

Students' Views on the Pacific Bridge Program

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1. Introduction

Jack London's famous quote "You can't wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club." (Sonoma State University, 2006) encapsulates the desire of those who refuse to settle for the humdrum and seek an active life. When Japanese students first enter university many wonder what their future holds. Study abroad programs provide students with the opportunity to challenge not only their linguistic ability, but also their cultural flexibility. In a sense, these programs offer students the chance to seek out inspiration.

This paper outlines a study abroad program which is run by Ritsumeikan University and the University of British Columbia (UBC). After a brief discussion of the images of Japanese university students in the academic literature, I provide an outline of the workings of the program expounding the aims, its structure, and the student selection process. This is followed by an analysis of the views of the program by the 2008-2009 cohort. Finally, some suggestions are given as to how the program can be improved.

2. Background

There are as many images of Japanese university students as there are teachers. Lee-Cunin (2005, p.137) contends that there are two images which dominate the literature "the quiet, uncritical student type" and "the academically lazy student type" who regards university "as a playground." Academics have explained the silence that is often encountered in Japanese university classes as being due to the notion of "losing face" (Taylor, 1983, p.98) or related to problems with teaching methodology and language proficiency (Cheng, 2000). McVeigh (2001) offers the opinion that Japanese students' shyness is related to fear resulting from examination-based schooling. Davidson (1995) argues that this focus on examinations has culminated in a general student body that lacks opinions and is less likely to seek knowledge (see Lee-Cunin, 2005, p.138). Considering this sober (and somewhat negative) overview of perceptions of Japanese university students it is perhaps unsurprising that many universities are offering new and challenging opportunities for their students. The Pacific Bridge program is one such example.

3. The Pacific Bridge Program

Ritsumeikan University has a long association with the University of British Columbia. The Pacific Bridge (PB) program is provided over a period of four weeks by UBC to Ritsumeikan University students and it is run by UBC's Continuing Studies Centre for Intercultural Communication (CIC). The PB program is designed to "provide a unique, elite level, educational opportunity for international university graduates" (UBC, 2009). The PB program takes place on UBC's campus in Vancouver and runs from the second week of February until mid-March. The curriculum is divided into seven components :

1. Academic Seminars
2. Communication Workshops
3. Field Studies
4. Project Work
5. Optional Socio-Cultural Activities
6. Directed Independent Study
7. Self-Directed Community Exploration

UBC describes the PB program curriculum as "an interactive program of communication skill development with an emphasis on Macroeconomics" (UBC, 2009). Students have activities 35 hours a week both in the classroom, and in the community. One major feature of the PB program is 'Directed Independent Study' which UBC states is "a form of academic preparation time to allow each participant to complete their assignments, put their language skills in use following their own interests (volunteer community work, athletics, travel), and explore the local community" (UBC, 2009).

3.1. The Selection Process

Students who wish to join the PB program attend a guidance session in early June. In this session the details of various study abroad programs offered by Ritsumeikan University are explicated. After attending the guidance session students make a written application to the university in which they outline why they would like to attend the PB program. Applications are assessed by staff and faculty members. Students who clear this vetting stage are asked to attend a selection interview which takes place in early July.

The selection interview procedure involves three or four candidates at a time being interviewed by two professors. The interviews are conducted in English and Japanese. During the interviews candidates have an equal chance to demonstrate their spoken English ability, to show their desire to attend the PB program, and to explain what they hope to achieve by attending the program. For many of these students it is their first time to go abroad and they are very enthusiastic (if not a little apprehensive) about studying abroad. Once the professors

have selected suitable candidates the decision is made known within a week of the interview. Each year 15 to 20 students are selected.

Although some financial support is provided by the university, many students are understandably hesitant to commit themselves to the PB program as they are concerned about the financial burden. In addition, once they have been selected, some students express feelings of unease such as "*Is my English good enough?*" and "*What happens if I can't understand my homestay family?*" The pre-program workshops are designed to help alleviate these fears and provide students with a grounding in fundamental economic and cultural issues.

3.2. Pre-program Workshops

Pre-program workshops are given by the two professors who run the PB program for Ritsumeikan. The first workshop is held before the end of the summer semester. In this initial workshop the features of the PB program are outlined once again and the students are encouraged to get to know each other. They are divided into small presentation groups and given a summer assignment which is to research one aspect of Canadian culture and to prepare a paper for presentation at the start of the fall semester. English is the sole language of use for these workshops and the presentations are given in English.

Workshops are held each month to further develop the students' content knowledge of economics and their ability to communicate in English. Students who have previously studied at UBC (on the longer nine-month program) sometimes attend the workshops and talk about their time abroad. These workshops are very popular as they give the PB program students the opportunity to ask questions pertaining to the day-to-day aspects of life in Canada. In the final workshop, students are given advice by travel agents concerning travel arrangements and immigration procedures. The students also take an Assessment of Communicative English (A. C. E.) placement test. The A. C. E. test provides an indication of the students' listening ability, knowledge of conversational English, and grammatical ability. This pre-test is followed by a post-test which is administered at the end of the PB program.

3.3. The Pacific Bridge Schedule

The schedule for the PB program provides students with a balance of academic classes alongside cultural awareness activities. The first week of the PB program can be quite daunting as all classes are conducted in English by native English speakers. Added to this is the fact that the students are living abroad (many for the first time) and that, from the moment they wake up, English is the main language that they will use throughout the day. The schedule for each week is drawn up by the CIC. An example of the schedule for the first week is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *Pacific Bridge program schedule for week one*

| Day | Weekend | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|-----------|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| | | Assembly | Assembly | | Assembly | Assembly |
| Morning | Socio-Cultural Activity Trip to Victoria, BC | Communication Workshops | Academic Seminar | Project Work | Academic Seminar | Communication Workshops |
| Noon | | Lunch Break | Lunch Break | | Lunch Break | Lunch Break |
| Afternoon | Self-directed Community Exploration | Guided Field Study | Communication Workshops | Guided Field Study | Communication Workshops | Networking Social |
| Evening | Directed Independent Study | Directed Independent Study | Directed Independent Study | Directed Independent Study | Directed Independent Study | Directed Independent Study |

4. Students' Views

13 out of 15 students from the 2008-2009 cohort attended a feedback session which was held after they returned to Japan. The students were asked to complete a questionnaire in English on their views of the PB program (this questionnaire consisted of eight open-ended questions). 10 of the 13 students chose to write their responses in English, with three choosing to write in English and Japanese. The Japanese responses were translated into English and the students' questionnaire responses were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). English responses are presented in their original form.

4.1. Positive Aspects of the Pacific Bridge Program

4.1.1. Improved Speaking Skills

Many students expressed that they were able to communicate better in English than before "Through this program, I could speak to foreigners in English." Other students also mentioned that they have become more experiential in their approach to speaking English "I became active to speak English." One student in particular stated that their speaking skills improved considerably:

"When I met my homestay's families, I didn't talk with them very well, but 30 days passed I could talk with them very friendly. And the talking time would be more longer than before."

4.1.2. Improved Listening Skills

11 of the 13 students commented that their listening ability improved. One student noted that they "actively" studied the English of their teachers and their homestay family in order

to help improve their listening and speaking ability *“I listened carefully the way of using words when they spoke, so I could use English words well.”*

4.1.3. Developing a Positive Attitude

The PB program helped the students develop a positive attitude towards English *“I became active to speak English through this program”* and, through exposure to an English speaking environment, they reconsidered their learning strategies. Others stated that it *“became natural to use English”* and that they were no longer *“afraid of speaking English.”* Other positive comments highlighted improved presentation skills, increased knowledge of slang, and higher levels of motivation.

4.1.4. Strengths of the Pacific Bridge Program

The students' comments about the strengths of the PB program were unanimous. They all agreed that the main strength was that it afforded them the opportunity to meet and communicate with people living in Vancouver. The students said that this was a highly motivating experience. One student sums up their views succinctly:

“I think it was really good to meet many people in Vancouver, especially students in UBC. They told us many good points in Vancouver, and gave us incentive to learn English.”

The opportunity to talk with people from different cultural backgrounds helped the students reconsider their views on various social, cultural, and economic issues. As one student explains *“We can study not only English, but also multi-culture system and critical-thinking and so on.”* The students also expressed that they enjoyed meeting and talking with UBC students.

4.2. Difficulties

By far the biggest problem which the students encountered regarding their English was their professed inability to communicate what they wanted to say. 10 out of the 13 students who attended the feedback session were concerned about their communicative skills in English. Representative comments are listed below:

- *“My English skills is very poor. So I can't communicate with host mother more deeply.”*
- *“My English is so poor, so sometimes my English didn't work.”*
- *“My English was not good enough to explain what I wanted to say. There were many times when I wasn't understood.”* (Translated from Japanese)

These comments are understandable considering the fact that, for many of the students, it was their first time to live and study abroad. Other problems which were raised were related

to poor vocabulary “*I could not understand some technical words.*” and poor pronunciation “*I’m not good at pronouncing “r” and “th.” For my poor pronunciation, I had difficulty when I talked with my host family.*” However, the problems which they encountered were far outweighed by the improvements which they mentioned.

4.3. Weaknesses of the Pacific Bridge Program

Of course, no study abroad program is perfect. The questionnaire afforded the students the opportunity to express any dissatisfaction with the PB program. Lack of time was the most commonly voiced weakness. They stated that the program was too short and there was too much homework. Many of the students expressed the need for more time in order to conduct detailed research for their presentations. The PB program as it stands seems to put students under too much pressure. One student’s comments encapsulates those of their peers :

“This program was very hard. This had many activities, so we could get English skills and be good at speaking. But time was so tight. We were so tired. Now, I think this program is very good one, but students might not think so during doing program.”

Other students pointed out that the lack of time hampered their ability to learn more about the culture of the area “*This program is very short. So, I have no time to learn English to know this country and culture and so on.*” Other perceived weaknesses focused on the lack of information given to the students before they went to Canada and the fact that there was some overlap between the economics subjects that they studied at Ritsumeikan University and those studied at UBC.

4.4. General Comments about the Program

The students stated that the PB program was a meaningful experience for them and that the general feeling about the program was extremely positive. Comments such as “*wonderful*” and “*good*” were often used to describe their sentiment. The following comment is representative of their assessment of the PB program :

“I had a very good time in Canada. I studied many things and went sightseeing. The teachers were very kind to us. But I wanted to communicate with other students in UBC, more.”

5. Looking Ahead

For a program to evolve it needs to take account of its stakeholders. In the questionnaire the students were asked to give advice to prospective PB students, as well as providing specific information on how the PB program should be improved.

5.1. Advice to Prospective Students

The advice which the 2008-2009 cohort gave to prospective PB students was mainly divided between pre-travel suggestions and information on living in Canada. Pre-travel advice centered on the need to study economics beforehand with the cohort warning that future students “*should prepare*” for their economics classes before leaving for Canada. Other comments focused on practical aspects such as minimizing the amount of luggage taken to Canada, the need to take a notebook computer, and the superfluous nature of 100 Canadian dollar bills. The most prevalent piece of advice was simply “*Don't be shy!*” The students strongly encouraged future participants to be positive and to grasp the opportunity to speak and use English in an active way. These four comments are wholly representative of those of the group :

1. “Get along with your host family. Don't speak Japanese in a class. Through English, learn not only English and culture.”
2. “Don't forget to use English anytime. Thinking in English and talking in English improve your English skill. Don't forget critical-thinking. This will improve your life.”
3. “Do not be shy when you have opportunity you can communicate with various people. Do not hesitate speaking English. Do not be complete. Even if your English is not good, they can understand.”
4. “Don't be shy to communicate. This program is so short, so if you are shy, you did lost the chance to improve your English skill and get friends. “Don't be shy.” The most important.”

5.2. Students' Views on Improving the Pacific Bridge Program

The improvements that the students wanted to see logically mirrored those of the PB program's perceived weaknesses. The need to increase students' free time was paramount. Many students expressed the desire to extend the PB program by at least one week.

5.3. Final Comments

The last open-ended question allowed the students the opportunity to add additional comments on the PB program. In their final comments some students focused on the need for more information (such as information about the homestay families and security issues). Many of the students described the PB program as giving them “*a good experience.*” Typical comments are shown here :

- “*Thanks to this program, I can experience various things. I can have new goal about my future. Thank you.*”
- “*I really appreciate this program, my friends, my teachers, and my parents. I learned a lot in this English, and I will improve this skill and knowledge.*”
- “*I had good teachers, host family, friends in Canada, and I think I could improve my English skill. I'd like to say thank you to people who worked this program!*”

5.4. Suggestions for Improving the Pacific Bridge Program

The feedback from the students was extremely helpful. Considering their comments the following proposals for improving the PB program are offered :

- Improve the support provided before students leave for UBC. Specific improvements include more information on security issues and life in Canada.
- Pre-program support should also provide guidance on interaction with homestay families and samples of course content material.
- Lengthening the program to five or six weeks would reduce the pressure on students and give them more time to develop their English skills and give them the freedom to explore the local environment.
- The feedback loop which allows for students to give their comments at the end of the program should be improved by sharing their comments with future students. Asking students who have attended the PB program to talk to new cohorts would facilitate the dissemination of pertinent information rather than simply providing information from the university administration's point of view.

One caveat which must be raised with regard to lengthening the PB program is the cost factor. The fact that some students view the current program as "*a little expensive*" could possibly mean that prospective PB students may balk at signing up for a longer course at a higher price.

6. Conclusion

Providing students with the opportunity to study abroad is becoming increasingly important for universities in Japan. Nowadays, many students are looking to expand their experiential horizons beyond the 'comfort-zone' of life in Japan. The students who choose to join these programs understand that study abroad programs can give them experiences which their usual courses cannot.

As I have argued in a previous paper, Japan needs to rethink its English education system (Cripps, 2002). Signs of fundamental change can be seen in the decision to reshape the way English is taught at high schools from 2013. Whether the moves by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to implement 'English only' classes from this date will succeed remains to be seen.

For educators who seek to foster learner autonomy through experiential learning, study abroad programs can act as a catalyst for learner interdependence and independence. The impact of these programs on the students in such a short space of time is remarkable. Many of our students at Ritsumeikan University appear invigorated after returning to Japan and approach their studies with a new sense of enthusiasm and motivation. As educators, we should try to harness this energy and help students to use it to fuel their desire for

knowledge and life-long learning. Considering the current economic circumstances I feel that arming our students with valuable experiences and a positive attitude will help them forge a bright and optimistic future.

Jack London's credo which begins "*I would rather be ashes than dust!*" (Sonoma State University, 2006). is particularly pertinent considering the difficulties that many Japanese students now face The Pacific Bridge program offers hope, inspiration, and succor to students who want to escape the current social and economic malaise. I am hopeful that our PB students will burn brightly and use their time wisely.

I would rather be ashes than dust!

I would rather that my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled by dry-rot.

I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet.

The function of man is to live, not to exist.

I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them.

I shall use my time.

Jack London (1876-1916)

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