and there was a, you know, uh, they were they were other exchange student from Europe. So what you were up and then, you know, South America, South America, like my scope. So I asked my friend I asked, I asked them about my question. And, you know, that was kind of easy for me. To know how to solve the problem, you know, my question.

Interviewer: I see, I see. Um, it sounds like it was easier to talk with other exchange students, rather than American classmates, is that right?

TM: That's exactly, yeah, exactly. Yeah, English. I felt like an English level of mine is almost the same as that, exchange students from other countries. So I thought we could understand what I thought. We could share quick question from the same perspective, with exchange students.

While struggling in class, respondent TM said that he looked for help from classmates who had the same level of English as he did, which made it easier to talk about their shared challenges, rather than rely on classmates for whom English was a first language. In this sense, there is a realization that attaining ideal language proficiency is less important than internalizing subject-matter expertise, which can be achieved without necessarily interacting with L1

English speakers.

Lack of knowledge about how to access available resources —— also due to language insufficiency and lack of an established support system —— can deepen the problems students experience in the process of acculturation or at least transitioning from their home institution's system to that of the host university（Smith & Khawaja, 2011）, which can also lead students abroad to exhibit signs of isolation, loneliness, and depression（Wei et al., 2021）.

In the following excerpt, respondent MT speaks about a similar experience, this time involving an attempt to work with an L1 English classmate. This sheds some light on the reason why international students prefer approaching students with seemingly similar backgrounds and language levels to theirs.

Interviewer: Sounds like everything's perfect so far

MT: This so far, but uh some sometimes are no good. No, no good for me the experience in the study abroad, though.

Interviewer: Can you give an example of that?

MT: Uh, what kind of class, I forgot but uh, I'm working in one kind of the class, the class needed group uh not group, pair working one on one.

Interviewer: Sorry, this is during class?

MT: During class. Then I was looking for the, my pair by myself. Then I talked to the, one girl who is American, American girl. And I exchanged the Facebook Messenger account, and keep in touch with her. Then the, okay we will work on, example Friday afternoon, I texted her. She was okay, okay, come to the cafeteria. But the day she doesn't, she totally didn't come and she totally forget.

Interviewer: Wow!

MT: Yeah. Keep in touch with her but uh, she sometimes ignores my text.

Interviewer: Uh, how does that feel?

MT: Oh, I was so sad.

Interviewer: What do you do about that?

MT: Uh, I really remembered, I tried uh, I tried a few time text to her but not so the, not so uh angry. My feeling the calm down and I texted her. "So, can we do the other days?" I texted to her a few times. Uh, sometime ignored but finally I could get the, I could get appointed with her and done the pair working.

Here, MT recollects a negative memory about her attempt to find a pair work assignment partner by approaching one of her classmates, a local student, who responded positively at first but turned out to be unavailable later. Eventually, after several rescheduling attempts and positive attitude by the study abroad student, the two were able to complete the class assignment. This brings us back to Chavajay's（2013）finding that students are more likely to consider receiving various types of support both on and off campus during their study abroad from other international peers（similar language level and shared struggles）than from local students（seemingly too high of a "hurdle" to approach and work with）. Sato and Hodge found that this is because "They believed that this was because international students tend to have difficulty communicating with American students and do not fully understand the essence of American social gathering patterns"（p. 221）. According to Smith & Khawaja（2011）, these stages are not a linear progression due to the dynamic factors informing acculturation, however since respondents' period of stay was limited to two semesters abroad, it can be

argued that this was not a sufficient period of time for this process to fully take place. In both respondents' cases, it is representative that attempting to work with L1 English speakers was deemed intimidating, something Sato and Hodge（2015）call "stranger anxiety"（p. 213）and also "isolation" during group work（p. 217）.

Contextual expectations

Besides their learning environments, respondents also noted differences between daily life in Japan and in their host countries. Beyond the immediate academic context, study abroad students exist in the broader, local environment around their study abroad institution, requiring attention from the home institution when preparing students for their studies abroad. As illustrated below, respondent AS referenced some of the more mundane processes of participating in a new university context, such as handling immigration paperwork or enrolling in classes.

Interviewer: Okay, you talk about the technical stuff, the logistical stuff.

AS: Yeah. Because I think like when I was in, when I enter Netherlands, when I been there, I do not have a visa or immigration card or something like that. But I was trying to get this kind of information from the students who are already there. And then from other universities, yeah. Then I could survive. But that's all.

Throughout her interview, respondent AS expressed a belief that her university in Japan did not adequately prepare her to handle the logistics of her study abroad university in the Netherlands. Maune's （2016）own research on study abroad students echoes this lacuna cautioning that many intuitions fail to help students learn how to deal with the ancillary tasks related to study abroad.

This challenge is echoed by respondent AK,

who talked about relying on her roommate's friends in order to learn how to do essential activities such as enroll in classes.

Interviewer: Does the university give any other information? Or any other help or any other support?

AK: Well, actually they didn't gave us much information. And actually, I'm still unclear about how to do at the first day or second day in the area, because in my case, my friends, my, my roommate, also know about some Bulgarian friends in the university. So they take care how to take care, to enter dormitory or enroll to the university. So she did everything and they talk in Bulgarian and so I don't understand what they do. Actually, we actually every Japanese university, we are first time but other time they, for months, extend the former students, Japanese students invite them to the messenger group. And then they connect to the new students to Japanese department students. So that the Japanese department students went to airport and after that they do everything for them. Like to enter in to everything to live in a dormitory or, yeah, so I don't know what the right process to . . .［trails off］

The two interview extracts suggest that there is more to be desired from the home institution during the preparation stage before students leave for their studies abroad. It also indicates that in respondent AS's case it might be the Japanese university's belief that it is not problematic to send students for an academic year abroad on a tourist visa, leaving students to cope with the official process on their own after arriving in their host countries. Similarly, in respondent AK's instance, the Japanese

university seems to have hoped that through unofficial channels and networks, its students will decipher all logistical obstacles with airport pick-ups, accommodation, class registration, etc.

> Interviewer: So, to go to class you have to go to the city every day, is that right?
>
> AK: Yes.
>
> Interviewer: University is in the city? In the city center?
>
> AK: It's in the, there is Sofia, this is the city center, there's a Sofia University main campus and Studentski Grad ［Student City］ is somewhere here.
>
> Interviewer: You're not really, so you're not really separated from the main city?
>
> AK: Not so much. We have, we have a direct bus and metro also. We cannot walk to the university.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah, sure. Sure. You have to, you have to take a bus you said?
>
> AK: Well, the Bulgarian student city there was not such far, I think, because the train is not, metro is not so fast, I think. But there are many stations. So it's takes time. And the road is always crowded. There was always traffic jam. So it takes one hour, but if I take a taxi, it was very much less.

As the excerpt above attests, AK had difficulties commuting between her dormitory and the campus.

During her interview it also became clear that her home institution did not provide her with any relative information prior to her study abroad. Here again, she had to depend on information provided by Sofia University's international office, other Japanese students already there, and local students studying Japanese. In her second interview, AK explained that

in the "Student City," or the neighborhood where most student dormitories were located, students were physically（and psychologically）distanced from the university and the faculty and staff there. Hence, students had to depend on one another while away from campus.

Social expectations

The final theme of note relates to how respondents interacted with other people while studying abroad. Any schooling context involves interaction with others in and out of formal teaching and learning contexts. Respondent ST found that social interaction was essential to his study abroad experience when he was struggling in classes and did not have a good strategy for academic success.

> ST: . . . I ［…］ had to do like, overnight study. I had to stay up all night. Yep, almost every day. So um, it that that much hard, hard, hard. The homeworks were, and I didn't know how to, like finish it, um, you know, with, with my English skills. Yeah. And, um I feel like I wasn't prepared, because I didn't expect that kind of thing. And uh, you know, as I tried to do it all along, I kept staying up all night, I eventually overslept skip classes, try to do homeworks, overnight, overslept skipped classes. And that kept, you know, I kept doing that. And eventually, I stopped going to classes because I was all you know, behind class. So, right now, well, I, that point, I thought, um, I wish I could find someone in the in university, or among my friends, who would help me finish my homeworks or, or I also thought that I had to change my personality . . .

In the above excerpt, respondent ST expressed

his realization that the challenges he experienced while studying abroad could be addressed through changes in academic habits and greater preparation for classes. When given the opportunity to leave study abroad early, respondent ST instead repeated the classes he failed to complete the first time and relied on classmates and friends in order to gain a sense of how to better prepare for the classwork.

The interview with respondent AK, highlighting her experience with her roommate, illustrates how interpersonal relations are at play with practices that fall outside the need for ideal English fluency.

> Interviewer: And how was your experience with your new roommate?
>
> AK: Well, it was excited. We we were not talk talkative person so we didn't. I'm regret about I didn't make when he conversation with her. But I can teach her. I taught her some Japanese. I helped her Japanese assignment. And she also helped me my big assignment. And she also interested in Japanese anime. Naruto, so you know, I'm not that so . . . in Naruto, she's said ramen is appeared in Naruto. Yeah, she had never eaten ramen so I made it for her. I was surprised someone wanted to eat ramen.

This anecdote highlights the importance of social alignment regarding cultural or shared interests, echoing Gee's（2011）assertion of affinities that connect people to each other. In this case, respondent AK is able to bond with her roommate because of her roommate's interest in Japanese culture, particularly the anime *Naruto*. Although she later says that she regrets not talking to her roommate much, this anecdote highlights the value of communicative competence in the absence of fluency that establishes useful social connections.

Respondent ST also speaks at length about his experiences with his roommate, but the challenge here centers on overcoming the issues at hand by accepting his roommate's strange habits at the end.

> Interviewer: Were there any? Are there any tensions? Or were there any problems with roommate?
>
> ST: We didn't have fights, but we had our differences. We, I was, to me, I was I was more confused than probably he was confused. To me. I was kind of shocked to see how he spends how he I don't know how to say, like, for example, he he spends most of the time naked.
>
> Interviewer: Okay. So and we're talking about absolutely no clothes at all, is that right?
>
> ST: I mean, with pants? Only underwear. Yeah. And also, he doesn't usually take a shower. So also, when he eats peanut butter, he doesn't use any spoon or fork, he he just puts his fingers in it and then just licking and without, you know, washing his hand, he touches every everything everywhere. So that was, I don't know if that was, no, that that was definitely not a Chinese thing. But it was just his thing. And I was shock, but sure. I accepted.
>
> Interviewer: I mean, did you say anything to him about it? You discuss it?
>
> ST: I think I did. But he didn't quite understand what I was saying because I don't think, my English was poor. And also his English was poor. And he didn't seem to care. So yeah. Um, so I was like, "Okay, do what you gotta do."
>
> Interviewer: Oh, so when you say

accept it, what does that mean? As in?

ST: Yeah, kind of gave up trying to,

you know, convince him.

In both examples, respondents AK and ST detail rich experiences regarding challenges of living with roommates while studying abroad. Challenges and opportunities with respect to roommates are individualized and vary in terms of the expectations for productive relationships. Respondent AK in the former excerpt addresses the challenges of language use with another non-L1 English-speaking student, while respondent ST speaks of needing to exhibit resilience in dealing with a roommate with undesirable habits.

Discussion

The resulting framework aims to provide a clearer understanding for the needs and challenges that students, particularly from the Japanese EFL context, encounter during their experiences while studying abroad. While some of these considerations relate to or can be addressed by language proficiency, the greater scope of practices within higher education in which study abroad students are expected to ably participate. In turn, the sort of support that home institutions can provide in preparing students to study abroad should be considered more holistically beyond the study of languages.

The distinction in the analysis between formal and informal sources of support illustrate the importance of a more holistic approach to study abroad preparation. In various examples, respondents rely on both formal, informal, and individual resources of support to address challenges while studying abroad. Of those examples, anecdotes of informal support (e.g., use of social media to connect with other study abroad students, relying on classmates who are also international students) should raise questions as to where home institutions can provide more formal preparation to mitigate sources of precarity for students during study abroad. It

should not be assumed, for example, that access to other study abroad students through social media would be readily available or even sufficient to addressing challenges at other universities as was the case with respondent AK. While some uses of the Messenger group that respondent AK mentioned include organization of social events and information for daily essentials such as shopping, other responsibilities undertaken by this group also included tasks arguably better delegated to more official support such as arranging transportation from the airport upon arrival. In other words, that support is informal in nature is not necessarily a critique of study abroad preparation without a deeper analysis and discussion of what should be expected of institutions in supporting students.

This analysis echoes previous studies specific to the Japanese EFL context regarding shortcomings in study abroad preparation programs in terms of academic skills (e.g., Cote & Milliner, 2017; Miller et al., 2021) and social and cultural competence (Douglas, 2020; English, 2012; Sato & Hodge, 2015). Moreover, the episodes outlined in this paper highlight challenges that interview respondents addressed in a manner that need not adhere to normative standards of English fluency or even contact with L1 English users. Respondent TM found success in his politics class by relying on non-L1 English-speaking classmates (i.e., fellow exchange students), while respondents AK and ST had non-L1 English-speaking roommates with whom they had differences in living expectations. In fact, the need for preparing students less for a perfect standard of language and more for a pluralistic use of language has been used to critique the current monolingual approach to study abroad preparation in the Japanese EFL context (Oyama & Yamamoto, 2020).

Implications and future research

The framework as defined can serve as a useful tool for needs assessment of study abroad preparation programs, at least in the Japanese context,

particularly as the nature of study abroad resists traditional needs analysis, which focuses in large part on stakeholders' overall satisfaction of the resources provided to them（Royse et al., 2009）. Particularly as many respondents viewed study abroad as a vehicle for building target language proficiency and given Japanese institutions' narrow focus on quantitative outputs related to study abroad（Ota, 2018）, the broader considerations identified in this study may be missed by a traditional needs analysis paradigm. Instead, evaluation of study abroad preparation stands to benefit from an analytical lens informed by the extent to which students are supported in their efforts to socialize into their study abroad environment, rather than by the extent to whether gains in language proficiency can be quantitatively realized.

To be sure, the larger breadth of socialization expectations explored in this study are not to be considered wholly separated and bounded from each other. Language is intertwined with all other aspects within any community of practice（Ochs, 2004; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011）, but this study affirms the importance of a more holistic analytical lens for research on study abroad preparation in the Japanese EFL context. Beyond an overt focus on language, a brief examination of the contemporary research indicates particular emphasis on isolated research areas such as digital literacy（e.g., Cote & Milliner, 2017）and motivation（e.g., Fryer & Roger, 2018）. These narrow research inquiries can benefit from broader research that situates these particular concerns within a broader framework of needs analysis.

Conclusion

This study illustrates the breadth of considerations involving students and study abroad preparation programs beyond narrow views of language proficiency. While language is certainly central to the study abroad experience - indeed, Ochs（2004）centers language as a tool for socialization - other aspects such as interpersonal relations and

academic skills deserve a degree of focus that the respondents in this study did not appear to receive. On this basis, the framework as proposed in this paper can provide a useful foundation for analyzing the effectiveness of study abroad preparation organized by institutions and of study abroad experiences for students.

The field of research centering on study abroad preparation in the Japanese EFL education context can benefit from a direct comparative analysis between study abroad preparation and the lived experiences of students who have gone abroad to more empirically grasp the benefits and shortcomings of such preparation programs. The current study focuses solely on the perspectives of study abroad students without having been able to directly observe their experiences while preparing to study abroad. A more comprehensive study can serve to affirm or challenge the preliminary framework proposed through the analysis of this study.

While it is perhaps not new ground in acknowledging that study abroad transcends a narrow view of language proficiency, the interview excerpts presented here highlight potential shortcomings in study abroad preparation that institutions can address through curriculum development and support infrastructure. The larger framework in which language proficiency is one aspect is proposed here to provide a means for educators, both in the classroom and in administration, to more adequately evaluate the extent to which they prepare students for study abroad is sufficient.

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