

High School Study Abroad Program Analysis

Jeffrey McCarty Suzuki

Abstract

A survey was conducted using 16 students that studied English in Canada for the period of one year. These 2nd year High School students were from Chukyo High School located in Mizunami, Gifu Prefecture, Japan. These students spent about one year enrolled at White-Rock Christian Academy in British Columbia, Canada from April 2006 to March 2007. The majority of their classes were taught in English and they lived with a homestay family for the year. The purpose of the survey was to gather data to indicate whether or not this study abroad program was a success.

Introduction

Studying abroad can be one of the most exciting experiences a person can have and can shape an individual's view of the world and their career path. In an age of increasing global interdependence, preparing students to engage the international community is essential to their personal and professional success. The study abroad program available for Chukyo High School students will be examined by analyzing data gathered from a survey of 27 questions given to 16 students in May of 2007.

The first question asked the students whether or not they were happy that they went to Canada to study English for one year. 15 out of 16 students were happy that they went to Canada. They wrote that they improved their English language skills dramatically; before going to Canada, about half the students felt uncomfortable communicating in English. While in Canada, they were removed from their comfort zone. They had to challenge themselves in order to succeed. They said that they were surprised to have made many new Canadian friends. Their language

skills improved as much as their own self-confidence. They learned many new things about themselves like how to succeed in a foreign environment. They learned about many other cultures because Canada is a mosaic of people from all over the world. The students were pleasantly surprised to mix with many people from all over the world. The many experiences that they learned from heightened their personal internal strengths, courage, and wisdom. The students wrote that it was hard at the beginning but the wonderful thing was that they found the power within themselves to overcome some minor hardships that they would never face while in Japan. Only 1 student was disappointed that he/she went to Canada. The student mentioned that he/she only wanted to go to America and that he/she found Canada to be boring. These very high percentages indicate that this study abroad program is very successful.

The second question asked the students to determine if their English skills had improved during their studies. 15 out of 16 students thought that their English abilities had really improved while in Canada. Students mentioned that they had to deal with many real-life situations on a daily basis, and they had to be spontaneous with their responses. Students said that they improved their pronunciation, vocabulary, listening, and writing skills through interaction with other fellow students, teachers, and their homestay families. Only 1 student felt that he/she did not really improve their English communicative abilities much because there was too much Japanese spoken in his/her close proximity. That student felt that he/she could have improved more had there been no Japanese spoken at school or with other Japanese staff. When learning a foreign language, full immersion is stressful for new learners, but it also stimulates better language skills and higher levels of improvements. When students study abroad, their learning grows exponentially faster than if they stay home. These student improved their English communicative skills because they had endless opportunities to practice learning English inside and outside of the classroom.

The third question asked the students if they if they got value for their money. 75% of the students said they were fine with the costs, and 25% of the students thought that it was a little expensive. These percentages indicate that the majority of the students thought the study abroad costs involved for the year were reasonable.

The fourth question asked the students what they would do differently if they had a future opportunity to study abroad. 75% of the students said that they would

interact more with other native English speakers in the future. Time is important and they mentioned that they would not squander any chances or opportunities in the future. More than half of the students said they would prefer to live alone in an apartment or in a dormitory in the future. The students mentioned that sharing the homes of their homestay family was a thrilling experience, but also a stressful experience. Now that they have become more mature and independent after having spent a year away from the comfort of their homes, they said that they would prefer to live alone in the future. They have a better understanding of their personal strengths and weaknesses. They probably never thought of living alone prior to going to Canada, and after this experience, the students have become more mature, both personally and intellectually.

The fifth question asked the students what they could have prior to going away for a year. More than half of the students wrote that they could have studied more English vocabulary before going to Canada. They mention that knowing more English vocabulary would have helped them to communicate effectively with their Canadian peers, staff, and host families. Some also mentioned that they would have liked to have learned more slang terms and idioms; the reason for this is many young English speakers like to imitate some speech patterns used by their favorite actors and music artists. These performers are always developing new "hip" ways to communicate with the masses. English slang terms are always being used in the music industry as well as in movies. What was "hot" to say ten years ago, might not be "chilling" to use anymore. When a student goes abroad, they are going to experience new cultures, people, food, music and a new language. All of the newness combined with the lack of things and people that they are familiar with might cause them to feel some anxiety. This type of anxiety is called cultural shock, and everybody living in a new country experiences some degree of cultural shock. Knowing more about Canada and English would have lessened some anxiety.

Question 6 dealt with advice that they would give to other students going abroad to study. The majority of the students felt that new students should just try their best and stay active as much as possible. New students should be positive all the time. The hardest parts are at the beginning-when they leave Japan, when they arrive in Canada, the first few days sleeping and living in an unknown house, and the first couple of times that they go to school. Everything gets easier from then. Some students mentioned that it is imperative to do their best to only communicate in English; new students should not use any Japanese at all in order to improve the most. Students should not blame their host country or its people for their feelings

of anxiety and frustration that they are feeling at the beginning. This happens to millions of people who study, work or travel abroad. Remember, that they are in a new environment and getting accustomed takes time. New students should not be negative; this will only prolong certain feelings of frustration. They need to try hard and remain focused; they need to think about the experience they are having living abroad and learning about new people, food, and culture. Preparation is the best defense against culture shock. Some students also mentioned that it was important to bring some personal things from home in order to make them feel comfortable in a new environment. It will only be a matter of time before the new students will be able to compare the good and the bad of Canada with the good and the bad of the Japan. They will feel less Japanese and more like a Canadian in no time. They will feel the satisfaction of knowing that they can live successfully in two cultures, the Japanese and the Canadian cultures.

Question 7 asked the students if they would recommend this experience to others. 19% highly recommend this experience to other fellow students who want to learn English in a foreign country, and 75% of the students recommend this English learning experience. Studying abroad allowed all of these Japanese High School students to gain real exposure to Canada's culture and perspective on doing business, including insight into its social, political and legal methods and environments. The 1 student who was dissatisfied wanted to only go to the United States. That student was biased with his response because in reality there are no major significant differences between people living in lower British Columbia and upper Washington State. They share similar industry, similar heritage, and the same economic worries that other parts of the countries do not necessarily share even though they are nearby.

Question 8 asked the students how long they spent abroad and was this good length of time. The students attended White Rock Christian Academy for a little less than 1 year. Only 30% of the students thought that one year was too long, 70% of the students thought that it was either too short or perfect the way that it was. Being away from home for this period of time helped the students develop an ability to think more originally and to see more than one perspective on an issue. They learned to be more self-reliant and self-confident being away from home. Students who go abroad for a short period of time to study do not experience as many things such as being comfortable with solving more complex situations. They have developed the ability to better cope with ambiguous information, and have greater flexibility to deal with challenging situations because they have experienced

more than a student who has only been abroad for a lesser period of time.

Question 11 asked the students what they thought of the High School that they went to while in Canada. More than 60% of the students would recommend the High School to their peers. Their comments indicated that White Rock Christian Academy has many strengths such as a good learning environment, compassionate students, friendly staff members, adequate computer equipment, many extra-curricular activities, and it is very safe. Some students felt that some of the Christian religious teachings in school and at Mass were difficult to understand and overwhelming because they had no first-hand religious classes taught in Japan to compare it them with.

Question 12, 24, and 25 asked if the students made new friends with non-Japanese students, and if they will stay in touch with their host family after coming back to Japan. Only 1 out of 16 students wrote that he/she did not really make any new friends during their one year in Canada. He/she thought that it was difficult to make new friends with someone new that did not speak the same language with the same comfort level as he/she has. 15 out of 16 students said that they would continue to stay in touch with their Canadian home family after coming back to Japan. While gathering the data at the High School, I overheard many students referring to their host family as "my Canadian Mom" or "my Canadian Dad". This type of language usage indicates a close rapport between the students and their host families. There is no doubt that their experience abroad helped the Japanese students develop some new tools to build good relationships with their host family that they knew little about before sharing the confines of their homes. Living with a host family for a year is challenging for both parties, students have to learn to adapt quickly to their new "parents" and these new "parents" have to quickly understand their new "children". The percentages indicate that the students were very pleased with the people that they met in Canada because they will continue to stay in contact with them.

Question 13 asked the students to compare their regular high school classes in Japan and the classes in Canada, what was different about them, and which suited them better. A slim majority of students indicated that they preferred to study in Japan because it was less strict than in Canada. A few students wrote that they could not sleep in class or in church. The rest of the students liked Canada better because the English that they learned was practical not just theoretical. The students did not have to make an effort at speaking English because it became

natural to them very quickly. A student said that they learned how to better communicate with other people in English because they had no other choice, the learning time was not just limited to the classroom. Students had to think in English and had to use English all the time. Students also mentioned that they were assigned English homework on a daily basis to reinforce their classroom lessons.

Questions 16 to 25 asked students to evaluate their homestay experience. 7 students thought their homestay was excellent, 8 students thought it was good. The one student that was dissatisfied mentioned that his/her homestay experience was poor due to having small food portions. 15 students were pleased with their host family because they were able to change and adapt to a different living situation. By living with people from a different culture, the students became more assertive, they were able to communicate effectively by speaking their minds, and they were not afraid to do new things. The students are now able to see things from different perspectives.

Question 17 and 18 asked the students when they spoke to their homestay family the most and about what topics. More than 75% of the students indicated that they spoke the most to their host family during suppertime and afterwards while watching TV. They spoke mostly about the student's school day and about the news. All of the women from the host families stayed at home to care for their young children, and all of the men worked Monday to Friday. Typical families communicate with each other when they are together like at the dinner table and afterwards. The Japanese students were treated just like the host families siblings, they talked at night. They talked about the same things that normal families talk about such as what happened during their day and of news events that happened recently either in Canada or from other parts of the world. Students that participate in a homestay program find that their English improves dramatically through conversation and daily involvement with their families. Homestay families helped the students adjust quickly to their exciting new lifestyle in Canada.

Question 20 asked the students if they participated in activities with their host family. 11 students said that they did many activities together with their host family especially on Saturdays and Sundays. 4 students said they did not do many activities together and 1 student wished he/she could have enjoyed their homestay more had he/she been included more.

Question 22 asked the students if they had any misunderstandings with their homestay families. 14 students said they had slight problems but these misgivings were easily resolved through communication. Only 2 students had some more serious problems, 1 student about Christian religious ideology, and 1 student about the length of time that one can spend in a bath. This latter was a cultural misunderstanding, generally speaking Canadians do not spend the same amount of time that Japanese people spend in the bath. Japanese people spend a longer length of time in the bath to relax and to warm up their bodies up before going to bed. Canadians do not spend a long period of time in the bath because they use centralized heating to warm up the house all day long.

Question 23 asked the students what advice they would give to other students concerning homestays. More than half of the students said to keep an open-mind and to speak openly with some of the problems that they may be faced with to their host family. They recommend to future students to speak openly, and to ask questions. The students suggested that the new students will become new members of a new family and with that comes new duties and responsibilities in the household; they will have to think of others and be held accountable as well. Remember to be open-minded about every aspect of living in someone else's home.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study abroad program at Mizunami's Chukyo High School has proven to be successful. 15 out of 16 students will recommend this educational program to others. These high numbers indicate that the students were very pleased with the year they spent in Canada. The data indicated that the students were happy with the school, the classes, the students, the staff, the host families, the costs, and all of the improvements that they made learning English. Their experience proved to be an enriching and eye-opening adventure, where learning extended to the world beyond the classroom. Furthermore, they gained in-depth knowledge of another's culture's customs, people, and language. Finally, let's spread the word about this great study abroad program at Chukyo High School and get more Japanese students ready to embark on a wonderful English learning experience at White Rock Christian Academy in British-Columbia, Canada.