

Crossing the Bridge : Self-evaluations and the Pacific Bridge Program

Anthony Cripps

Abstract

Study abroad programs are run by many universities in Japan. This paper examines the 2010-2011 Pacific Bridge (PB) program and student evaluations of their progress at the end of the PB program. A brief outline of the program is provided and the students' self-evaluations are discussed. Instructors' comments on the cohort's progress are shown along with the author's reflections. Recommendations on how the program can be improved are also given.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the 2010-2011 Pacific Bridge (PB) program cohort and the self-evaluations of their progress at the end of the PB program. A brief background to the program is given followed by an analysis of the students' self-evaluations. Comments from the instructors on the cohort's progress are included along with some reflective comments from the author on the PB program. Finally, some recommendations on how the program can be improved are provided.

2. Background

The PB program is a joint undertaking between Ritsumeikan University and the University of British Columbia (UBC). It aims to provide students with the chance to experience Canadian culture first-hand while studying at the best university in Canada. The program is offered each year over a four-week period from mid-February to mid-March. It was designed by UBC's Continuing Studies' Centre for Intercultural Communication (CIC) and aims to "provide a unique, elite level, full-time, educational opportunity for international university graduates" (UBC, 2009, p. 1; see Cripps, 2009).

Academic seminars given as part of the PB program allow students to experience learning in a Canadian university context and apply their critical thinking skills in various

Table 1: *Academic Seminars*

Lecture Topics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Canada in the Global Environment • Basic Concepts of Trade Theories • International Trade and Trade Restrictions • Balance of International Trade and Canada-Japan Trade • Exchange Rate Policy and Economic Growth • Business Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility

(UBC, 2009, p.2)

Table 2: *Intercultural Communication Workshops*

Aims of the CIC Workshops
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve fluency and comprehension of informal and formal spoken English • Build a variety of intercultural communication skills for personal and professional situations • Increase cultural understanding and sensitivity • Strengthen presentation skills for international audiences • Improve confidence for study in multicultural and international environments

(UBC, 2009, p.2)

subject areas (Table 1). The students also attend workshops on 'International English', 'Orientation to Canada' and 'Intercultural Communication Skills' (Table 2).

Best (1987) cautioned over 20 years ago that the Japanese university system had severe underlying problems such as its entrance examination system and faculty structure. He drew attention to the endemic nature of the system and stressed that change from within towards internationalization was unlikely. Best also suggested that significant change in the type of education offered by Japanese universities (such as opening themselves up to international influences) could be facilitated by pressure from the commercial sector (see Walker, 2005). Indeed, this appears to be happening as Japanese companies are seeking to recruit candidates with a knowledge of English and overseas experience.

University students are finding it increasingly difficult to secure full-time employment after they graduate. In addition, the cataclysmic events of March 11, 2011 have had a major effect on the Japanese economy. Thus, the importance of short and long-term study abroad programs in helping the students with their future career paths cannot be overly stressed. Global competition has seen a rise in demand by Japanese companies for employees who can work in a competitive international environment. Mars is representative of many multinational companies operating in Japan. It advises prospective Japanese employees as follows (Mars, n. d., Para. 1) :

English is imperative for working at Mars Japan and Mars, Incorporated operating globally. Higher English proficiency is directly related to improved future career development and accessing of career opportunities available at Mars, Incorporated. In other words, if you don't have a good command of English, you cannot take advantage

of various opportunities offered.

They do add a caveat (Mars, n. d., para. 1) :

However, selection is not made solely based on English proficiency, as we believe language skills can be improved while working. English proficiency is taken into account as a comprehensive assessment factor.

The expansion of study abroad programs and inter-university cooperation has resulted in a rise in the number of stakeholders involved in this area (Akbar, Van Bael & Baguley, 2005). Richardson (n. d., para. 1) points out that: "Homestay is designed to be an ideal setting where international students are exposed to the target culture and language from within the intimate and safe family environment" (see Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002, p.196). Richardson (op. cit.) contends that homestay programs facilitate "interaction between two cultures, and consequently promotes multicultural understanding and accepting of difference." Unfortunately, regulation and evaluation of these programs have lagged tangibly and the gap between homestay theory and practice is palpable. Self-evaluation by students of their study abroad experience is one way to help improve such programs.

Ritsumeikan students who choose to attend study abroad programs have many reasons for doing so. While a small number may have lived abroad before, for the majority it is their first experience to spend a considerable period of time out of Japan and with a family that they have never met before.

As stated in a previous paper (Cripps, 2009) the PB program aims to provide students with a comprehensive study plan that maximizes the students' cultural and educational environment within a short period of time. The coordinators of the program on both sides of the Pacific work closely to provide the students with a range of experiential activities. This paper discusses the 2010-2011 cohort's self-evaluation of their progress. Aliases have been used to protect the identities of the students and the PB staff.

3. Final Evaluations

Student evaluation and feedback from the UBC instructors who teach the PB program is meticulous and invaluable. Each year, after the students have returned to Japan, the UBC PB program coordinator sends a detailed report outlining the comments of the instructors who teach the program on each student along with their grades. In addition to the instructors' comments, Ritsumeikan is also sent the results of a questionnaire administered to the students on the last day of the program after their final presentations. On March 11, 2011 the students (n=14) completed the questionnaire. The final evaluation is divided into three sections; Program objectives and content; Self-evaluation and reflection; Program staff and facilities (see Tables 3, 4 and 5).

Table 3: Program objectives and content

Overview	Categories
Rating Progress	Presentation skills Critical thinking skills Communication skills
Rating usefulness	Various activities Field studies & optional trips Teaching/learning methods Level of class activities Economics course

A six-point Likert scale is used by UBC to rate the students' responses to their perceived improvement in presentation skills, critical thinking skills, and communication skills. Ten students rated their improvement in presentations skills as 'Good' (n=8) or 'Very Good' (n=2). The students were fairly well versed in giving presentations even before going to Canada having learnt fundamental skills during their regular English courses and also through giving two presentations as part of the pre-PB program held at Ritsumeikan. The fact that they could feel further improvement within only one month is a testament to their progress, as well as to the excellent instruction they received in Canada. The final presentations on their economics related research at the end of the course were polished and interesting.

Seven students assessed the improvement in their critical thinking skills as being 'Good' (n=6) or 'Very Good' (n=1). Similarly, students indicated that their communication skills had improved and their ratings were as follows—'Good' (n=6), 'Very Good' (n=5) and 'Excellent' (n=1). These positive responses must be tempered by the fact that the students completed their questionnaires almost directly after their final presentations and that, perhaps, they were feeling overly satisfied with their effort.

The students were asked about the usefulness of various activities and trips—short talks (2 minutes), presentation skills, E-journal writing, and a teamwork survival activity all rated highly. The highest ratings were reserved for the three activities where the students interacted with three separate groups of people; Japanese language students; Korean students; and guests from different cultural backgrounds (multicultural forums). I was present when the students met the Korean students and also for the multicultural forum. The transformation within the Ritsumeikan students was tangible. They became more animated, vocal, and very soon all members were laughing and smiling as they conversed with their new 'friends'. Perhaps the novelty value of meeting a group of people with different backgrounds galvanized the students into action. One student even wrote in the reflection questionnaire that one of their most important achievements was "*Speaking in English to strangers.*" This reaction mirrors some of my own pedagogical experiences when I have asked groups of students at Ritsumeikan University to interview foreign visitors in Kyoto. Japanese students are usually not 'risk takers' when it comes to language

Table 4: *Self-evaluation and reflection*

Overview	Categories
Rating individual participation and effort	General self-assessment Most important achievements Self-improvement

learning, but many find such activities worthwhile and highly rewarding.

Regarding the usefulness of the 'teaching and learning methods' — instructor teaching, discussions in pairs and small groups, large class discussions, informal class presentations, and the final group project preparation were all rated highly. Overall 13 of the 14 students rated the level of the activities as 'Just right' and all the students rated the pace of the activities as 'Just right'.

A five-point Likert scale was used for self-evaluation of participation and effort. 13 of the 14 students rated themselves as 'Good' (n=8), 'Very Good' (n=4) and 'Excellent' (n=1). This can be taken as an indicator of how satisfied the students were with their own work.

When asked 'What was your most important achievement in this program?' half of the students mentioned their improvement in their English skills. In addition to English skills, an improvement in general communication skills was also highlighted by four of the students. One student commented that through the program they could get a "*positive attitude toward communicating with foreign people.*" An improvement in cultural awareness was another self-reported improvement with one student stating that they could come to "*know the thinking and different culture of foreigners by meeting and talking*" (sic).

When responding to the question 'How could you improve your participation and effort?' five of the students mentioned having an "*active attitude*" or "*positive attitude*" with one student going so far as describing their participation as "*aggressive participation*". Asking questions was also mentioned by two of the students with one stating that "*I asked many times, and tried to talk.*"

In summary, the self-evaluation of the students' individual participation and effort was extremely high and positive. The experiential nature of the program certainly seemed to result in high levels of satisfaction with their individual achievement.

The students were taught by three instructors during their one month program. Two instructors were TEFL professionals and one was an economist. Students were asked to rate their instructors using a four-point Likert scale and they were also given the opportunity to give comments/feedback to the individual instructors. Comments for both TEFL instructors were extremely positive with Andre receiving an evaluation of 'Good' (n=3), 'Very Good' (n=7) and 'Excellent' (n=4) and Claire receiving an evaluation of 'Very Good' (n=10) and 'Excellent' (n=4). The students commented that they appreciated Andre's funny and interesting stories and that he helped them learn about critical thinking. The following comment is typical of those for Andre: "*Andre's lecture was very interesting and I could understand culture and race deeply.*"

Similarly, the students appreciated Claire's kindness and her interesting lectures. She

Table 5: Program Staff & Facilities

Overview	Categories
Rating staff and facilities	Assessing individual instructors Comments about other staff & volunteers Facilities at UBC

focused more on the cultural aspects of life in Canada which the students found invaluable. The students liked her classes as they could take part in discussions and learn about Canadian culture :

“Claire gave us a lot of chances to speak English (For example : talk with other students)” (sic).

“I could understand Canada’s culture and decide my goal.”

“Your comments were very critical, so it was very helpful for us to learn Canadian cultures.”

A surprising (but welcome) result was the positive feedback for the economics lecturer (Paul). The two previous cohorts had complained about Paul’s English accent and his talking speed, with the 2010-2011 cohort however, almost all of the comments were extremely positive. Paul was assessed as ‘Good’ (n=5), ‘Very Good’ (n=7) and ‘Excellent’ (n=2). Students commented that his lectures were easy to understand with clear explanations. They particularly appreciated the fact that they could learn more about economics: *“It was good that you showed some examples related economic theory”* (sic); *“Paul’s lecture was good. I could review microeconomics.”*

Comments for UBC’s facilities, the cultural assistants and the staff were also positive. Students mentioned everyone’s kindness, friendliness, and how much they appreciated their help. These comments echo the cohort’s sentiment: *“Billy and Tricia and other staff were very kind to us, and we could talk a lot of things, so I had a very good time”*; *“Cultural assistants were very cheerful and very kind for us. Thank you !”*

4. Instructors’ Comments

One of the many admirable aspects of the report given to Ritsumeikan by the UBC PB program’s instructors is the detailed grading breakdown of each student with comments on each student. The following comments are typical of the feedback we are given :

“Shogo was one of the most active members of the class, performing well in all categories, and regularly volunteering answers and comments in class discussions. He was a great asset to the program.”

“Ayane made the best presentation of all on “My Life in Vancouver” because, unlike so many of the others, she actually tried to get below the surface and explore the hidden aspects of Canada and her own culture.”

The instructors were pleased with the majority of the students’ learner journals which

were either handwritten or submitted via e-mail. The course coordinator commented that many of the submissions were detailed and thought-provoking. She noted that those students who put the effort into writing their journals seemed to go beyond mere superficial evaluations of Canadian culture and began to '*get below the surface*' (see Gardener and Miller, 2005, for more information on the effectiveness of learner journals).

5. My Perspective : Looking Back at the Bridge

5.1. Group Dynamics

After three years of helping Ritsumeikan with the Pacific Bridge program one underlying theme has been the importance of group dynamics in determining the smoothness of each cohort's journey. All the cohorts I have overseen have worked well together. Each group has elected a second-year student to be their group leader and they often take the younger students under their wing. Usually the majority of the students are second-year students but typically there are three or four first-year students on the program. Often these students appear to be more nervous before leaving for Canada and have less confidence in their English (and economics) ability. Group bonding activities both within the pre-study PB program and through extra-curricula activities serve to create a close-knit group similar to the '*han*' system which the students experienced during their formative school years.

5.2. Emergencies

One fear as an educator and a concerned adult is for the students' physical and mental wellbeing. At times a student may get sick or experience other difficulties and this is where the presence of the support structure provided by Ritsumeikan professors and UBC staff, as well as their peers, is vital in helping the stricken student. One year a student had an accident whilst skiing and they needed help in gaining medical assistance and the post-treatment paperwork which followed. Such an event is rare and students understandably lack the English skills and vocabulary to deal with such situations. In these cases it is vital for the students to understand that they will not be alone when navigating the minefield of officialdom. In fact, the day before the 2010-2011 cohort was due to fly back to Japan, the Tohoku Earthquake and tsunami occurred. Thankfully the students handled the situation well and they were assisted by the staff at UBC, their host families, and myself.

6. Recommendations

6.1. Pre-study Abroad

One of the keys to any successful study abroad experience is preparation. The five-

month preparation program offered by Ritsumeikan University for students before they attend the short-term program in Canada does go some way in helping students prepare for the academic reality of student life at UBC. Practice presentations and group work on Japanese-Canadian themes provide a taste of what they will experience. In terms of preparing the students for the cultural and linguistic challenges I believe that more effort should be made. Despite the fact that students receive advice from their '*sempai*' (seniors) on life in Canada and what to expect, many students fail to study English hard before leaving for Canada. Perhaps one reason is that they are too busy with their university studies or another may be that the need for English may not seem immediate or pressing. Once they start living in Canada however, the need is all too apparent.

6.2. Creation of a Study Abroad Handbook

A study abroad handbook would be an invaluable resource for the students. The handbook could contain useful expressions, advice and other information. Of course students receive a comprehensive handbook from UBC once they arrive, but a pre-PB program package would go a long way to helping the program run smoother.

6.3. Support during the PB Program

Another way to help the students adapt to life in Canada once they arrive would be to provide support through language workshops. During the first few weeks (especially the first week) of their program students could study language and cultural themes that they come across in their day-to-day lives. For example, if they have a misunderstanding with their host family or find themselves unable to express themselves adequately in a given situation then they could air their problems and ask for advice in the workshops. Almost certainly other students will have experienced similar difficulties and the airing of these views would certainly put other students at ease who were probably also thinking "*Am I the only one who is having problems ?*"

Further support could be provided by student counseling—either in small groups or one-to-one. These meetings could focus on specific issues and perhaps the instructor could suggest certain ways to resolve the situation. A further suggestion would be for each student to have a UBC mentor i.e. a student from UBC with whom they could consult. Possibly these mentors could visit the host families with the students to help discuss any difficulties which may have arisen.

6.4. Provision of an Online Study Abroad Centre

Many applied linguists acknowledge that there is a close relationship between learner autonomy and new technology (Hall, 2011, p.157). The students on the PB program are used to working with technology and they rely on their mobile phones and computers for information. Benson (2001) agrees that through multimedia support student autonomy can be developed and that online activities can lead to self-directed learning. The creation of an Online Study Abroad Centre (OSAC) which the students could access before and during

the PB program could provide essential linguistic and cultural support. With the aid of a grant from the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT-Grant in Aid No.23520722) I have begun work on the construction of the OSAC. The online centre will include videos of homestay interaction and other typical situations which the students are likely to encounter during their sojourn abroad.

6.5. Course Reflection and Feedback

It is important to create a link between those students who have attended the PB program and those who are planning to attend. After students have completed the course it is essential that their comments and suggestions should be garnered. This reflective feedback could be used to create a valuable corpus of advice for future cohorts. Apart from written comments and talks with future attendees, a further way of improving the program would be to video the returnees. They could record their advice to future students and discuss their experiences. These 'video letters' could be housed on the Online Study Abroad Centre for future students.

Since the personnel involved with the PB program on both sides of the Pacific changes each year, close liaison between educators and administrators is essential. On the Ritsumeikan side there is a handover process when two professors take over the responsibility for the PB program from their colleagues, but in truth this is largely informal and brief. More detailed discussion on improving the program is warranted.

7. Conclusion

Study abroad programs represent a challenge for students and educators alike. For many of the students it is their first time to go abroad and to live with a family other than their own. The host families have a completely different cultural make-up and this makes for an extremely steep learning curve for the students and for the families. Educators on both sides of the Pacific also face challenges. What are the best ways to prepare the students before they go abroad? Are they up to the task both linguistically and emotionally? The UBC instructors have to quickly gauge the linguistic level of the visiting students and also their cultural flexibility. Notably, students have problems with critical thinking and going beyond the surface of their assumptions.

Despite these challenges study abroad programs allow students to take ownership of their language learning. I concur with Dudley-Marling and Searle (1995, p. viii) that the epistemological notion of ownership "describes the complex ways in which individuals make sense of their experience and the world around them." It is up to educators to do what they can to create a learning environment where students are free to interpret and experience the world in their own individual ways. Programs such as the PB program are ideal crucibles for experiential learning.

Study abroad programs run by Japanese universities could benefit from having closer

connections with other institutions in Japan. For example, if a university-wide study abroad preparation centre were set up in Japan to help students who plan to study overseas then students could receive valuable formal training. They could be taught essential English phrases, given lessons in cultural understanding and they could also mix with students from other universities and realize that they share similar feelings and angst. Admittedly this is a lofty goal. Perhaps the proposed Online Study Abroad Centre can act as the first step in helping students prepare themselves for their study abroad experience.

Students taking part in study abroad programs are living bridges spanning countries and cultures. It is through them that cultural understanding can take place free from the perceived constraints of formal tertiary education. Each day Japanese students such as the 2010-2011 PB cohort are challenging themselves and it is hoped that future study abroad cohorts will build more bridges between Japan and other nations.

References

- Akbar, H., Van Bael, T. & Baguley, G. (2005). *Evaluating the QUT Homestay Program — lessons learnt in providing quality services to international students*. Retrieved May 25, 2011. http://www.isana.org.au/files/20051017171152_EvaluatingtheQUTHomestayPolicy.pdf
- Benson, P. (2001). *Autonomy in Language Learning*. Harlow :Longman.
- Best, P. J. (1987). *Japanese higher education and Japan's "internationalization" (kokusaika)*, unpublished ms, Southern Connecticut State University.
- Cripps, A. C. (2009). *Students' Views on the Pacific Bridge Program*. Ritsumeikan Economic Review. Vol. 58, No. 3.
- Dudley-Marling, C. & Searle, D. (eds.). (1995). *Who owns learning ?* Portsmouth :Heinemann.
- Gardener, D. & Miller, L. (2005). *Establishing self-access : From theory to Practice*. Cambridge :CUP.
- Hall, G. (2011). *Exploring Language Teaching : Language in Action*. London :Routledge.
- Knight, S. & Schmidt-Rhinehart, B. (2002). Enhancing the Homestay :Study Abroad from the Host Family's Perspective'. *Foreign Language Annals*, Vol. 35, No.2, pp.190-201.
- Mars homepage. (n. d.). Retrieved June 1, 2011. <http://www.mars.com/japan/en/careers/graduates/faq.aspx>
- Richardson, K. (n. d.). *International Education :Homestay Theory Versus Practice*. Retrieved June 2, 2011. <http://www.aare.edu.au/03pap/ric03173.pdf>
- The University of British Columbia (2009). *The Pacific Bridge Program* (information pamphlet). Vancouver :UBC.
- Walker, P. (2005). Internationalising Japanese Higher Education : Reforming the System or Repositioning the Product? In Eades, J. S., Goodman, R. & Hada, Y. (eds.), *The 'Big Bang' in Japanese Higher Education* (pp.165-182). Melbourne :Trans Pacific Press.