8 The assessment for the year abroad programme: how to incorporate language, culture, and personal development

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Abstract

This chapter will discuss how a Year Abroad (YA) assessment can incorporate language progress, cultural understanding, and personal development by showcasing the Interim Self-Reflection Evaluation Report (ISER), which was introduced in 2017-2018 as a piece of assessment for the YA in Japan at the University of Leeds. At the end of their first semester, the students were required to write a reflective report on their progress and challenges related to their academic, linguistic, intercultural, and personal development, using both Japanese and English. Keyword analysis of the content revealed what aspects the students primarily focused on. Further qualitative analysis also shed light on their successful endeavours to enhance their confidence, on how they viewed their own weaknesses, and on changes in their self-perception.

Keywords: Japanese, assessment, year abroad, self-evaluation, personal development.

1. Introduction

Recent studies have shown that Study Abroad (SA) not only promotes learners' target language skills (DuFon & Churchill, 2006), but may also affect their

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cultural understanding (Deardorff, 2006; Watson & Wolfel, 2015), identity (Block, 2007; Jackson, 2008), belief (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003), and motivation to study (Irie & Ryan, 2015; Isabelli-Garcia, 2006). Furthermore, Dwyer (2004) claims that SA, a full year abroad in particular, has productive effects, such as increased self-confidence and maturity, a lasting impact on world view, and a tolerance for ambiguity.

The Japanese degree programme at the University of Leeds includes a YA, but the outcomes of this differ considerably in terms of students' experiences both in their university and outside it, and in their motivation to study Japanese. Therefore, in order to assess and monitor students' personal development, as well as their language and academic progress and intercultural awareness, a new piece of assessment, called the ISER, was introduced in 2017-2018.

This chapter will discuss some of the possible benefits of ISER, and analyse what students mainly wrote about in their report in terms of progress, challenges encountered, and changes in their views.

2.   Presentation of the project

2.1.   The YA at the University of Leeds

The Japanese degree programme at the University of Leeds includes a one-year compulsory YA at a Japanese university in the second year. Students are allocated a place in one of 15 exchange partner universities across Japan. A series of pre-departure meetings is provided both before and after their allocation. Whilst we highlight language and academic progress, cultural understanding, and personal development as principal objectives, up until 2017-2018 our YA assessment did not place much emphasis on students' personal development, such as improving self-confidence, enhancing motivation, and becoming independent learners. Therefore, the Japan YA team reviewed the assessment method and decided to introduce ISER, which gave students an opportunity to reflect upon their own development.

2.2. ISER

ISER requires students to write a self-evaluation of their language and academic progress, cultural understanding, and personal development, reflecting upon their experiences in their first semester in Japan. This self-evaluation is written in Japanese. Students are also asked to write a summary and an action plan in English at the end of their report. There is no specific word limit but the total length of the report should not exceed two A4 pages. The first set of ISERs was submitted in mid-December 2017 as a formal assessment, and marked as either a pass or a fail by the Japan YA tutor. The outcome, together with brief feedback on content and use of language, was sent to each student by email in January 2018, approximately three weeks after submission.

The rationale for introducing ISER was to provide students with a chance to reflect on their progress, including their personal development, which was missing in the previous form of assessment. ISER also aimed to encourage students to use Japanese in a real and meaningful context, whilst giving them the opportunity to clarify in English the things they could not explain well in Japanese. Furthermore, it was hoped that ISER might promote students' autonomous learning by encouraging them to consider how well their current study and social skills were developing and what action plan might be needed to achieve their goals. Since this new assessment was implemented at the end of the first semester/term in Japan, it was also expected that ISER would be a good monitoring tool for the tutors to assess their students' progress and wellbeing.

3. Analysis and discussion

Thirty-four students submitted their ISER in December 2017 as part of the assessment for their YA in Japan in 2017-2018. In order to find out what the students focused on in terms of progress or lack of progress, the content of ISERs was analysed based on the frequency of keywords appearing in them. Since the primary purpose of the analysis was to understand tendencies among students, any keyword was counted only once per student, even if the student used it more

than once. Also, 'positive' (i.e. achieved progress) and 'negative' (i.e. lack of progress) usages were not distinguished in the keyword analysis, as the reports often included the same keywords – e.g. speaking (skills), (making) friends – in both positive and negative contexts. Instead, however, further qualitative analysis was undertaken to find out how the students reflected on their successes, their problems, and the changes in their self-perception.

With regard to language and academic progress, 25 students (73.5%) wrote about their *speaking skills*, the most mentioned topic by far, followed by *grammar* (64.7%), *Chinese characters* (47.1%), and *listening skills* (41.2%). This is not surprising, as most students wanted to improve their oral/aural skills more than any other skills during their YA. Although this section of ISER was not limited to the progress made in language skills, and although most students were studying non-language subjects in their Japanese universities, hardly any students discussed their general academic progress, such as research methods and essay-writing skills.

In terms of cultural understanding, there was no common topic to which the majority of students referred. The most recurrent topics were *Japanese people* and *traditional culture* (both 38.2%), and the second most mentioned topics were *human relations/politeness* and *social customs* (both 32.4%). Other topics found in the reports included *dialects*, *work ethics*, *food*, *places*, *language*, *lifestyle*, and *environment*. Interestingly, despite the fact that recent studies (Fujino et al., 2018) show learners' general interest in Japanese popular culture, none of the students wrote about popular cultures or subcultures.

As for personal development, the majority of students (55.9%) discussed at least one issue related to their *friend(s)* or to *friendship* in general. Furthermore, 44.1% and 32.4% of the students mentioned their *confidence* and *independence/autonomy* respectively. It is worth noting that over one-fifth (20.6%) of students specifically referred to their experiences in *clubs* or *circles*, whilst a smaller number of students wrote about their *work* and *volunteering* experiences (11.8%). Although these results themselves may not prove their actual personal development, they seem to confirm Benson's (2007) claim

that "(a)utonomy is clearly relevant to (study abroad programmes)" (p. 26). Other keywords relating to students' personal development included *time management*, *financial management*, *out of comfort zone*, *life balance*, and *identity*.

A further look into ISERs shows what the students perceived as difficulties or challenges to their progress during the first few months of their stay in Japan. Ironically, the most commonly observed challenge for the students was *insufficient opportunity to speak Japanese* (26.5%) despite the fact that they were living and studying in Japan. However, this may be closely related to other issues, such as *isolated location* (5.9%) and *making friends with Japanese people* (5.9%). For instance, one of the universities where three students were studying is located in a rural area of Japan, and those students may have had limited access to off-campus life. Also, a few students specifically commented on how difficult it was to make friends with Japanese students:

> "tomodachi ni naruno wa nagai jikan ga kakaru. tabun nihon de ichinen iru ryugakusei dakara nihonjin no gakusei wa watashitachi to tomodachi ni naru noga chucho suru" (*It takes a long time to become friends [with Japanese students]. They may probably hesitate to become friends with us, because we are exchange students who will stay in Japan only for a year*).

Not surprisingly, *fear/shyness* (8.8%) was also one of the biggest challenges for students to overcome. Understandably, they felt anxious in a country where both language and culture are significantly different from those of the UK or their home countries. However, the fact that they went to Japan in their second year, as opposed to the third year, when most other Japanese programmes in the UK have their YA, may also have contributed to their fear or shyness. Another problem the students experienced was to do with their workload. Whilst a few students found *too much workload* and *lack of time* impeded their overall YA experience, one student felt that *less intensive teaching* in their Japanese university than in their home university was problematic for their academic progress.

Beyond those keyword analyses, ISER has also revealed some successful episodes where the students' confidence was enhanced:

> "gesuto hausu o sagashiteita toki, michi ni mayotte shimaimashita. […] kanzen niwa kaiwaga wakaranakatta noni, gesuto hausu ga mitsukeraremashita. […] jisin ga fuemashita" (*I lost my way when I was looking for the guesthouse. […] Although I couldn't fully understand the directions the person gave me, I was able to find it. […] I gained confidence*).

> "jibun de isha to meisha ni ikimashita. Sono toki nihongo o renshu shimashita. kono kekka watashi wa jishin ga tsukimashita" (*I went to see a doctor and optician by myself. This gave me the chance to practise my Japanese. As a result, I have gained confidence*).

As those examples show, small successful experiences in the students' day-to-day life, such as asking for directions and going to see a doctor using the target language, can be a confidence booster for their use of the language. Conversely, there were also cases where students reflected on their lack of progress with a detailed analysis such as the example below:

> "nihon no gakusei to hanasu toki ni machigaeru koto ga kowakute, watashi ga iou to shiteiru koto ga hanashite iru hito ni tsutawaranai koto wa hazukashii desu. kore wa jikoseicho ni warui eikyo o oyoboshi mashita" (*I am afraid of making mistakes when talking with Japanese students and feel embarrassed when I cannot convey what I want to say to the person. This has had a negative effect on my personal development*).

Furthermore, ISER has provided some good examples of students' changing their views about themselves, as shown in the example below:

> "At the start of the year I was adamant that I'd never want to live in Japan for a long period of time. This was because I want to live in a

place where I can be treated like a resident and not always seen as a foreigner. […] I can now realistically see myself living in Japan in the future".

It could be argued that the realisation or re-discovery of themselves has the potential to change their motivation to study Japanese. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) argue, the "ideal L2 self" or "a representation of personal hopes, aspirations or wishes [can be] a powerful motivation to learn the language, because of our psychological desire to reduce the discrepancy between our current and possible future selves" (pp. 3-4).

4.   Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the importance of incorporating the process of assessing students' language progress, cultural understanding, and personal development with a particular focus on ISER. ISER was an effective assessment tool which brought together the students' initial goals and their perceptions of their own attainment in terms of language and academic progress, cultural understanding, and personal development. The keyword analysis has revealed that the students focused primarily on speaking skills and grammatical knowledge in language learning, whilst turning to Japanese people and traditional culture for cultural understanding. In terms of personal development, the majority of the students discussed the pleasure and difficulty of making friends, whilst being aware of changes in their confidence and independence. It was also found that insufficient opportunities to speak Japanese was the students' major concern, which seems to be closely connected to other perceived difficulties, such as fear/shyness, isolated location, and making friends with Japanese people. A further analysis of ISERs has shown evidence of students' successful experiences, and also evidence that they can examine their own weaknesses and can change their views of themselves.

Although the student feedback at the end of the YA was positive on the whole, some students found the timing of ISER a little too early for them to engage in

significant reflection, whilst others felt more specific feedback would have been helpful. Therefore, the assessment needs further review in terms of timing and the giving of effective feedback, including a possible change of medium to a blog or something more interactive and continuous in nature. With regard to the analysis of the content, it cannot be denied that the author's subjectivity may have had an impact on the way the keywords were selected and identified and on the outcome of this study.

Despite those limitations and challenges, however, this study has also suggested how pre-departure guidance could be improved by focusing on some of the aspects the students found particularly motivating or challenging. For instance, recurrent issues related to their perceived lack of opportunities for, and lack of confidence in, speaking Japanese could be discussed in groups among outgoing students based on some of the actual experiences reported in ISER. Furthermore, it might also be useful for YA tutors to discuss ways of improving the exchange programmes with the partner universities in Japan.

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