

A Research Study of Japanese University Students on a Short-Stay Study Program to the United States

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Abstract

This research study includes 42 past participants of the UW-L Short Stay Program, focusing on their impressions and experiences of this UTEF sponsored program, ascertaining what kind of international study or travel experience they had prior to participating on the program, the reasons why they decided to participate on the program, what they found to be beneficial about the short-stay program, and how this experience assisted them in their academic, educational, or future careers. The data included in this research study offers an overview of the short-stay program to the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UW-L) and the impact it has on the participants once they return back to Japan. This paper also gives an overview of the program's educational and cross-cultural components and activities that form the basis of this unique and interesting short-stay exchange program.

Introduction

For a number of years, the University of Teacher Education Fukuoka (UTEF) in conjunction with the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UW-L) have sponsored a three-week comparative education-observation short-stay program for UTEF students in Wisconsin. Unlike other similar programs, the focus of this program is not on language learning specifically (although there is a “survival English” component), but rather on observing the educational system of the United States, allowing the UTEF students ample opportunities to visit schools and institutions (from kindergarten through university) where they participate actively in teaching the American students about Japanese culture, while also surveying and experiencing the American educational system personally and up close.

The primary focus of this program is to allow the Japanese students an opportunity to become accustomed to the US educational system through hands-on activities in the schools. Every year, fourteen UTEF students participate in this program. Since its inception, there have been 84 UTEF students who have participated on this short-stay exchange program. This study consists of 42 students (N=42) who answered a brief questionnaire about their experiences on this program, which is exactly 50% of the total number of students who participated.

This program has served, in many cases, to be a “seed” program for other future, international programs students sought out after returning. Initially, however, the UW-L Short-Stay Program was overwhelmingly the first experience the students ever had in traveling abroad or participating on an international exchange program. A total of 86.5% of the students indicated that this program was their first time abroad, with only 13.5% of students indicating they had traveled abroad previously. Most likely, of the

nearly 14% of students with prior international travel experience had done so on an international school trip while in high school, or took an international trip with their family to a different country.

The Study

This study was comprised of a short, five-question, questionnaire given to the past participants of the UW-L Short-Stay Program. It was decided by this researcher at the beginning that the questionnaire should be short and easy to do because it was totally in English and I wanted as many respondents as possible and worried that if the questionnaire was too long, or too complicated or involved, it might serve as a hindrance in enticing past participants to answer it and to participate in this study.

The following section gives a sampling of the responses the participants offered to the question: “why they opted to join the UW-L Short Stay Program?” The responses were varied and thoughtful. The following student responses offer some interesting insights to this question:

- Because I wanted to study English in a real situation.
- I thought this program is the best for my first visit abroad because it's well supported.
- I thought the program was a good way to experience the American way of life.
- I had never been abroad, so I wanted to go to an English-speaking country. It was also attractive to be able to experience it for a short period of time.
- To learn about a different culture and to practice English.
- When I was a high school student, I wanted to study abroad. But I didn't have the courage. So, I decided to become a person who can challenge various things at university. And, so, I challenged myself to participate on the UW-L Short-Stay Exchange Program.
- I wanted to check my ability in English and to see things from a different perspective.
- First, I wanted a chance to interact with American University students. Second, I wanted to experience a homestay in America. Third, when I read SNS posts of alumni of this program, it seemed so enjoyable. I was influenced by them.
- I have three reasons. Firstly, I wanted to experience the difference between Japanese education and American education. I thought having a broader perspective of education would deepen my value of education. Secondly, I wanted to experience a different culture. Thirdly, I wanted to improve my English ability.
- Because not only did I just want to go to the U.S for the first time in my life, I also thought that I should have the knowledge of the educational system of another country. This program was so perfect to fulfill my purposes at that time.

The students were asked “What was the most beneficial aspect of the UW-L Program for you personally? (For example, the school visits, homestay, English lessons, personal growth that comes with traveling internationally, etc.)” Again, the students offered some very interesting responses and reasons as to why they wanted to have this experience. Please see below:

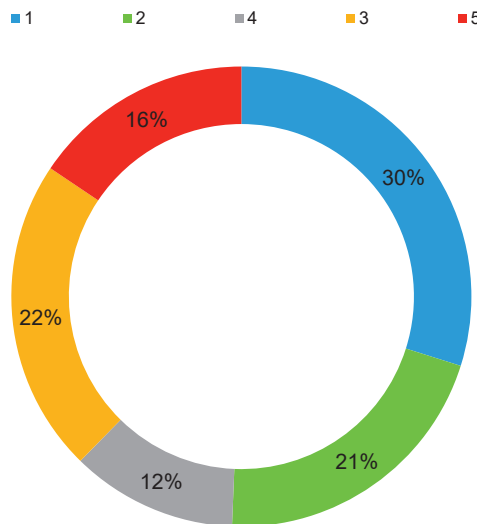
- Teaching about Japanese culture while wearing yukata/kimono.
- Visiting schools and giving a presentation about Japan in front of the American students. I gained confidence from this experience.
- The school visits and Survival English lessons.
- I was affected the most on the UW-L Program personally by the homestay. I was surprised how different the American lifestyle is from Japan's. It broadened my horizons.
- The school visits and Survival English lessons.
- It was the presentation aspect in front of the UW-L students. That was my first experience to do this and I could gain more confidence in everything. And I was so happy that many people praised my English, such as pronunciation.
- The school visits, homestay, and broadening my horizons.
- It was the experience of the homestay. My host family was really kind and they welcomed

me warmly. The conversation with them helped my English skill and my attitude toward communication in English became much better. I was really happy when my host mother said that my English had improved during the short homestay. I was also glad to do a lot of new things with them.

A common epiphany the students had was how the activities and presentations they did during the program helped to build confidence in their own abilities to present in English and how it served to improve their speaking, listening, and understanding of English. The excitement of the students being able to converse and be understood with native speakers, in English, seemed to have a positive impact upon their motivation and desire to improve their linguistic skills.

Since participating on the UW-L Short Stay Program, a number of students decided to seek out other exchange programs to participate on, including a year abroad to Sweden, to UW-L as a long-term exchange student, and other short-stay programs to Malaysia, China, Canada, and Korea. A number of students decided to do graduate work abroad, as well, enrolling in Master's Degree Programs in Great Britain, Sweden, and the United States. One student was a participant on the elite and highly competitive Japan-America Student Conference (JASC).

When asked “What was the most important personal benefit you received from participating on the UW-L Short Stay Program?”, the students responses were quite revealing. See below:



	Choice	Total
1	It motivated me to study English more seriously.	29.9%
2	It gave me self-confidence in using English with native speakers.	20.8%
3	It encouraged me to pursue more foreign travel and to seek out other exchange programs .	22.1%
4	It influenced my decision to attend graduate school after graduating from UTEF.	11.7%
5	It helped me to decide upon my future career after graduating from UTEF	15.6%
	Other	

Program Description

The University of Teacher Education Fukuoka (UTEF), as the name suggests, is an education-based university with the majority of its graduates going on to become elementary, junior high school, and senior high school teachers. So, the UW-L Short-Stay Program especially appeals to these students because they have an intrinsic interest in education and are curious about other educational systems. Many are naturally teachers, so they are more than happy to have experience in teaching in the US classrooms about Japanese culture.

Every year, the students are divided into several groups which focus on one particular aspect of Japanese culture that they will present to the American students: 1) origami; 2) Japanese dance; 3) Japanese calligraphy. Each group has 4 students (12) and two students (2) then prepare a PowerPoint slide presentation that they present several times during their three week stay in the United States. Each group is responsible for creating materials to present and each student has a specific role in the presentation. This aspect of the program is very popular with the US schools, and many of the same teachers request the UTEF students to come to their lessons to present about Japanese culture during our visit to the schools each year.

As referenced above, the UTEF students especially enjoy the school visits, home stays, and Survival English Lessons, as well as spending time with their new American friends. The UW-L side has developed an ingenious component which pairs an American UW-L student with each one of the Japanese students, and in the schedule, time is allotted for the students to meet with their "UW-L Buddies." In past years, the US students have been wonderful in making time to meet with our students, driving them to places of interest, meeting for meals, and spending time with them.

These friendships which develop between the UW-L and UTEF students often extend well past the program and the students maintain contact once the UTEF students return home. The same is true with the homestay families. These relationships between the Japanese students and their American homestay families continue once they return to Japan, with Zoom reunions, e-mail contact, and even personal visits to each others' countries.

One unique aspect of the UW-L Short-Stay Program is the "Cross-Cultural Portfolio" that the UTEF students are required to make in order to receive academic credit for the program. Before leaving, the Japanese students are asked to make seven Japan-centered cultural pages that include a photo and a 150 word explanation in English. These are for students to show their homestay family after they arrive to their host family's home. The topics for these cross-cultural pages can be anything they think would be of interest to their host family. Every year, students are quite creative in selecting aspects of Japan and Japanese culture that they want to share with their families after arriving. This is then extended to their "Survival English Lessons" and the UW-L teacher asks the UTEF students to present several of their selected essays and photos to present in class. During the 3-week short-stay program, the UTEF students must select an additional seven US-based topics that they find surprising, interesting, or unusual about American culture to include in their portfolio which is turned in to the chaperone teacher upon arrival in Japan. After successful completion of the program, the UTEF students receive two academic credits for their participation on the program.

Changes in Attitudes Toward Study Abroad in Japan

Another advantage of this program that students seem to like is that the time and financial commitment to this exchange program is quite doable. In fact, nationally, Japan has seen a decrease in the number of students seeking short or long-term study abroad programs, instead opting to participate in the more feasible "short-stay" programs. The short-stay program option gives students an opportunity to experience going abroad but in a very controlled way that will not put them behind in their studies at their home university and that which is quite reasonable in cost. In the case of students at UTEF, they

have very busy schedules that include several mandatory “teaching practice” commitments that occur in their second, third, and fourth years of study. These are often scheduled during summer vacation times, allowing fewer opportunities for students to travel abroad on an exchange program. The UW-L Short-Stay Program is scheduled to happen at the end of February through the middle of March, finishing before graduation, allowing students from all grades to participate, even seniors.

The relatively lower cost of a three-week program is very appealing to students and their parents. In the past 20 years, the overall cost to study abroad at an American university has risen sharply, making it less desirable for students to want to invest in this type of educational opportunity.

In addition to the economic depression all over the world, as well as in Japan, there are many reasons why recent Japanese, especially Japanese college students, do not want to study abroad. One of the reasons may be attributed to the early start of job hunting for college students [and teacher licensing exams]. Japanese students who want to find jobs before graduation, seem not to have enough time or money to study abroad. Another reason for the decline of the number of Japanese college students studying abroad would be to the inward-intention of recent young Japanese. Benton (2012) points out that recent young Japanese do not have a longing for the West, compared to the young Japanese just after World War II. (Matsumoto, p. 1)

The “inward-intention” of Japanese students today is a fascinating observation because the number of students seeking to study abroad has had a sharp decrease in recent years and the interest that motivated students in past generations to study abroad seems to be lacking in this generation of students. Of course, the practical aspect of studying abroad, or the decision not to study abroad, is nearly always directly connected to the financial burden that such an added study program would have on the student and his/her family. Few scholarships are available for such programs, including short or long-term exchange programs, leaving the student to have to finance the cost on his/her own.

Added to the financial considerations are the practical aspects of the class curriculum: What type of classes can be taken, and how may the credit from abroad be easily transferred to the Japanese system? Many Japanese universities have unwittingly put up stringent obstacles to allowing credit to be easily transferred from the student's exchange program experience. Often is the case that the Japanese university requires the class be exactly the same in the foreign institution in order for the credit to transfer, which is nearly impossible to achieve.

However, with the recent trend of globalization, more and more Japanese companies are opening overseas branches, and dispatch their employees to foreign countries. Koike *et al.* (2010) discuss that the number of overseas Japanese affiliated companies has increased over the past 30 years. In 1979, there were less than 4,000 overseas affiliated companies that Japanese companies established. In 2007, there were approximately 17,000 companies in foreign countries. This trend will continue, if the current high value of the Japanese yen persists. Thus, it is an urgent matter for Japanese society to cultivate young Japanese who have a global perspective. (Matsumoto, p. 1)

This will undoubtedly force Japanese companies to pressure Monakasho (MEXT) to encourage universities and colleges to try to increase their international exchange programs, which means that universities will have to become more flexible in accepting credits given by the foreign institutions and to offer more financial incentives to students through grants and scholarships in order to interest students to study abroad. This is easier said than done, of course.

Japanese universities are notoriously slow in making changes that benefit students directly. Rather

than concentrating on any administratively or institutional issues that may hinder expanding the number of students to study abroad, administrators often prefer to ignore issues at hand or choose to keep things status quo to avoid disrupting the convenience of maintaining the system as it is, which is familiar and easy. However, if Japanese companies begin to squawk more loudly to MEXT, that will in turn force MEXT to pressure universities to improve their international programs with more flexibility and financial incentives, which the universities will turn around and demand from MEXT.

Conclusion

In the end, it is more than apparent that having international exchange opportunities to study abroad, whether for a short-stay or long-term stay, offer students an important opportunity to grow individually, socially, academically, and culturally. The UW-L Short-Stay Program has shown, in this small, but important study, that the participants found it to be extremely beneficial and worthwhile.

One limitation of this study was the number of participants who responded to the questionnaire. In a future study, it would be nice to get at least an 80% response rate to offer more concrete and in-depth data to the research. In addition, it would be nice to interview some of the participants individually to get more detailed responses to the questions, perhaps ascertaining in the process just how much of an impact their exchange experience had on them personally and educationally, by asking followup questions to their responses, which is not very feasible in a written questionnaire.

As shown in the data, this short-stay program has served the student body of UTEF quite nicely in offering them an opportunity to experience international travel, culture, and study abroad. Students who participate on the UW-L Short Stay Program often seek out other exchange programs and opt to study abroad again, or to focus more intently on improving their English skills. A number of students frequently decide to further their education by attending graduate school, as well. The main focus of this program is to expose students to a different, cross-cultural educational perspective regarding US education which will assist them in the future when they become teachers. To this end, the program is a resounding success, as demonstrated by the student responses contained in this study.

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