

〈Research Note〉

Relationship between Student Internships and Second Language Education: Examples from the Experience of a US Overseas Studies Program in Japan

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By Andrew Horvat *

The following research notes deal with the relationship between foreign language study and student internships. Report 1 describes the effectiveness of “peer education” in encouraging awareness among students of a) the real life benefits to be had from overseas internships and b) the crucial role of pre-departure language training in enhancing the internship experience. Using responses to two separate surveys of students and host organization staff, Report 2 demonstrates how time spent on language study prior to an internship correlates positively with satisfaction levels of both students and hosts. Report 3 focuses on counterintuitive insights gained from qualitative analysis of responses to post-internship surveys.

Report 1: Utilizing peer education to promote pre-departure language study and encourage participation in overseas internships

It has been generally assumed among Japan-related study abroad specialists that internships are a “good thing” since they place students inside Japanese society and encourage social interaction to a far greater degree than classroom instruction. But what factors contribute most to a satisfying internship experience? Student responses to surveys at the conclusion of a program consisting of an academic quarter in Kyoto followed by a summer internship at a Japan-based host organization indicate that the single most significant determinant of satisfaction is pre-departure language study.

As Report 2 demonstrates, students who arrived in Japan with more than the minimum required

units of Japanese generally evaluated their internship experiences more highly than those who came having completed only the prerequisite two quarters. While this fact is unlikely to surprise language teaching professionals,¹ the positive correlation between pre-departure language preparation and success after arrival is generally not well understood by students.

Although surveys comparing the language competence levels of students who participated in summer internships with those who returned immediately after the spring academic quarter were not taken, almost all students who participated in internships stated that their ability to communicate in Japanese had improved significantly by the end of the summer as a result of interactions with native speakers at their host organizations.

While most students stated that they derived great satisfaction from acquiring skills in Japanese, during the economic downturn following the bursting of the US subprime bubble many came to perceive additional Japanese language study as taking time away from courses in technical fields such as engineering and computer science, subjects they saw as crucial to their future careers.

The task facing instructors and administrators of the Stanford Kyoto program was to make students aware that in a globalized economic environment the ability to speak a foreign language was not a luxury but a necessity and that an overseas internship – especially one conducted in a foreign language – would greatly improve a student’s career choices on graduation. As described below, during the post-subprime recession many students chose to return to the United States early to take part in internships with American firms. With regard to pre-departure language preparation, about 60 percent of students continued Japanese study but the remainder either stopped at the minimum two quarters or else interrupted language study after just one additional course in order to make room for courses in computer science and engineering.

In the immediate aftermath of the economic downturn, numbers of students staying for summer internships declined precipitously. This first report describes how administrators were able to reverse that trend through “peer education” – students telling other students about their positive experiences.

Background

Founded in 1989 as the Stanford Center for Technology and Innovation (SCTI), the Kyoto overseas studies program was initially conceived as a response to deteriorating US-Japan relations during an era of trade and technology friction. SCTI’s original goal was to nurture a cadre of Japan-literate business and technology leaders who could respond to tensions in bilateral relations with sensitivity gained through first-hand knowledge of Japanese language and culture.

Although the name SCTI was dropped in 2012, the program remained largely as originally envisaged: a minimum of one quarter of academic study in Kyoto followed by a 10-week summer

internship at a Japan-based host organization. In one typical year students were placed at research laboratories of NTT and NEC, a product design firm in Yokohama, three software start-ups, and four major manufacturers: Hitachi, Kawasaki, Furukawa and Horiba.

In normal years 80 percent of students taking part in the Kyoto program are in science and engineering; the remainder, in the social sciences and humanities. The latter normally proceed to internships at NGOs, think tanks, and research centers. In 2012 these included the Institute of International Monetary Affairs, JACSES (an environmental NGO in Tokyo) and the Kyoto International Manga Museum. One student worked at the Tokyo office of a Democratic Party of Japan Diet member. The number of students participating in the program in recent years has ranged between 30 and 40 depending largely on the popularity of study in Japan in any given year. Since its founding, SCTI has placed about 800 students at internship with organizations of various kinds in Japan.

As might be expected, many students perform at a very high level. During one recent program session a linguistics major in her junior year wrote a paper comparing attitudes in Kyoto and Osaka toward the use of Kansai dialect. During her internship at a Kyoto hospital she studied cross sections of frozen mouse brain tissue to pinpoint the location of sound production in the brain. In another year a mechanical engineering major devised a new type of clutch which his host firm later patented. At the end of their internships, both students presented the results of their work in Japanese.

Challenges

In the years immediately following the bursting of the US subprime bubble in 2008 students expressed reluctance to commit to internships in Japan, preferring instead to return to the United States where they felt they stood a better chance of finding secure jobs after graduation. Even those students who chose to remain in Japan for an internship saw the experience primarily as preparation for future employment. For example, one engineering student wrote in his evaluation at the conclusion of his internship at a major auto parts firm “will help make me an even greater success.” I cite this to indicate that perhaps one half of technology students on the program can be categorized as “instrumental learners” in keeping with the criteria established by Gardner and Lambert.ⁱⁱ The other roughly 50 percent of science and technology majors could be described in the same way as the majority of social science and humanities students, namely as “integrative learners.” This is clear from statements these students made in program applications that their interest in things Japanese was sparked by childhood viewing of anime such as *Doraemon* and *Sailor Moon*.

An additional factor contributing to the decline in internship participation was a change in program rules. Until 2006, internships were a mandatory part of the SCTI program. As soon as internships became voluntary, numbers of participants declined from 30 in 2006, to 27 in 2007, 24 in 2008, 20 in

2009 and 19 in 2010. Had an outside funder not stepped in to subsidize two social science internships in 2009 and 2010, numbers for those two years would have been 18 and 17 respectively. In other words, within four years the program experienced a 40 percent drop in internship participation.

By 2011, however, numbers of students choosing to remain for internships had recovered almost completely. And in 2012 there were twice as many technology majors heading for internships as in 2010. Had the disaster of March 11, 2011 not forced the cancellation of the Kyoto academic quarter in the spring of that year and had other delays not resulted in students giving up summer internships already arranged for them, some 24 technology majors would have taken part in internships in Japan in 2011. By 2012, however, that very same number of engineering and hard science majors did take part in internships at Japan-based host organizations.

Response

How was the program able to rebuild its internship component and did this recovery signify changes in student attitudes toward the importance of pre-departure language proficiency? The answer lay in peer education, i.e. getting students to inform other students about a) the real-life benefits of overseas internships, and b) how additional language training improves internship outcomes.

In 2009, at the suggestion of staff at a major donor organization, program administrators in Japan launched a regular annual exit event where students were given an opportunity to meet among themselves to discuss their internship experiences. It became immediately apparent that this exercise contributed to heightened student morale. Of 20 students in 2009, 18 had positive stories to relate. They spoke about their initial difficulties and embarrassments and how they eventually achieved rapport with supervisors and co-workers. In 2011, of 12 students who came to Japan in spite of the March 11 disaster, 10 evaluated their internships positively, one not so, and one admitted in front of peers that she would have had a more fulfilling experience had she taken more Japanese language courses prior to coming to Japan.

In 2010, with the help of Dr Richard Dasher, director of the US-Asia Technology Management Center at Stanford, the Kyoto program revamped its home campus orientation programs, held at that time some six months prior to the departure of students for Japan. The aim was to home in on the concerns of the “instrumental learners” about employment and to encourage them to think positively of their internship experience.

Dr Dasher, a linguist by training, presented a picture of “reward for effort,” a basic motivating factor for instrumental language learners. He explained that an internship in Japan even at relatively little known host organizations would give students “international experience” and “global competence.” Students were told that if they wrote on their CVs these four magic words, that the

computers which read application forms would immediately pick theirs out. The message was simple: real-life overseas experience would count more towards a job than time spent at big name companies where interns may be asked to do little more than make copies and serve coffee.

Students who had taken part in the program in previous years and who had spoken positively about their internship experiences at exit events were asked to talk about their internships at the pre-departure on-campus orientation sessions directed at students heading for Japan in the following year. At one such session, a student, who had interned with an international securities company in Tokyo described how she had learned about stock markets by editing the English language copy of Japanese market analysts, how she had been asked to provide a short course on presentations in English for Japanese sales staff, and how much this was appreciated by her supervisor. And finally, she told her fellow students that everything she had done had led directly to her being hired by a major international consulting company at its San Francisco branch on her return.

The impact of this student's presentation was electrifying. One student in the audience who earlier had said he wished to return to the United States after the end of the academic quarter in Kyoto (without heading for a summer internship in Japan) approached the Kyoto program director at the end of the orientation session to say he had changed his mind. This student, an environmental engineer, not only signed up for an internship in Japan but also remained committed to it even through the uncertain period after March 11, 2011 when it appeared that in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear accident the university would cancel not only the academic quarter in Kyoto but summer internships in Japan as well. This student was among the 12 who stuck it out and came to Japan in the summer of 2011. This same student, upon completion of his internship in August 2011 wrote in his evaluation: "I think this program is a great experience and the staff should continue to advise students that do not choose to intern initially to do so anyway (which was my case)." This is a direct reference to his change of mind thanks to the revamped orientation. Although he was not aware of it, he was responding to peer education.

In October of 2011, the same type of pre-departure internship orientation program was held on the home campus; this time the mechanical engineering student whose new type of clutch had been patented by his host company spoke to students weighing the pros and cons of staying for an internship in Japan the following summer. The student made the following two points: 1) I went for "international experience and global competence" (the very words used by Dr Dasher in the orientation session he attended in 2010) but 2) learned a lot that was directly related to my major (strong appeal to instrumental learners). Both he and another student spoke (without prompting from program staff) about the importance of pre-departure language study. The engineering student explained that thanks to having taken five quarters of Japanese instead of the minimum required two quarters, he was able to read the *kanji* (Chinese characters) on the Japanese language patent

application his company showed him prior to filing for (and obtaining) a patent for the device the student had developed while interning at the company.

The student who had expressed mixed feelings about her internship at the exit program also spoke. In front of students who could still opt to take additional Japanese courses, she confessed that she had taken only the minimum two quarters for technology majors but later, during her internship, when she was having troubles communicating with host organization staff she realized that she should have taken more Japanese. (This student returned to Kyoto later to complete a full two years of Japanese language study.)

After the 2011 on-campus internship orientation described above, 32 students signed up for on-campus interviews for internships. Of these 29 made a firm commitment to do internships and ultimately all were placed with host organizations. In other words, the ratio of participation in internships had recovered to virtually the same levels as when internships had been mandatory.

Conclusion

The experience of the Stanford Kyoto program in the difficult economic period of 2008 to 2011 proves that crises do contain opportunities. In this case, the sudden and drastic downturn in numbers of participants encouraged administrators to focus on reaching out to students to explain the real-life benefits of foreign language skills and the positive role of internships in maximizing those skills.

The decision to let students speak to other students turned out to be the right one. Students are able to convey through dress, gestures, and vocabulary, a sense of community with their fellows.ⁱⁱⁱ While there can be no doubt that student testimonials are the most effective way to get across the message that internships are both personally transformative and career useful, (and that language is not merely a curriculum prerequisite but also a real and genuine building block of the experience), peer education alone does not provide a complete explanation for positive student response. Were peer education the only determining factor, then students ought to be able to convince other students to do absolutely anything. We know that this is not true. Peer education is an effective tool when the message being transmitted has recognizable truth value. That pre-departure language study is the single greatest determinant of competence achieved after arrival is demonstrated below.

Report 2: Relationship between language competence and success in overseas study -- What the numbers did tell us: strong correlation between Japanese language ability and student/host satisfaction

The following are some conclusions drawn from a survey of students returning from Japan after completing an internship during the summer of 2012 and a separate questionnaire sent to the same students' host organizations. A response to a question on the application form students filled out prior to leaving for Japan is also referred to. In the year in question, Japanese language levels stood at: five students in first year, 14 students in second year and six students in third plus one in fourth.

There were also 10 students who had taken one course beyond the minimum required but had dropped language study in order to take more courses in their area of concentration, usually engineering and computer science. When looking at student expectations from overseas study – in particular internships – this group of 10 is highly significant because they had interrupted their language studies and had fallen behind their peers. The pressures on technical students to take courses related to their majors is extremely high so we need to refrain from being judgmental regarding this type of behavior but it is clear from survey responses that these students reported being least satisfied with their internship experience. They also received low evaluations from their host organizations compared to students who opted for more language study.

The survey material:

1) Student survey: Of 29 students who stayed beyond the academic quarter in Kyoto to undertake summer internships 21 replied to a 10-question survey. This report focuses on responses to three questions: a) did you use Japanese in your internship; b) were you generally satisfied with your internship experience; and 3) would you consider returning to Japan to work in future?

2) Host organization questionnaires: Of 29 host units, 24 responded in writing, two in verbal interviews and three opted not to send evaluations. Taking Japanese cultural context into consideration, we can assume that failure to respond meant a desire to avoid giving a negative appraisal. In all three cases in which responses were not received, students hosted by the same organizations also either failed to respond or else expressed critical views of the internship. Host units were asked six questions but for sake of simplicity responses were reduced in the following way: a) host unit satisfaction with student's Japanese language ability and b) the average score of answers to five questions related to student attitude toward work and social relationships. Unit supervisors were asked to rate students on a scale of 1 to 4, the highest number being 4. Again, given cultural context, under normal circumstances a student could expect to receive a 4 regardless of how many years he/she had studied Japanese. Anything below a 4 was judged as indicating dissatisfaction on the part of the host organization.

3) We also looked at an answer students gave to one particular question on their pre-departure application forms: “What classes are you taking that might be relevant to your major or internship?”

A high degree of correlation could be observed between positive student self-evaluation and host unit appraisals; likewise, an equally close correlation existed between dissatisfaction among students and low evaluation by host units of the student’s performance. In 24 out of 29 cases student self-appraisals and host evaluations correlated positively, i.e. both the student and the host supervisor agreed about the outcome of the internship whether negative or positive.

With the exception of one outlier – a dissatisfied student with one year Japanese who was given a 4 by his host both in language and general performance – students with just one year of Japanese, or students who had interrupted their language studies after completing the minimum requirement, received low evaluations from their host organizations and in one case received no evaluation. Three of seven such students received evaluations of 2 on a scale of 4 from host supervisors.

Thirteen of 17 students who were given scores of 4 on language or 4 on other criteria by their host organizations also rated their experiences as having been either generally or wholly satisfactory. One student stated that her experience went “well beyond expectations.” All 13 had two or more years of Japanese prior to embarking on internships. Of 5 students in third year Japanese, four were rated highly by host organizations as well as themselves; of the eight among the 13 who had completed second year, four finished their last quarter of Japanese with As, two had A-s, one a B+ and one had a B. (Although the B student did not do so well in class, this student had an outgoing personality and was seen to be performing well outside the classroom in contact situations with Japanese peers.)

In other words, there is a clear correlation between high performance in language, high satisfaction in internships and positive evaluation from host organizations. While this may look like a no-brainer to any fairly competent speaker of a foreign language who has spent significant time abroad, this correlation does not appear to be self-evident to students even as they prepare to go to Japan.

This inability to see a connection between Japanese language skills and success after arrival seems to be corroborated by the failure of nearly 2/3 of internship participants to list Japanese courses in their pre-departure application forms as “being relevant to your internship.”

It would appear that most students assume that they will have a successful experience overseas simply by going to the target country and spending time with local people. Most are unable to understand that language competence is not simply a course pre-requisite but that it is the single most important enabling element of the life-changing experience that they say they wish to have as a result of study overseas.

Conclusion: More effort is required to convince students going abroad that the time and effort they spend on language study prior to their departure is just as much a part of their preparation as the technical courses they take. In fact, without an ability to engage in basic communication in a target

language, much of the time students spend on technical preparation will be for nothing since they will not be able to develop the social and professional relationships needed to apply the technical skills they have learned. Moreover, the general sense of satisfaction – well-being – that they will acquire through the confidence they gain from being competent communicators in a foreign language, will have a positive ripple effect on other aspects of their time abroad including their professional work. Conversely, frustrations due to lack of language competence will undermine their self-confidence which in turn will have an adverse effect on all aspects of their stay. Although the scope of this analysis is limited, nonetheless the message comes across loud and clear: students who go abroad with less than sufficient pre-departure language training are setting themselves up to fail. Every effort should be made to encourage students going overseas to take language study seriously.

Report 3: Qualitative Analysis of Student and Host Organization Internship Survey Answers -- What the numbers don't tell us: the importance of being earnest.

In Report 2 we tabulated numerical ratings of student performance by host organization staff in areas such as language skills, task completion, and socializing ability and compared these with student self-appraisals of levels of satisfaction on conclusion of internship. We found that there was a strong positive correlation between time devoted by students to language study and satisfaction of both students and internship hosts.

The above method was useful because it provided hard facts when encouraging students to take language study seriously, i.e. to finish more than the minimum two quarters of Japanese for technical majors and five quarters for non-technical majors before leaving for Japan.^{iv} However, qualitative analysis yields nuances which the mere tabulation of results – the reduction of satisfaction levels to numbers – does not.

Qualitative analysis, i.e. the search for common threads in students' written responses as well as comments of host organization staff, not only corroborates the results of quantitative analysis it also provides some insight into areas for which we did not create criteria when tabulating numbers.

The importance of being earnest:

- 1) The earnestness with which a student tries to communicate and to learn Japanese is appreciated more highly by host organization staff than successful performance. It is significant to note that students with only one year of Japanese received praise in written evaluations given by host organization staff, even though the numerical value such students received in their evaluations was 3 out of 4 or even 2.

- 2) Such a gap between qualitative and quantitative evaluation is consistent with accommodation theory, namely, in contact situations willingness to communicate facilitates communication helping to overcome deficiencies in pronunciation and grammar. In other words, feelings matter. Understanding the above gap is important when evaluating student applications for overseas study. In other words, good grades in language do matter but students who have achieved the highest marks on their quizzes may not be the most successful communicators, and conversely, students with less than sterling marks may perform quite effectively in real life contact situations. This fact should be kept in mind when interviewing students for internships.
- 3) One example of the above could be observed in the case of a student with particularly low marks in language. This student was evaluated by three host organization staff, each one of whom rated his Japanese language skills differently: one gave him 2 out of 4, another 3, and yet another gave him an incredible 4 out of 4! Clearly, subjective factors have a great impact on ability to communicate.
- 4) The tendency to evaluate consistent and sincere effort higher than brilliant near-native performance is underscored by a negative comment from one supervisor regarding the allegedly “inappropriate” behavior of the linguistically most competent student in the group. We need to take note of this – even though it is only one comment – because it tells us of the need to encourage students to acquire cultural and social skills in tandem with increased competence in abilities in verbal communication.
- 5) It is also interesting to note that the appreciation shown by host organization staff for “sincere effort” to communicate in Japanese as opposed to real success in reproducing near-native speech finds its parallel in Japanese attitudes toward the use of “keigo” among fellow native speakers. It has been pointed out^v that Japanese native speakers tend to feel more comfortable with counterparts whose performance in keigo is less than perfect than with those who can manipulate all aspects of Japanese treatment language without making a single mistake. In other words, in keigo speech trying hard is highly evaluated, whereas faultless performance may trigger negative feelings. This is not to say that we should encourage students to make mistakes but rather that they should be more aware of cultural context and less concerned with acquiring faultless mechanical skills.

Language competence and desire to return to Japan to work:

It can be said that students who achieved high levels of proficiency in Japanese not only indicated greater satisfaction with their internship experiences but also showed greater desire to return to Japan for work or study. Although there were exceptions, students with generally good language skills were

more likely to say they wished to return to Japan at some future time than those who experienced problems communicating with Japanese supervisors and colleagues. Those who said they did not wish to return to Japan attributed their reluctance to what they described as “Japanese corporate culture” and “poor treatment of women employees.” In other words, students who made reference to “Japanese corporate practices” or “discrimination against women” (with one exception) tended to be those with low levels of language and culture competence. It is significant to note, however, that a female student whose language skills were near-native level made no such comments while two students with low language abilities cited “long hours” and “gender issues” as reasons for not wishing to return to Japan. This is not to say that it is easy to work in Japanese companies or there are no barriers against women in Japanese society. It is, however, more likely that such students looked to “outside factors” to explain their reluctance to return, while those who could communicate well, saw opportunities for themselves that less competent students could not.

The above is a mere sampling of what can be learned by taking time to read carefully the written performance reviews of host organizations and the self-evaluation of students. Although quantitative analysis does give the big picture, qualitative analysis provides insights that can help us to differentiate various cases and to treat students more sensitively as individuals.

**Between 2008 and 2013, the author served as director of the Stanford Kyoto Program.*

ⁱ see Matsumoto Yoshiko, “Acquisition of Japanese by American Businessmen in Tokyo: How much and why,” in *Current Issues in Second Language Acquisition and Development*, Carol Blackshire-Belay, University Press of America. 119-140, 1994

ⁱⁱ Gardner, Robert C. and Wallace E. Lambert, *Attitudes and Motivation in Second-Language Learning*, Newbury House Publishers, Rowley MA 1972

ⁱⁱⁱ Allow me to offer as an example of how students relate positively to dress choices permitted for peers but inappropriate for elders the case of the mechanical engineering student whose design of a new type of clutch was patented by his host company. This student gave his presentation at the home campus orientation wearing tee-shirt and shorts under a navy duffle coat. As it was raining his only footwear consisted of flip flops. Although it might be difficult to provide empirical proof of the positive impact of this student’s outward appearance, it was clear from the relaxed smiles of members of the student audience that they felt the presenter to be one of them and hence were more receptive to his message than to one delivered by an older adult wearing jacket, white shirt and tie.

^{iv} As language study after arrival was mandatory, technical majors who fulfilled minimal requirements would depart for their internships with three quarters (i.e. one academic year) of Japanese while social science and humanities majors would complete six quarters, or two full academic years of Japanese language study.

^v Wetzel, Patricia, Keigo in *Modern Japan: Polite Language from Meiji to the Present*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2004