

Organization and Implementation of a Virtual Summer Study Abroad Program for Japanese Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: A major consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic for university student life has been the impossibility of participating in study abroad programs, but it has also presented opportunities for novel solutions. This research paper reports on one such attempt: an English language and culture study abroad course which went online for summer 2021. A total of 25 students participated in this unique new program, which offered a choice of online summer courses at four universities in North America. The process of finding partner universities, securing accreditation, and student recruitment and orientation through a spring semester preparation class are outlined. Student reactions to the programs including their strong and weak points are analyzed, and the possibility of the course continuation in the future is explored.

Keywords: Online, study abroad, COVID-19 pandemic

1. Introduction

One of the highlights of university life for many students is an experience abroad. For students majoring in English or other foreign languages, studying abroad is often the crowning event of their academic career. However, COVID-19 restrictions have made this experience impossible for most students since 2020, with saddening and frustrating consequences. As one student lamented in a free-verse poem,

I have a lot of things I want to do.

They're all gone because of you

Adult ceremony, overseas travel, school life

When will you disappear from the world?

I just want to live a normal life

I just want to be a normal 21-year-old

Promise me

You'll say goodbye to us in 2022 (a 3rd year English student, 2021)

Like the author of this poem, many students who had dreamed of studying abroad in their university years found themselves facing the fact that they would have to give up their childhood dreams. In present day Japan, the window of opportunity for studying abroad cannot be delayed, as most students feel compelled to start job hunting in their third year.

As a teacher in charge of such students, who chose and entered the English department of our university based on its reputation for excellent exchange programs, the challenges posed by COVID-19 were not simply a matter of cancelling a course and leaving students without options. Thus, the possibility of recreating the experience of traveling abroad via an online program was considered. The present study reports on this attempt: an English language and culture study abroad course which was reorganized as an online program for summer 2021. Although the course is not required and thus did not need to be held for academic reasons, it can still be considered an instance of Emergency Remote Teaching (hereafter ERT, Hodges et al. 2021), a direct response to the pandemic.

Such programs have been forged around the world in response to COVID-19. Reporting on an ERT business course involving collaboration between US and German students that was taken online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Liu and Shirley (2021) concluded that “students were satisfied with the redesigned online study-abroad course, which suggests that traditional study-abroad courses can be redesigned into fully online COIL courses” (p. 186) but added that “VR cannot replace a full immersion in a different country” (p. 192). They also noted that “the most interesting finding was that prior to the course, students were neutral regarding whether “a complete study abroad course can be given online without difficulty” (median = 3), but by the end of the course, most students agreed with the statement (median = 4, a statistically significant increase)” (p. 186).

In Japan, however, there were many academic and logistic hurdles to be overcome to offer such a redesigned course. Here, the process of finding partner universities, securing accreditation, student recruitment, and orientation through a spring semester preparation class are outlined. Student reactions to the program, including its strong and weak points as viewed by the participants, are analyzed using text mining and co-occurrence networks, and the possibility of its continuation in the future is explored.

2. Online Learning in Japan

The development of synchronous video conference tools such as Zoom, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams has immensely expanded the possibilities for effective education outside of the classroom. As Bates and Sangrà (2011) note, “by exceeding the boundaries of time and location, the Internet enables instructors and learners to communicate with one another both synchronously and asynchronously, in pairs or groups anywhere anytime” (quoted in Mehran et al 2017, p. 2). “Anywhere” means that it is no longer necessary to board a plane to experience a culture thousands of miles away, “anytime” implies that it is now possible to sandwich novel albeit vicarious experiences around the world between meals and part time jobs. Moreover, the choice is no longer binary—educators can mix and match education online and offline in blended environments, and “purely online learning has been equivalent to face-to-face

instruction in effectiveness, and blended approaches have been more effective than instruction offered entirely in face-to-face mode.” (Means et al. 2013, p. 35).

Although Japan is generally considered a highly advanced country in terms of technology, it is often pointed out to be sadly lagging behind in terms of online education, resulting in confusion and delayed responses to pandemic-driven ERT. For example, none of the 38 empirical studies connected with the “global crash-course” in ERT reviewed by Stewart (2021) dealt with responses in Japan. Two major reasons can be cited for this: overall government policy regarding public education and student unreadiness.

2.1 Government Policy

As laid down by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Japan’s rigid and homogenous academic standards prevent local governments from facilitating at-home learning. First, online classes are required to prove that they provide the same educational benefit as face-to-face learning. If not, they cannot receive accreditation. Moreover, online classes must account for less half of the credits gained from coursework, and virtual classes must be later supplemented by face-to-face lessons. (Hata, 2020).

2.2 Student Unreadiness

Are Japanese students ready for digital learning? According to a questionnaire of 299 Japanese university students by Mehran et al. (2017, p. 11-12), 36.8% were willing, 36.1% were **uncertain**, and 26.1% were **reluctant** to take a purely online English course. They also believed their English typing skills to be poor. Moreover, a survey of 346 Japanese university students (Cutrone & Beh, 2022 p. 29-63) found that over 40% responded that online classes should be used “only in an emergency”. This reflects the possibility that many students (and perhaps their teachers as well) in general did not have satisfactory experiences in their online studies, and have not yet become aware of the distinct advantages to be had with well-organized online courses. The next highest responses (depends on class (30%), depends on teacher (11%)) seem to indicate that some classes and teachers, at least, had some success online.

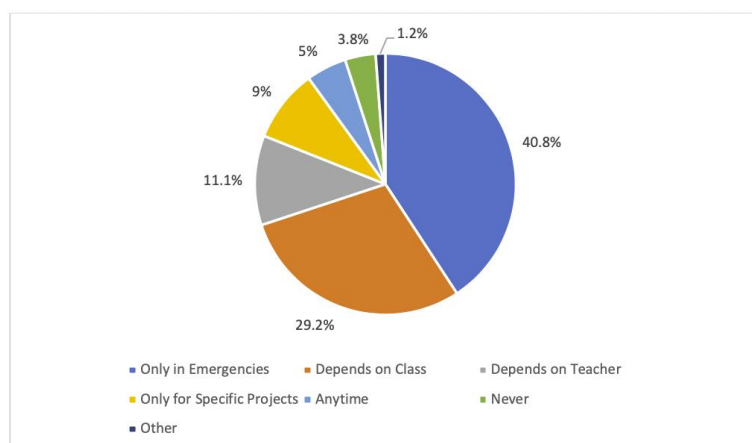


Figure 1. When Should Online Classes Be Used?

(From Cutrone & Beh, 2022 Fig. 5, p. 49)

Possibly due to the two reasons discussed above, only a few reports of actual online study abroad courses in Japan have been published. Hori (2022) reports on a virtual summer study program for science students in 2021, concluding that the quality of English education and the experience of the Short Summer Program were almost the same as for actual courses. On the other hand, she found that cultural experience was lacking, as “students cannot feel and learn ‘culture’ itself virtually” (p. 97). Kondo, Kakimoto and Hattori (2021) review a program developed at Ritsumeikan University for pharmacy students, which included lectures and student exchange with a university in Toronto. They concluded that the combination of the Toronto lectures and Ritsumeikan sessions “were beneficial to the students and helped them deepen their comprehension of the lectures and cross-cultural understanding” (p. 90). Yamamoto (2021) analyzed student responses to similar online study abroad programs and concluded that “[o]nline international exchange programs can partly compensate for the experience of study-abroad programs and can offer positive experiences that will benefit students regardless of the plan to study abroad” (p. 69-70).

However, ready or not, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the academic world to go online in 2020. The Mainichi (2020, August 8) reported that on July 1, over 20% of universities in Japan were conducting all of their lessons online. Overseas study programs were cancelled, and students had to postpone or forego their summer study plans. The program discussed in this paper was developed for summer 2021 by restructuring an existing summer study abroad course.

2.3. The Summer Study Abroad Program (海外研修) 2000-2019

In normal times, three accredited study abroad options are available specifically for English students at the university under study:

a 3-month program in Victoria, Canada, with an optional internship component
 a 3-week summer culture-based homestay and study program at a small Christian college in Minnesota
 a 2-week domestic program at a Japanese center for students from universities in Michigan.

In 2020, all of these programs were cancelled due to COVID-19, and especially the cohort of 16 students who had trained and were ready to study abroad in Canada from March 2020 were sorely disappointed. In an effort to provide students with a poor but viable substitute, the author sought to restructure the 2021 summer study abroad course in Minnesota around an online component.

This course is an elective class comprising a summer ESL and local culture study and homestay program sponsored by an intercultural institute at a small Christian college. This course has been operated since 1995 (originally 26 days from Japan departure to return) and has been a mainstay of the department since its inception. There is a 15-week intensive preparation course in the spring, in which students are prepared for going abroad. It has been interrupted only for three years, two in 2001-2002 due to the Gulf war and the Sars epidemic, and one in 2009 due to H1N1.

The history of the course can be divided into four eras:

- (1) **1996-1999.** This was a required 26-day 3rd year course in the US or New Zealand, average participation 77.3 students. It was restructured as an optional 2nd year course from 2000, which had 39 students enrolled.
 - (2) **2003-2008.** After the 2001-2 Gulf/SARS hiatus, the average participation was 56.4 students.
 - (3) **2010-2014.** After the 2008 Lehman shock, sending of a teacher/chaperone was stopped for budget considerations, and the program was cancelled in 2009 due to H1N1. Moreover, a competing semester-long Canada program was introduced in 2012. Average participation was 22.8 students.
 - (4) **2015-2019.** The program was reduced from 27 to 23 days (2016) and a 30,000 yen/student stipend was cut (2016). Average participation was 11 students.
- In addition, the years 2021 and 2022 can be considered a 5th, pandemic-induced era.

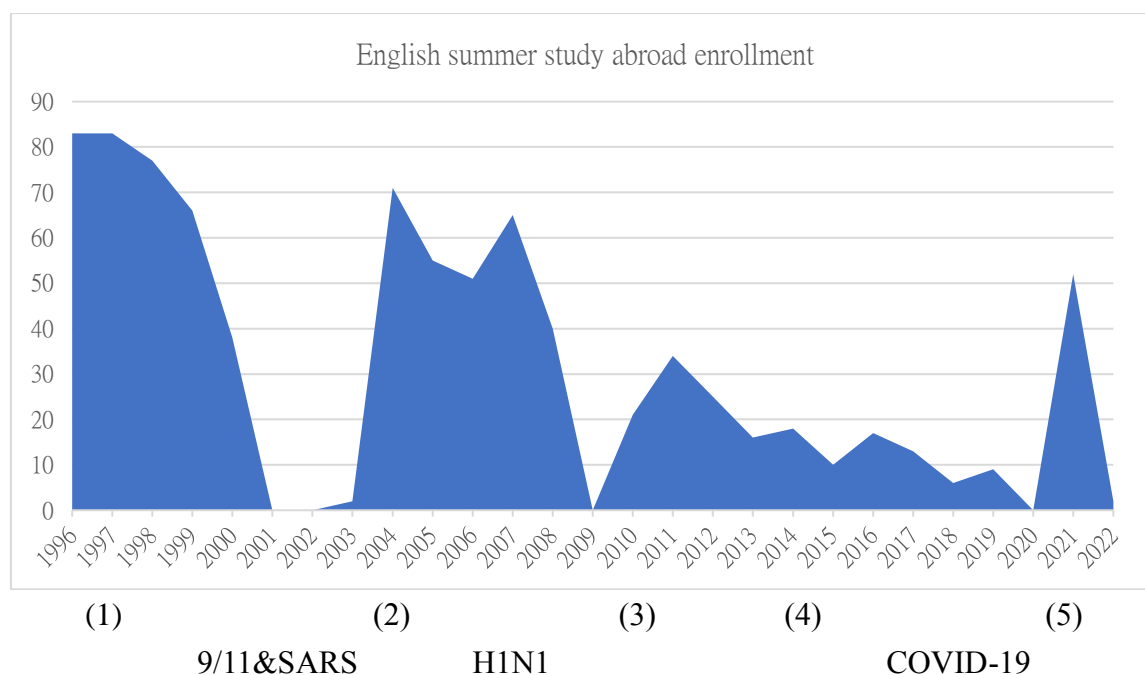


Figure 2. Student Enrollment in English Summer Study Abroad Course 1996-2022

As seen above and in Figure 2, the course participation has gradually dwindled from a peak of 89 students in the first two years, to only 5 students in 2018. There are several reasons for the gradual lack of interest in the program as expressed by the average number of participants:

- (1) Course status was changed from required to elective in 2000.
- (2) Budget cuts after 2008 led to cutbacks in program length and service. In 2016, a general restructuring of university expenditure led to a budget cut of a 30,000 yen stipend per student which had been previously offered. At the same time, airfares rose from approximately \$1500 in 1996 to over \$2200 in 2016. (<https://www.in2013dollars.com/Airline-fares/price-inflation/>)
- (3) A semester-long program in Canada began in 2012. The Canada program is attractive both in terms of academic credit (a total of 20 credits is possible, compared to only 4 credits for the summer program), and cost-effectiveness, approximately 1,000,000 yen for 3 months in contrast to some 450,000 for 3 weeks.

Therefore, without major revisions, the course itself was bound for extinction. On the other hand, it proved to be a perfect vehicle for accreditation of online courses abroad, as it could be adapted to an online format without creating a new course.

However, there was still much work to be done. Based on personal experience and student reports, this research will review and discuss the processes of finding partner universities, securing accreditation, orientation through a spring semester preparation class, and student reactions to the program.

2.4. Recreating the Course

The first order of the day was to ensure the academic appropriateness of the online course. It should not only meet MEXT requirements, but also provide students with an educational experience analogous to that of actually going abroad. To this end, there were five requirements for a suitable course offered by a partner university.

- (1) **Local culture.** The course should focus on what is available in the local culture, including the history, food, attractions and characteristics of the area.
- (2) **Interaction with local students.** The course should include interaction with local students as much as possible.
- (3) **Interaction with international students.** The course should accept students from various parts of the world, and provide interactions between students.
- (4) **Course hours.** The timing of the course should fit within the university summer schedule (early August – mid September) and offer at least 30 50-minute course sessions along with appropriate homework. This was necessary to ensure MEXT compliance for accreditation.
- (5) **Cost.** The tuition cost should be reasonable for the number of instruction hours provided.

At first, our partner university in Minnesota was approached to see if they could put together an online version of their program. It proved to be impracticable, however, so an online search was made for possible partner universities that offered summer programs fitting the above criteria. At first the search was directed towards universities in Australia, New Zealand, and other areas in the Eastern hemisphere which would be in similar time zones, but no appropriate summer online programs were found. Expanding the search to Canada and the United States, four programs were identified as suitable for our purposes (see Figure 3).

location	Canada	Hawaii	New York	Mississippi
dates	8/3-27	30-9/17	8/23-9/4, 9/7-9/21	8/9-9/15
Japan times	9-10 am MTWTh	8:30-11:20 AM MTWTHF	8:00 -11:00 PM MTWTF	9:00-10:40 AM T TH
fees	895 CAD (76000 JPY)	575 USD (66000 JPY)	300 USD (33000 JPY)	360 USD (39000 JPY)
teacher(s)	Caucasian	Philippine-American	Mexican-American	Caucasian
student assistants	a few students, outside of class	interchangers 1 per 4 students	one student on Saturday	graduated ESL and current students

Figure 3. Characteristics of the Four Partner Programs

All four programs were approved through a series of faculty meetings and consultations

with the department head and the academic affairs office. Although four different programs were not necessary for the course, they were chosen to provide a variety of choices for academic goals, time constraints and budget considerations. As it turned out, each program was able to attract enough students to form separate study groups, which worked out quite well in terms of organization of the preparatory course.

3. Implementation of the Online Study-Abroad Course in 2021

It was impossible to predict how many students would be interested in taking the class, but 28 students ended up registering for the course. Compared with enrollment trends for the actual overseas course (see Fig. 1), this was the highest number in 10 years. It included two 4th year students who had prepared to study in Canada in March 2020, who unfortunately dropped out soon afterwards due to concerns about conflicts with job hunting activities, which for them had to be prioritized. Of the remaining 26 students, six were in their 3rd year and 20 in their 2nd year. One of these students dropped out in the middle of the course due to personal reasons, leaving 25 who completed the course.

	Initial	AT Module 2	Final	Retention	Notes
Canada	7	7	6	86%	1 incomplete
Hawaii	7	5	5	71%	2-->NY, 1→Mississippi
Mississippi	7	4	4	57%	2 dropped, 2-->Hawaii
New York	7	10	10	143%	
Total	28	26	25	89%	

Figure 4. Number of Students in Initial Choice and Final Programs

The 15-class preparation course was structured in four modules as follows:

- (1) **Module 1.** Classes 1-5. Detailed research of each partner program by task group, including an online zoom meeting with organizers of the program, and reporting to the class.
- (2) **Module 2.** Classes 6-9. Informed choice of partner program, registration and payment of fees. Rearrangement of groups based on partner university.
- (3) **Module 3.** Classes 10-14. Group research and individual presentation on cultural topics viz. the target locality. Topics included food, restaurants, local sites, history, demographics, university life, politics, housing, and local economy (Appendix 1).
- (4) **Module 4.** Class 15. Assignment of final report and review of course requirements.

In addition, a semester-long assignment, consisting of collecting and sharing photographs to practice awareness and explanation of Japanese culture in English, was performed each week as a warm-up exercise (Appendix 2).

In Module 1, structured to acquaint the students with the partner universities and details of each course, students were divided into 4 groups of 7 (N=28), based on their initial preferences. Online informational zoom sessions were held by each group with at least one staff member of each partner university present. Students were instructed to prepare and ask questions about the program, and organize their responses into a presentation for the rest of the class. The two 4th year students, who joined the Mississippi group, dropped in the second week before the zoom meeting.

After the first module, final choices were made as shown in Fig. 4. The initial numbers for Canada did not change, demonstrating that the students' initial choice did not waver. This may be expected, as this program is at the same university that provides the semester abroad program, reflecting the general interest in Canada. The student who dropped out after Module 1 was a 3rd year student. Some shuffling between the other three programs led to the final numbers shown in Figure 1. Notably, New York retained all initial students and gained three more, probably due to time and cost factors as it was the least expensive and the only program offered at night. For this reason, the New York cohort was divided into two groups (NY1 and NY2) of five students each, who took the summer course at different dates.

In Module 3, the reorganized 5 groups of 4-6 students each chose, researched and reported on various aspects of their chosen locality. Reports were given by one representative student each week, and students compared cultural differences and similarities of their different locations. Several interesting discoveries were made through this approach; for example, that Captain Cook had been involved in the history of both Victoria and Hawaii, and that housing situations varied dramatically between New York and Mississippi.

Module 4, which was the last class of the semester, focused on last minute preparations, confirmation of class starting dates and times, creation of questions for each student to ask during the course if possible, preparations before the online classes, and requirements to complete the final report. The final report was due at the end of summer, before the beginning of the second semester, and students were asked to include detailed answers to the 8 questions shown in Appendix 3.

4. Results and Student Feedback

The feedback given in the final reports are analyzed here in order to determine overall student reactions to each course, using two methods. The report did not include quantitative data, so co-occurrence networks of words generated by the downloadable text mining program KH Coder 3 developed by K. Higuchi of Ritsumeikan University (<https://kncoder.net/en/>) was used to provide an overall picture of each program. Partially based on the resultant characteristics, student answers with special respect to the questions 6-8 of the report assignment were identified and discussed:

6. What was the best part of your program? Why?
7. Were there any problems or troubles with your program? If so, explain.
8. Would you recommend this program to other students? Why or why not?

4.1 Text Mining Results

Figures 5-8 show results for the KH coder co-occurrence networks of words for each program, revealing clusters that were labeled *university name*, *teachers' names*, *other students*, *overall program*, and *program activities*. The last three clusters gave the greatest insights on the characteristics of each program, so they will be focused on here.

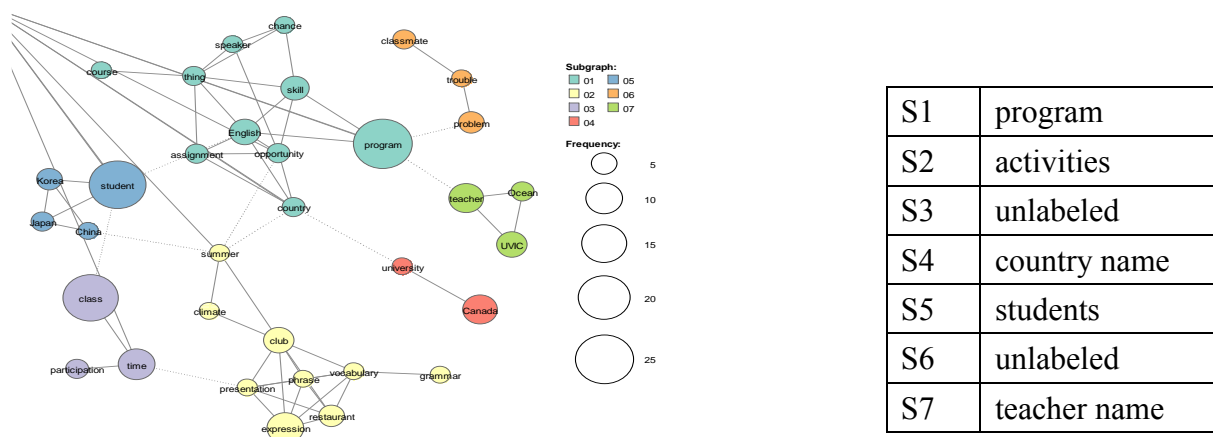


Figure 5. Canada Program Results

There are 7 subgraphs of the Canada program, the important ones for our purposes being Subgraphs 1 (Program), 2 (Activities) and 5 (Students). The keywords *chance*, *opportunity*, *speaker*, *skill* and *assignment* cluster with *program*, indicating that the assignments in the program provided opportunities to discuss with other speakers. Program activity keywords focused on linguistic aspects such as grammar and vocabulary, and cultural-based keywords were fewer (restaurant, climate). The student cluster mentioned only students from East Asia: Japan, China and Korea.

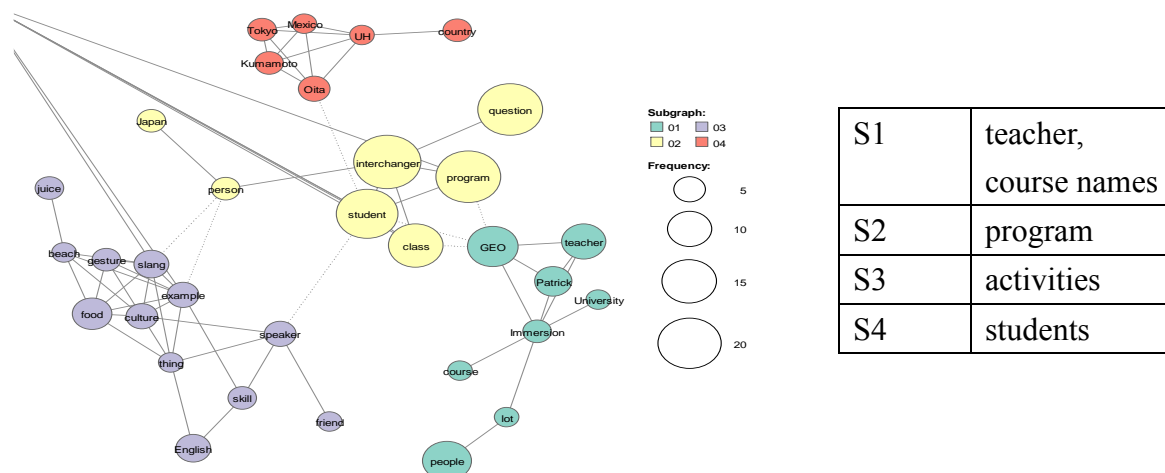


Figure 6. Hawaii Program Results

The Hawaii program had only 4 subgraphs, including Subgraphs 2 (Program), 3 (Activities) and 4 (Students). The keywords *interchanger* and *question* were most closely mentioned in connection with program. Indeed, the interchangers, which were local student assistants, proved to be the most important and popular characteristic of this program. Activity keywords clustered around Hawaiian culture, including food, gestures, beach and slang. The student cluster included Mexico and various cities in Japan.

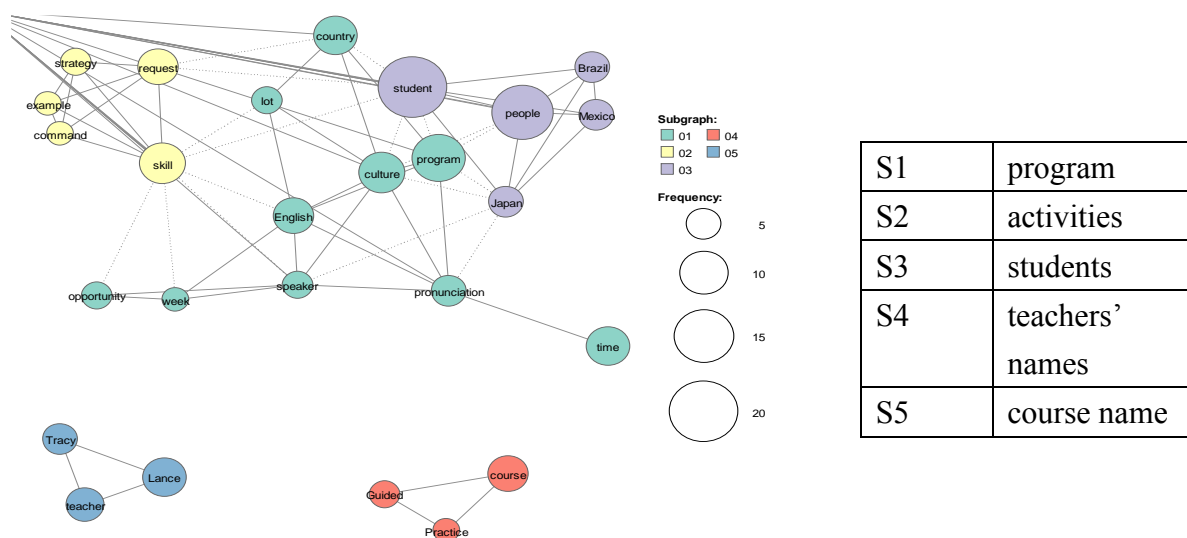
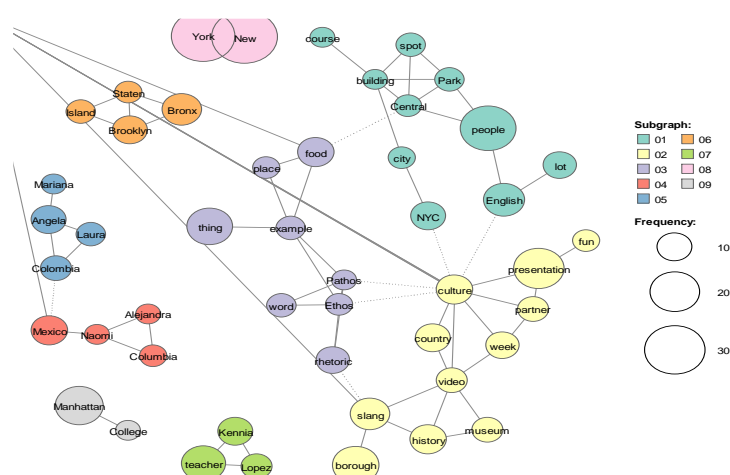


Figure 7. Mississippi Program Results

Subgraphs 1 (Program), 2 (Activities) and 3 (Students) of the Mississippi program reveal that, similar to Canada, the keywords *culture*, *speaker* and *opportunity* cluster with program. On the other hand, program activity keywords *request*, *example*, *command*, *skill* and *strategy* focused on pragmatic aspects of English, and there were no cultural-based keywords here. The student cluster mentioned Japan, Mexico and Brazil, but the comparative number of interconnections (=dotted lines) between all three clusters, along with words such as *speaker* and *pronunciation* indicates that the program was tight knit with close connections between the program, activities and students.



S1	program
S2	program
S3	program
S4	students 1
S5	students 2
S6	place names
S7	teacher name
S8	state name
S9	school name

Figure 8. New York Program Results

Finally, the New York program shows 9 subgraphs. Perhaps because this program was divided into two different sessions with different participants, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between the overall program and its activities. Subgraphs 1, 2 and 3 correspond to program and activities, and there are connecting lines between various individual keywords of these 3 subgroups. We also find two different subgraphs for students (Subgraphs 4 and 5). In subgraph 1 the keywords *Central* and *Park* cooccur with *building*, *people*, *spot* and *city*. We see *culture* in subgraph 2, linked to *country*, *video* and, interestingly, *presentation*, *partner* and *fun*. A characteristic of this program was that students from different cultures were paired and tasked with presenting about the partner's culture. On the other hand, New York culture can also be seen here, with connections between *slang*, *history*, *museum* and *borough*. Food, however, appears in subgraph 3, linked to *example* and *places*. We also see that elements of *rhetoric* were taught in this course including *Pathos* and *Ethos*. The student clusters mentioned Mexico and Colombia.

4.2 Student Reactions

The following results are based on the last three open-ended questions for the final report

(Appendix C). First, asked what the best parts of the programs were for them (Q6), students provided multiple responses that could be sorted into three general categories:

4.2.1. Communicating with Others in English

The four programs focused on different culture and language content, but they all provided ample opportunity for communication in English, and this was reflected in almost all of the student comments. Typical comments were:

- *I had to speak English twice a week and opportunity I speak English increased*
- *I needed to communicate one on one*

The comments could be subdivided into communication using “native English”, such as

- *I found conventional expression native speakers actually used*

and communication with other students using English as a lingua franca (ELF), e.g.

- *I enjoyed talking with students from different countries as if I was on the phone with a friend*
- *It was really good chance to communicate with people who have various backgrounds in English.*

Indeed, several students carefully made distinctions between the two sets of interlocutors, implying that they are swayed by elements of “native speakerism” (Halliday 2003, 2005, 2006) (emphasis added):

- *I would recommend this program to other students, because they can improve their English skills **by talking with native speakers and students that are good at English.** we hardly go abroad and don't have many chances to talk to native speakers.*
- *I could communicate with the **native speakers and other students** positively and make friends in this class.*
- *I could have **UH students understand my English and make friends who are from other prefectures and other countries.***

4.2.2 Learning about Different Cultures

Similar to the opportunities for exposure to both native and lingua franca English discussed above, improving knowledge of different cultures could also be divided into learning about the target culture:

- *I can feel 'Real Canada'*
- *We can learn from New Yorkers, so we can learn about deep New York.*

and cultures of the other students, such as

- *We shared unknown tourist spots*
- *I found 'culture shock' in this program. I especially surprised to hear Korean soldier*

system.

The following comments also reflect how students felt their horizons had been expanded through sharing information with other students.

- *I could make friends who are from other prefectures and other countries.*
- *When we introduced our recommend restaurants, I got a lot of information from Chinese and Korean students. I want to go those restaurants after finishing COVID-19.*

The above comments tend to support the results of Kondo, Kakimoto and Hattori (2021) over Hori (2022) viz. the question of how much cultural experience can be “felt” virtually, but here it should be reiterated that this experience was not simply of the target culture, but included true multicultural experience with other student interlocutors.

4.2.3 Characteristics of Specific Programs

Finally, two of the four programs had characteristics that were mentioned several times by the students. The first was the interchangers provided by the university in Hawaii,

- *There was one interchanger for every three to four students*
- *I could have UH students understand my English*

and the second was a set of 2 paired presentations, set as assignments for the students on the New York program:

- *I investigated many things for the presentations.*
- *We pretended to be New Yorkers, and I went to many sightseeing spots in my imagination.*
- *Me and Angela became friends thanks to this assignment.*

The comments above demonstrate that conversation tasks with young interlocutors in pairs or groups were especially appreciated by the students, and indicate again that the single most important factor for the students was having as many opportunities to communicate with people from other cultures in small online groups.

The responses to Q7, “Were there any problems or troubles with your program? If so, explain.” were minimal. Although 10 students answered that there were problems, 4 of these were technical: bad WiFi communications and freezing of their own or other students’ connections, including on the part of the teacher in the Hawaii program. Four students mentioned difficulties in understanding what needed to be done, but also followed up that this generally became clearer during the flow of the class. Two students said they had trouble communicating in English, and one said she was not able to attend the class twice, but admitted that it was her problem, not a problem with the course. Indeed, the only problem with the program proper seemed to be the WiFi connections.

Finally, for Q8. “Would you recommend this program to other students?” 24 of the 25 students answered in the affirmative, with 5 of these voluntarily providing emphasis such as

“Definitely” or “Of course!” Only one student who joined the Canada program (the most expensive of the four) responded in the negative:

- *I wouldn't recommend because I couldn't talk with native speakers. The teacher was Canadian, but in the class I didn't have time to talk with him. I talk with Chinese, Korean, and Japanese almost. I think I can make an opportunity to talk with Asian in my private. For join this program, cost is not cheap, so I recommend that you save money for going to Canada.*

Most students gave multiple reasons for recommending their respective programs, which could be grouped into two categories. First, they reported overall improved confidence through shared extensive experience in communication, as demonstrated by the following comments:

- *I was able to communicate more than I expected*
- *I learned the importance of trying*
- *I could discuss about wide range of topics in English.*
- *I found out It is important to remember to not be afraid of making mistakes*
- *I can be more confident about speaking English than before.*
- *I moderated for the group a few times*

The second reason, on the other hand, clearly came from influence of the pandemic, showing that most of the students considered the program a replacement for their lost opportunities to actually go abroad, and *as such* considered it a suitable option. This sentiment can especially be felt in the final comment, in which the student reiterated the fact that even though the program was good and the gains substantial, he still felt the need to actually go abroad in the future to “communicate in person.”

- *Because of the COVID-19, we can't study abroad easily*
- *Though it's pandemic now, I had invaluable time to join this program!*
- *I could have a wonderful experience because it has been difficult to study abroad recently because of COVID-19.*
- *Thanks to the program, I felt like I studied abroad this summer although it was held on Zoom.*
- *I think this program is good, but we have to go abroad sometime. Because it is important for me to communicate in person. I was helped by the chat function of my computer, so I need to actually go abroad.*

5. Future of the Course

There are many hints for future success of virtual study abroad programs. First, the popularity of the interchangers and student assistants who interacted with students in the Hawaii and Mississippi courses points to the need to request such care from the partner university. This would be one way to, as Kondo et al. (2021) put it, “devise ways to make it more than just

providing a course by the partner institution” (p. 90).

The initial number of students enrolled was 28, including two 4th year students, six 3rd year students and twenty 2nd year students. The trend for students to plan to go abroad in their 2nd year is strong, so most students seem to have considered the course as a replacement for their lost opportunity. On the other hand, as seen in Figure 2, the same course only had two students enrolled in 2022, one 2nd year and one 3rd year student. Two other 2nd year students seem to have “mistakenly” enrolled and dropped out right away. It is difficult to explain the dramatic decrease in students, but one possibility is that especially 2nd year students may have become “zoomed out”, having in essence performed their entire first year online. They may also have waited to see whether they can go abroad in person in 2023 or 2024, expecting that they could go virtually if not. Additionally, an informal survey of 1st year students in May, 2022, revealed that there was clearly more interest in a face-to-face summer study abroad program in contrast to a virtual one, as seen in Figure 9.

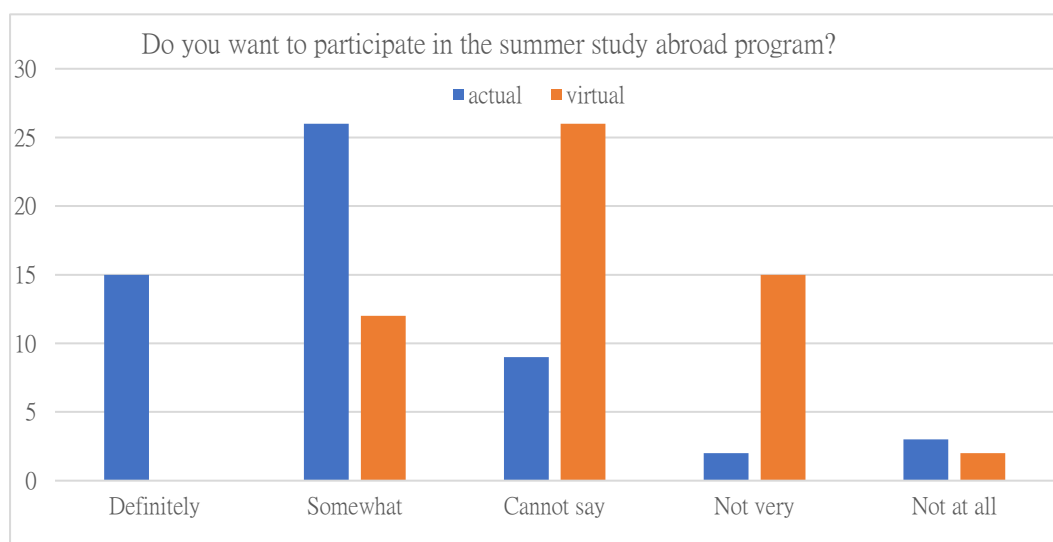


Figure 9. Survey of Attractiveness of Virtual vs. Face-to-Face Study Abroad Program for 1st Year Students

Changes in partner universities seem to coincide with this trend away from online courses. One of the four partners completely cancelled their online program, another cancelled the summer course, and the other two had much lower enrollments than in 2021. Although the dramatic increase in course enrollment in 2021 over the previous years seemed to indicate a real need for such an online experience at a low cost, hinting that it could be a template for a completely new course in the future, the extremely low enrollment in 2022 has most likely sounded a death knell for the online program in the future.

In light of the highly positive overall reviews of the 2021 course, the untimely demise of this online program would be indeed unfortunate. The departmental vision that this course

would provide an ersatz experience for those who were not able to go abroad did seem to materialize, but in the future, the possibility that this experience could be considered instead as a new, different, time- and cost-effective opportunity to interact with native speakers and students from other countries should not be forgotten. Perhaps, sadly, many Japanese students are still not yet ready for such a future.

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Appendix 1. Target Culture Research Topics for Module 3

Research 1: Food and restaurants

Special food of the area? Good restaurants? Drinks?

Research 2. Demographics in your chosen city/state/province

How many people? What ethnicities/percentages? How many Japanese? What percent? How many other Asians?

Research 3: Other Universities in your city

What other universities are there? How do they compare to yours in size? number of students? Majors? Where are they?

Research 4: Housing and transportation

Homes vs apartments/condos, rental vs ownership, average size and cost, Types of transportation

Research 5: Sightseeing spots

Shopping, natural areas, amusement parks, museums, other

Research 6. History of your city

When was your state/city/province founded? By whom? What was its history before that? Special historical events? areas to visit? Natural disasters?

Research 7: Politics and economy

President and vice president/ Prime minister and vice prime minister? Congress people from your state or province, Political parties and membership

Appendix 2. Photo Homework about Japan/Kumamoto

1. You and your family and pet(s)
2. Your house/apartment
3. Your kitchen (One difference! disposal)
4. Your bedroom
5. A typical Japanese bathroom and typical Japanese toilet. The ones with lots of buttons are especially interesting to Americans
6. Something you enjoy doing at home
7. Something you are proud of
8. You and your friends doing something together
9. Typical things in Kumamoto (shrine, park, factory, statue, traffic, shops, etc.)
10. Your favorite shop (outside and inside if possible) and your favorite shopping mall
11. Your favorite restaurant (outside and inside if possible) and a photo of you eating there
12. Kumamoto Gakuen University (outside), your high school (if possible), your junior high school (if possible), your elementary school (if possible) and a photo of your high school uniform
13. Someone (it could be yourself) cooking a meal in your home. Include photos of both cooking and the meal itself as you are eating it
14. A photo of you eating a typical breakfast
15. The KGU cafeteria, the food you can choose, and a photo of you and your friends eating

a typical lunch there

16. A market and/or grocery store – several photos of various kinds of food
17. Photos of Kumamoto Gakuen University– classrooms, professor’s office, your favorite place at Kumamoto Gakuen University, etc.
18. Someplace you worked or are working at a part-time job
19. Photos of various kinds of vending machines (food, beverage, train tickets, etc.)
20. Public transportation (bus, train, taxi) and photos of how you buy tickets, photos the train station
21. Views of nature in or near Kumamoto (parks, countryside, mountains, forests, rivers, ocean, etc.)
22. The 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake

Appendix 3. Questions to Be Addressed in Final Student Reports

1. Who was your teacher? What was he or she like?
2. Who were the other students in the class? How many students were there altogether? Where were they from?
3. How was your participation? Did you join all of the classes on time? If not, why not?
4. What did you learn in your classes? Please tell me many things!
5. What three questions did you want to ask from our last class? Were you able to ask them, and what were the answers?
6. What was the best part of your program? Why?
7. Were there any problems or troubles with your program? If so, explain.
8. Would you recommend this program to other students? Why or why not?