Promoting language and culture learning outside of the classroom: Implementing student-led committees in study abroad

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I will be talking about implementing student-led committees in study abroad. First I will describe some ways that study abroad students often fail to take advantage of the learning opportunities available to them when they are studying abroad. Then I will describe how student-led committees can address these issues, and specifically how they addressed these issues during the 2013 Critical Language Scholarship program held at the U.S. Department of State’s Critical Language Scholarship Japan Institute hosted by Himeji Dokkyo University. I will also mention how student-led committees helped students to improve their cultural competence. Lastly, I will discuss some areas in which the student-led committees that were implemented in 2013 could potentially be improved upon.
Students may fail to take advantage of learning opportunities in study abroad

1. Students use the base language more than the target language.

So, how effective is study abroad? On study abroad, students are surrounded by the target language and the target culture. One might therefore expect that students would be spending lots of time using the target language and learning significantly more than they could at home. However, this does not seem to be the case. Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey (2004) found that learners studying abroad in France used English more than French. In a separate study, Dewey (2007) reports that study abroad students in Japan used English more than Japanese, and interacted with non-native speakers more than native speakers. These findings could provide an explanation as to another finding of Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey’s study. They found that students studying intensively in a domestic learning situation had greater language learning gains that students studying abroad. Or in other words, in spite of the fact that the study abroad students were surrounded with native speakers in a target culture context, the domestic students made greater improvements in their language abilities. So one area in which students may fail to take advantage of the learning opportunities available to them is in how much they use the target language on study abroad.
Students may fail to take advantage of learning opportunities in study abroad

2. Students use the target language in a limited variety of contexts.

   Primarily:
   – With homestay family members
   – With fellow students

Another area in which students may fail to take advantage of the learning opportunities available to them on study abroad is in the variety of different contexts in which they use the language. Experiencing a variety of contexts of language use is important not only in developing linguistic ability but also cultural competence. As Noda (2007) acknowledges, learners could potentially use the language in a wider range of contexts on study abroad than when studying domestically. However, the range of contexts that learners actually experience on study abroad seems generally rather limited. Anectodal evidence suggests that outside of the classroom, learners tend to use the target language in two main contexts: Speaking with members of one’s homestay family, and speaking with peers.
Students may fail to take advantage of learning opportunities in study abroad

In both homestay and interaction with peers:

– Casual style is predominant
– Personal experience with hierarchical relationships is limited

In both of these contexts, the casual style would be the predominant speech style, and neither context provides students with the kind of social experience that they would get in a professional capacity.

Furthermore, in both these contexts Japanese natives would experience extensive socialization regarding hierarchical relationships. Antecedotal evidence suggests that study abroad students don’t experience the same kind of socialization in these contexts. In the homestay situation, students live with a Japanese family. When Japanese natives grow up in a family, they have a clear place in the family hierarchy. Their position is determined by their age, with older family members being higher in the hierarchy and younger family members being lower. This hierarchy is manifested in both the family members’ behavior and in their language. For example, the polite suffix –san is attached to the terms of address for older family members, but not younger family members. However, students who homestay in Japan are not given a place in the family hierarchy. They aren’t expected to
refer to older children of the family as older brothers and sisters, and younger children as younger brothers and sisters. They are often addressed by their first name plus –san by all members of the family, or by their first name alone, again by all members of the family. Thus, they do not experience the kind of register variation that members of the family experience. They are either treated as guests that are not family members, or as some kind of family entity that either has no place in the family hierarchy, or at best obtains the very lowest place in the hierarchy. Consequently, they are unable to participate in the family hierarchy in the same way that a family member could. Now, it would probably be strange for everyone involved if they actually were treated as a literal son or daughter of the family. But it remains the case that study abroad students do not experience the same kind of socialization in living with a family that a family member would. Their experience with hierarchies in this situation is mostly limited to an observational role.

The other situation I mentioned in which study abroad students often use the target language outside of the classroom is talking with peers. As with homestay, study abroad students don’t experience the same kind of socialization that Japanese natives would in this situation. For native speaking college students in Japan, there is a definite hierarchy. A senpai, or senior student, behaves differently to a kohai, or junior student, than a kohai behaves towards a senpai. Kohai may use addressee honorifics, such as desu/masu endings, in speaking to senpai, but senpai do not use these honorifics in speaking to kohai. Kohai are expected to do various tasks for senpai, while senpai are expected to provide food for kohai. However, study abroad students aren’t held to these same expectations. Native Japanese students who have been studying at their university for longer than the study abroad students don’t make requests of these students like they would of typical kohai. Similarly, native Japanese students who have been studying at their university for a shorter period of time than study abroad students don’t use addressee honorifics in speaking to those students. Again, the study abroad students are treated as guests or as familiar members of a separate organization, rather than as recognized members of the same organization.

Since students on study abroad aren’t socialized into Japanese hierarchical social interactions in the same way that Japanese natives are, students may struggle if placed as
an employee in a Japanese company. As an example of this, Moody (2014) reports on a student intern placed in a Japanese company. This intern has little confidence in his ability to interact appropriately with fellow coworkers, and often resorts to English to compensate. This is in spite of the fact that he is fluent in Japanese.

It is worth mentioning that there is an exception to the pattern I have described for study abroad students. It is study abroad students who join a club. Marriott (1995) conducted a study on Rotary exchange students, and in discussing her findings she mentions that of the 8 students she studied, there was only one student who could recall ever having received feedback regarding speech style. This student was corrected while participating in a club. I've also heard similar things as I've talked with study abroad students. Students that participated in a club during study abroad would occasionally mention how they were corrected in how they spoke to senior club members.
Students may fail to take advantage of learning opportunities in study abroad

1. Students use the base language more than the target language.
2. Students use the language in a limited variety of contexts.

So, to summarize, it seems that students on study abroad generally don’t use the target language as much as they could, and they generally don’t experience language use in a wide variety of contexts.

Now, how can student-led committees address these issues? I’ll first describe the structure of the committees and how they were implemented, and then how they address these two issues.

The student-led committees were implemented in an 8-week summer study abroad program. Prior to the start of the program students were informed that they would be participating in committees. Committee participation was considered to be one type of community activity that students would be participating in. This is the information students were given regarding committee participation:
Committee Structure

“One of the formal aspects of community activities is your service on various program committees. CLS Students will work with CLS and Himeji Dokkyo University staff to plan and implement events, trips, and information sharing. You will work with local resource providers to learn the decision-making process involved in shaping and implementing program activities.”
Committee Structure in 2013

- Health and sports (健康・スポーツ)
- Events and community outreach (地域・クラブ・イベント・アウトリーチ)
- Travel (交通・旅行)
- Housekeeping (ホテル・ハウスキーピング)
- Newsletter (ニュースレター)

The committees addressed 5 separate areas of responsibility. These areas were health and sports, events and community outreach, travel, housekeeping, and newsletter. The health and sports committee was responsible for promoting student health during the study abroad, and for handling any inquiries from students regarding opportunities to participate in sports. The events and community outreach committee was responsible for assisting with the coordination of community service and other activities, both optional and mandatory. The travel committee was responsible for informing students of travel opportunities, and addressing students’ questions about travel opportunities. To understand the housekeeping committee’s responsibilities, it is necessary to mention that the students did not stay with homestay familys but in a business hotel. Hotel staff interacted with students in a professional manner, and at the same time also seemed to feel an older sibling-like responsibility for the students. This being the situation, the housekeeping committee was responsible for ensuring that students fulfilled their responsibilities as hotel guests, and for addressing concerns students had regarding living
arrangements. The newsletter committee was responsible for publishing a bilingual newsletter on a bi-weekly basis. While some of the content of the newsletter was written by members of the newsletter committee, the committee’s primary responsibility was that of formatting and editing the newsletter. Much of the content of the newsletter came from assignments students completed as part of their regular language instruction.
Committee Structure in 2013

- Health & Sports
- Events & Community Outreach
- Travel
- Housekeeping

Each student participated on one committee for 8 weeks.

Each student participated for 2 weeks.

Each student participated in one of the first four committees. Students were assigned to the four committees based on their own personal preference, and most students were able to serve on the committee that was their first choice. For each of these four committees, students participated in the committees throughout the 8-week study abroad. Additionally, each committee took turns being responsible for one installment of the newsletter. In other words, each student served for 8 weeks on one of the first four committees, and 2 weeks on the newsletter committee.
Committee Structure in 2013

- 6-8 students per committee.
- Each committee included students from each level of instruction.
- Committees were chaired by students.
- Committees were overseen by instructors.
- Meetings were held weekly.

Each committee consisted of 6-8 students. For each committee, members of each of the four levels of instruction participated. These levels were level 3 high, level 4 low, level 4 high, and level 5. For each committee, one student served as committee chair and another as vice chair. The selection of chair and vice chair was done by the students. In general, the committee chairs were students from the higher levels of instruction. There was one exception—a committee chair from the level 4 low class—and while this committee chair struggled somewhat with responsibilities, the vice chair was a level 5 student and provided support and assistance.

Each committee was overseen by an instructor of the program. 4 native speakers of Japanese and 1 native speaker of English—myself—served in this capacity. All committee business was done in Japanese, whether face-to-face or email communication. And there was a general understanding that the committees would be run according to Japanese conventions.

Committee meetings were held on a weekly basis. Committee chairs led the meetings and handled the necessary business.
Interaction with the Community

- Introducing the committee chair to the hotel manager
- Meeting with the hotel manager about a fire/earthquake drill
- Contacting curry companies about the ingredients in their curry
- Making inquiries about the hotel’s key policy
- Asking hotel staff regarding the towel procedure

Through committee participation, students were provided with opportunities to interact in the target language with fellow committee members and the overseeing instructor. Students were also provided with opportunities to interact with community members through committee participation. I’ll give some examples here, which come from my experience overseeing the housekeeping committee.

Soon after the committees were formed, I introduced the chair of the housekeeping committee to the manager of the hotel. Formal introductions had been covered in class, and this was an excellent opportunity to use what had been learned in class in a real situation. Before actually doing the introduction the committee chair and I practiced how to perform a formal introduction together. After practicing, we visited the hotel manager. I introduced the chair of the housekeeping committee to the manager and explained what her role as committee chair was. The manager and the committee chair then spoke briefly.
The next example concerns a fire and earthquake drill that was planned at the hotel. Before the drill took place the chair of the housekeeping committee, another representative from the committee, and I met with the hotel manager. The manager went over the details of how the drill would be performed, and the members of the committee asked questions. After the meeting, the committee chair sent an email, in Japanese, to the other students relaying what the manager had told us in the meeting.

Another example concerns some of the vegan students that were participating in the program. During one of our excursions the plan was for one of the meals to be curry, and there was concern regarding whether or not the curry contained animal products. It was thought that the curry paste that Japanese typically use to make curry would probably contain animal products, and bringing a vegan-friendly curry base to the excursion was considered as an option. The task of finding out which curry brands contained animal products was entrusted to the housekeeping committee. The committee chair looked up the phone numbers of the more prominent curry companies and called the companies to ask if the curry contained animal products. The chair then told the program staff what she had found out.

The next example concerns a hotel policy that some of the students found a bit irritating. At the hotel the students were staying at the policy was that guests would give their keys to the staff at the front desk when they left the hotel, and they would pick up their keys from the staff when they returned to the hotel. Some of the members of the committee had heard students complaining about this—and may have complained about it themselves—so the housekeeping committee decided to investigate why the hotel had this policy. One of the committee members asked one of the program instructors about this policy, and the result of their discussion was relayed to other committee members at the next meeting. After some discussion of the committee member’s report, another committee member was tasked with drafting an article on the subject to appear in the next edition of the newsletter. After the article was reviewed by the committee chair and myself, the article was submitted to the newsletter committee, and appeared in the next edition of the newsletter.
One final example. During the study abroad, some students reported that towels were piling up in their rooms. The students seemed to be used to the American practice of leaving towels on the floor when they want new ones, and hanging them up when they wanted to keep using them. However, no matter where they hung the towels in their rooms new towels kept piling up and the old towels weren't being taken away. One of the level 3 high students—the lowest level—was given the task of asking the hotel staff what to do with the towels when they were done using them. He learned that if you put the towels out in the hallway that the staff will collect them in the morning. Another committee member was tasked with writing a short notice for the newsletter, and the information was relayed to the other students in the next edition of the newsletter.
Addressing Concerns

Concern #1:
Students use the base language more than the target language.

How Committees Addressed the Concern:
Student-led committees promoted target-language use outside of the classroom.

As mentioned previously, one of the ways in which study abroad students can fail to take advantage of study abroad is in not using the target language outside of class. With student-led committees, students were provided with additional opportunities to use the target language outside of class. The students used Japanese with fellow students, with the overseeing instructors, and with members of the local community. In this way, participating in the committees helped students to increase how much they used the target language outside of the classroom.
Addressing Concerns

Concern #2:
Students use the language in a limited variety of contexts.

How Committees Addressed the Concern:
Student-led committees provided opportunities to use the language in professional contexts.

The other area of concern that was mentioned was that students generally do not experience using the language in a wide variety of contexts during study abroad. The committees helped to address this issue as well. One context they experienced that they might not have otherwise was that of a committee meeting. During the meetings, students used Japanese to discuss ideas and make decisions. Outside of committee meetings, students interacted with members of the local community as representatives of the program. Thus, through committee participation students used the language in a wider variety of contexts than they would have otherwise, and in this way further developed their cultural competence as well as their linguistic competence.
Areas of Improvement

• Provide instruction and coaching to students regarding Japanese cultural norms for committee interaction.
• Plan opportunities for students to interact with members of the local community.
• Plan tasks that can be performed by lower proficiency students.

In closing, I will mention a few areas in which the ways that the committees were implemented in the 2013 study abroad could potentially be improved. One way is through providing instruction and coaching to students regarding Japanese cultural norms for committee interaction. For example, committee chairs had a tendency to make small decisions without running those decisions by the overseeing instructor or other program officials. Also, it was not uncommon for students to perform tasks that pertained to another committee’s sphere of responsibility. Instruction and coaching regarding Japanese cultural norms for committee interaction would not only help program business to be conducted more smoothly, but would also help students to improve their ability to communicate with native speakers, and particularly in a professional capacity.

Another potential area for improvement is the amount of interaction that committee members had with locals. For some committees, the members had only limited interactions with locals. For interactions that did occur, the committee chair seemed to be much more
involved than other committee members. Planning in advance opportunities for students to interact with members of the community could help improve the situation. Instructing and encouraging committee chairs to delegate could also be beneficial.

A final area of concern was that lower proficiency students were generally less involved in the committees than higher proficiency students. Ensuring that students of higher proficiency do not undertake tasks that lower proficiency students are able to perform would be beneficial. Preparing tasks in advance that lower proficiency students could complete could also be beneficial. Having lower proficiency students shadow higher proficiency students as they interact with locals in more difficult tasks could also increase the level of involvement of these students. This practice would help both higher and lower proficiency students to benefit when committee members interacted with locals.

It should be noted, however, that the evaluation and recommendations I have presented here are based on my own personal observation as well as feedback I have received from program instructors and students. Empirical research on student-led committees and their efficacy in addressing the issues I have described is recommended.

In conclusion, student-led committees provide one way of increasing the extent to which students use the target language outside of the classroom, and of increasing the variety of contexts that students use the target language in during study abroad. In this way, students leave study abroad not only more fluent in the target language but also more culturally competent and better prepared to use the target language in a professional capacity.
Thank You!

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