〔Refereed Article〕

Assessing the Impact of Study Abroad Programs on Japanese Students: A Mixed Methods Research Proposal

Christopher Samuell

Abstract

With Globalization continuing at an ever-increasing pace, the government and universities in Japan are striving to find ways to foster intercultural communication in Japanese students to stay competitive and integrate into global marketplaces. To this end, many universities offer students the opportunity to participate in Study abroad (SA) programs, with the hope that participation in such programs will cultivate *jinzai* – or internationalized human resources capable of taking active roles in international markets. Yet, there remains little research on the efficacy of SA programs with regard to Japanese students, especially after they return to Japan. This paper proposes a study to explore how participation in an SA program affects Japanese students' linguistic ability, and if improved linguistic ability affects attitudes towards intercultural communication. The study proposes a sequential exploratory mixed method design consisting of pre-and post-departure qualitative interviews, and quantitative language tests. Through the use of a mixed methods research design, it is hoped that a study using this methodology can gain a greater insight into the student's lived experiences, while also generating quantifiable test data to ascertain if there exists a link between students' linguistic improvements during their time on an SA program and their attitudes towards intercultural communication.

Keywords: Study Abroad, Pragmatics, Intercultural Communication, Globalization, Japan, Linguistics

Introduction

Globalization continues at an ever-growing pace, with many states relying on transnational interdependency to survive within a highly competitive neoliberal marketplace; thus, the movement of people, ideas, information, and capital across borders is increasingly commonplace (Huffman et al., 2020). With this rise in cross-cultural contact, it follows that the fostering of intercultural understanding represents a key determinant for successful integration within the global market order (Asaoka & Yano, 2009).

In response to an increasing requirement for successful communication between diverse nations, there is a noticeable expectation for university students in Japan to develop intercultural communicative competencies – as well as English proficiency (Huffman et al., 2020). Despite a

push by local industrial and higher educational（HE）sectors for internationalization, concerns over Japanese students falling behind fellow Asian states in terms of English proficiency remain（Take & Shoraku, 2018）. This shortage of students with "cross-cultural competencies" is viewed as an issue for Japanese economic prosperity and its position as an industrial leader（Porter & Porter, 2020, p. 57）.

　Japan remains a largely homogenous society, with foreign residents accounting for only 2.25% of the local population（Demographic Shift, 2020）. Therefore, in order to improve their linguistic ability and to learn "soft skills", such as intercultural understanding and communication, as well as learn firsthand about other countries' culture, society, and history, an increasing number of Japanese students are traveling abroad（Lassegard, 2013, p. 366）. This shift has led to a growing number of universities offering study abroad（SA）programs（primarily to English speaking countries）, which play an essential role in promoting open-mindedness and cultural awareness, representing a significant "pull" factor for Japanese economic competitiveness（Asaoka & Yano, 2009, p. 175）. Thus, pressure falls on Japanese universities to cultivate *jinzai* – or internationalized（more accurately *Englishsized*）human resources capable of taking active roles in neoliberal markets（Take & Shoraku, 2018, p. 38）. In producing culturally competent graduates who can exploit English to compete in diverse business sectors, the importance of SA programs to Japanese education and industry becomes clear.

　However, Japanese participation in SA programs is not limited to native English-speaking countries, as evidenced by data provided by the Japan Student Services Organization（JASSO）, which reports that, between April 2019 and March 2020, 38% of students participating in some form of SA program remained in Asia, with Korea（6.7%）, China（5.8%）, Thailand（4.7%）, Taiwan（4.7%）, The Philippines（4.3%）, and Malaysia（3.2%）being popular choices（JASSO, 2021）. While, collectively, Asian countries accounted for 38% of total SA sojourns, North America alone accounted for 25.6% during this timeframe. However, "every year an increasing number of students do go to English-speaking countries, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States（US）to study English"（Tanaka, 2007, p. 36）. This statement reflects JASSO data indicating that of the top 5 countries visited in the 2019-2020 timeframe, Korea was the only non-English-native-speaking country. The top 5 countries, in order, were: the US（16.9%）, Australia（8.9%）, Canada（8.7%）, Korea（6.7%）, and the UK（6.3%）（JASSO, 2021）.

　With an aim to internationalize higher education in Japan, The Japanese Government promotes SA through programs including *Tobitate Japan*, the *Top Global University Project*（TGUP）, and *The Re-inventing Japan Project*（Rose & McKinley, 2017）. *Tobitate Japan* claims that 70 percent of Japanese companies with international locations find it difficult to secure and develop globally-minded Japanese talent. The initiative aims to encourage students to embrace SA for ambitious youths to "go global"（Tobitate Japan, n.d.）. Similarly, TGUP was implemented to support universities "leading the internationalization of Japan's education" by "reforming personnel and educational systems, enhancing educational systems to help students develop the ability to act globally and accelerating other globalization initiatives"（TGUP, n.d.）. Finally, the Re-inventing Japan Project, otherwise known as the *Inter-University Exchange Project,* claims that they aim "to foster human resources capable of being globally active"（IUEP, n.d.）.

While these programs appear to directly address Japan's globalization issues, they remain limited by somewhat prohibitive entry requirements. For instance, TGUP encompasses 30 "elite" universities in Japan. In a nation containing more than 700 HE institutions, this project is, arguably, for students who are already motivated to learn English and participate in SA. Indeed, Take and Shoraku (2018, p. 49) state that due to the limited number of institutions, the program "cannot promote a common practice of internationalization in Japanese universities". *Tobitate Japan* is undoubtedly more accessible; yet, prospective learners must demonstrate a requisite level of English competence via proficiency tests, depending on the course they want to apply for.

While a reasonable requirement, taking these proficiency tests remains a stumbling block for many Japanese learners – particularly those from low-income households (Smith, 2021). Indeed, only 42.6% of third-year high school students have achieved the Government-stipulated goal of passing the Eiken pre-2 level test (Japan Times, 2019), the equivalent of CEFR A2. Thus, students at this level are expected to "be able to understand and use English at a level sufficient to allow them to take part in general aspects of daily life" (EIKEN, n.d.). Against this background, a significant number of university students view SA programs as a means of improving English, making friends, bolstering confidence, and experiencing foreign cultures (Fritz & Murao, 2020).

It would therefore seem that universities and governments are working in conjunction to stress the importance of study abroad programs for students, yet there is a lack of research examining the outcomes of SA concerning both linguistic and intercultural competencies (Fritz & Murao, 2020). Fritz and Murao (2020) posit that measuring these outcomes would require universities to devote more money, staff, and resources to the endeavor, which many institutions cannot afford. Therefore, the proposed study attempts to elucidate the realities and outcomes of SA programs at a medium-sized, non-TGUP university in Japan to understand better the experience of "average" students in Japan; those of low English proficiency that typically do not qualify for participation in programs like *Tobitate Japan* and TGUP. This group may be viewed as average, given that they generally make up the 57.4% of students who, upon graduation from high school, do not possess a qualification such as the Eiken pre-2.

Typically, learners attending the institution in question possess an English level of CEFR A1-A2. Research on students at this level could provide a more representative view of the average Japanese student's experience with SA as opposed to students who attend one of the 30 "elite" universities that comprise the TGUP group. This is important because there is little research on second language (L2) gains made by Japanese students during SA, with a great deal of existing research offering only the American and European perspectives (Llanes, 2011, p. 190). Furthermore, there is insufficient literature about students' pre-departure goals and beliefs about SA as opposed to how these feelings and opinions may change after they return from studying abroad. Further still, there is little research exploring how any change in opinions may relate to gains in communicative competence made while studying abroad (Lassegard, 2013; Llanes, 2011).

The inquiry proposed here is thus guided by the following research question: *How does participation in a SA program affect the English linguistic ability of Japanese students, and to what degree does this exposure impact their interest in intercultural communication?* This proposal adopts a sequential mixed-methods approach with a pragmatist ontological and epistemological lens.

Literature Review

1. Intercultural Communication

One of the perceived benefits of SA is an increase in students' intercultural communicative abilities (Fritz & Murao, 2020). The Japanese Government, and by extension the HE industry, promotes internationalization to compete within increasingly competitive global markets. In utilizing SA programs to produce workers with foreign language skills and outwardly international perspectives, graduates are considered *jinzai*, "a term that implies different skills and understandings than *global citizenry*" (Take & Shoraku, 2018, p. 42). Indeed, Asaoka and Yano (2009), note SA as an effective system for engendering research, international contribution, economy, and diplomacy. This assertion would undoubtedly fall in line with Japanese education policy (Smith, 2021); nevertheless, it is essential to assess the real-world experiences of Japanese SA participants, irrespective of state intention.

With a view to defining what constitutes intercultural communication skills, a study by Williams (2005) explored the impact of SA on students' intercultural communication skills, and in her review of existing literature, suggested that several recurring themes determine intercultural communication skills and competency: open-mindedness, cultural empathy/non-judgmental perceptiveness, personal autonomy, and resourcefulness. Williams (2005) summarizes by suggesting that, to be an effective intercultural communicator, learners must exhibit "an understanding of cultural communication differences, an ability to overcome those barriers, and a desire to use those skills" (p. 359). Research carried out by Williams (2005, p. 368) indicates that, of 44 SA and 48 non-SA students who stayed on campus, SA students "showed a greater increase in intercultural communication skills than the students who did not study abroad.

However, Williams (2005) also discovered in pre-and-post-testing that the only statistically significant predictor of intercultural communication skills was exposure to other cultures; this could also take the form of building relationships with people of other cultures or even watching international films. Thus, simply participating in an SA program and visiting a foreign country does not necessarily increase intercultural communication skills. Students must interact with the culture in a *meaningful* way to benefit from their SA experience, a conclusion shared by Tarrant, Rubin, and Stoner (2014). This concept of meaningful interaction is where the importance of linguistic ability can potentially become a determining factor in intercultural communication skills, as will be expanded upon in the following section.

Williams (2005) claims that increases in intercultural communication can be challenging to quantify. She posits that many studies consist of somewhat anecdotal evidence, which may be inapplicable to everyday life. This sentiment is echoed by Tarrant, Rubin, and Stoner (2014, p. 141) when noting that "few studies have used experimental designs adequate for documenting the *value addition* of studying abroad; that is, learning outcomes above and beyond that which may be achieved in domestic or traditional campus-based courses." Although the study proposed here perhaps lacks the scope to provide definitive answers to these questions, through the use of the proposed mixed methods design and by focusing on Japanese students directly, it is hoped that findings may add to the body of existing literature by establishing a link between improved linguistic

ability, first-hand exposure to foreign cultures, and attitudes towards intercultural communication. As previously suggested, even in the absence of research on gains to intercultural competence during or after SA for Japanese students specifically, several studies illuminating the issue of intercultural SA, in general, remain relevant to this proposal.

When exploring the "added value" of SA to fostering global citizenry, Tarrant et al. (2014) found location and academic focus to be more powerful driving forces for nurturing global belonging rather than the program itself. The authors also posit that similar gains to global awareness can be achieved through well-designed on-campus instruction that correctly synergizes appropriate academic content and pedagogy. Through exposure to foreign cultures, this global awareness could arguably help to improve students' cultural empathy, which, as noted by Williams (2005) is a determiner of intercultural communicative ability. They also address the growing skepticism surrounding short-term programs, a practice that is becoming increasingly normalized (Fritz & Murao, 2020). In fact, of 107,346 Japanese SA participants in 2019-2020, 71,263 stayed for less than one month, and only 11,562 stayed for six months to one year (MEXT, 2021).

Both studies suggest that the act of studying abroad may not be enough to foster intercultural communication. Fritz and Murao (2020) contend that the act of traveling abroad is not enough to reduce cultural stereotypes or guarantee a deep connection with local cultures, and in some cases, may increase stereotypes and leave diverse groups feeling that they share no common values. Linguistic issues may not *entirely* cause this situation but could undoubtedly exacerbate them. It is, therefore, paramount to ensure the students are adequately prepared to communicate with the target community in their chosen L2. The present study will aim to assess to what extent the students feel they are prepared to confront these issues in the pre-departure interviews, detailed later in this proposal.

2. Linguistic Improvements Due to Study Abroad

As well as offering students firsthand experience of foreign cultures and potentially increasing their global awareness, SA programs can also provide students with a new learning context within which to improve not only their intercultural communication but also their linguistic ability. Within the body of research pertaining to second and foreign language (L2) acquisition, there is evidence that learning context can be a determining factor for successful L2 acquisition (Llanes, 2011). Various elements are impacted by the learning environment, including quality and quantity of input, opportunities for practicing the L2, and the form of L2 instruction (Llanes, 2011). This is one area in which SA offers a unique context for Japanese students to learn a foreign language. Indeed, Kinginger (2013, p. 341) theorizes that SA has the potential to "enhance language learning in every dimension," including proficiency, fluency, communicative competence, and strategic or discourse abilities, such as those outlined above by Williams (2005).

Many of these factors will vary from student to student, with successful language learning depending on access to learning environments and students taking an active role in their learning by evaluating what they have learned and attempting to incorporate new language into their repertoire (Kinginger, 2013). An awareness of personal progress or lack thereof is also essential for students to measure growth during SA. Huffman et al. (2020) note that, after initial difficulty, SA participants

become aware of improvements after being successfully understood within group settings or upon the realization that "efforts were bearing fruit" (Huffman et al., 2020, p. 58). SA experiences can be described as a "wake-up call" for many participants in terms of their L2 ability and their "engagement as a global citizen" (Huffman et al., 2020, p. 60). This self-realization acts as a key driver for successful language learning (Takala, 2015). This link between improvement in L2 ability and increased engagement as a global citizen is exactly the focus of the currently proposed study, as it will endeavor to establish a link between the two phenomena.

Further, SA provides a naturalistic context for language learning by immersing students in the target language, helping them acquire unconventional speech patterns, improve linguistic processing speeds, speech rate, and comprehension accuracy (Taguchi, 2011; Llanes, 2011). Taguchi (2013) suggests that exposure to the target language in an SA setting may aid students in these areas where traditional classroom teaching cannot, offering continuous observation and increased opportunities for practice (Taguchi, 2013).

Although it is clear that SA programs provide some benefits for students, the opposite can also be true. If learners are not adequately prepared for their sojourn, immersion in the L2 may act as a hindrance in which learners feel "that they were not sufficiently academically prepared, particularly in terms of foreign language ability, to study overseas" (Lassegard, 2013, p. 375). According to Asaoka and Yano (2009, p. 184), JASSO and JAFSA (Japan Network for International Education) data indicate that "many Japanese university students cannot acquire the level of English proficiency required to take courses at universities of English-speaking countries through normal English language education provided by Japanese schools and universities". This is also true of the institution at which the present study will be carried out. Many students have difficulty communicating effectively in English as they have mostly been taught in a classroom setting heavily reliant on rote textbook learning and grammar-translation. Thus, it would be of great interest to ascertain whether students with such learning experiences feel they can improve their English ability through participation in SA.

Indeed, students require a certain level of L2 proficiency to benefit from SA, as most novice students cannot participate in much more than basic language activities such as ordering in restaurants and taking public transport (Tanaka, 2007). Without this foundational L2 proficiency, students have difficulties establishing relationships with native speakers and tend to associate with peers that share the same first language (L1), limiting their exposure to "naturalistic" L2 (Tanaka, 2007). While this is a missed opportunity, it does not mean that the SA program would not benefit the students, as described by Sato (2014), who concludes that all "of the participants enjoyed their study-abroad experience despite the fact that their English proficiency was insufficient for academic contexts" (Sato, 2014, p. 38). Even with limited L2 proficiency, if Japanese students can enjoy their time studying abroad, increases in confidence and motivation can lead to a willingness to communicate and improved contact with the L2 outside of the classroom (Tanaka, 2007).

3. Limitations of Study Abroad

Despite the perceived benefits of SA, several accounts identify recurring issues arising during such programs. One mainstay of outbound SA in Japan (especially amongst younger students) is

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homestays. They are often considered ideal environments for learners to improve their L2 abilities as homestay environments provide students with "many opportunities to use the L2 in natural communicative settings" (Tanaka, 2007, p. 36). However, according to a 2007 study from Tanaka on Japanese SA in New Zealand, students indicated that, while they had more contact with English than in Japan, overall, they had less contact than initially expected. Learners reported that despite their surroundings, they had few opportunities to interact with "native speakers" outside of the classroom, mainly owing to limited L2 ability. Nevertheless, this experience does not mean that SA programs are not without merit, as learner experience may lead to "non-linguistic outcomes, such as personal development and increased socio-cultural awareness" (Tanaka, 2007, p. 49). The post-interview stage of the proposed study will attempt to determine to what degree students who showed little linguistic improvement after the SA program self-report improvements in other areas, such as those described by Tanaka (2007).

　Porter and Porter (2020) identify several issues pertinent to Japanese SA, namely: the financial burden, university schedules and curriculum, and lack of English ability and confidence. Although SA programs serve to help students, institutions may not be aware of such conflicting accounts. Nevertheless, to counter these concerns, universities must implement forward-thinking policies to adequately promote SA, an endeavor in which the Government should also take a more active role (Lassegard, 2013). This is especially true considering state plans to increase global growth. To avoid confusion between educational institutions, legislative bodies, and the students themselves, Japanese HE institutions and governmental agencies must be more transparent with their goals for SA programs (Fritz & Murao, 2020). This study will then compare these goals to those of the participants with the hope of creating a more complete picture of SA in Japan concerning the goals of students, the government, and HE institutions.

　Given the disjointed nature of HE policy in Japan (Smith, 2021), a lack of consistency regarding institutional SA goals and desired outcomes is typical. While universities and the state claim a preference for global leaders that will benefit the Japanese economy (MEXT, 2003; Mami, 2014), students appear most interested in new experiences and self-discovery, often unaware of state goals for SA (Fritz & Murao, 2020). This outcome feeds back to student progress evaluation - or lack thereof - both during and post-SA participation. Without clearly defined outcomes and assessment measurements for SA programs, there is a "lack of recognition by Japanese industries of the merit of the 'study abroad' experience" (Asaoka & Yano, 2009, p. 185). According to a report published by the British Council (2014), 69% of students do not think or know if employers place any value in students with overseas study experience, so learners may wish not to participate in SA out of fear that the experience may not aid employment prospects following graduation (Take & Shoraku, 2018). With this in mind, the present study will attempt to confirm the extent to which these concerns manifest within the HE institute in question, and how students who showed little improvement in terms of their linguistic ability, may self-report improvements in other areas, in order to explore the less easily measurable benefits of SA.

Research Question

The following research question serves as the crux of the proposed study:

How does participation in a SA program affect the English linguistic ability of Japanese students, and to what degree does this exposure impact their interest in intercultural communication?

This study will be a sequential exploratory mixed methods design, consisting of two phases, a pre-departure, and a post-departure phase. Each phase will consist of a quantitative language ability test and a qualitative interview.

The pre-departure interview will address the following questions:

1. Why did students choose to participate in a study abroad program?
2. What do students hope to achieve through participation in the SA program?
    a. Improvements to linguistic ability?
    b. Improvements to intercultural communication?
    c. Anything else?
3. What are students' views on intercultural communication?
    a. Is intercultural communication an important skill for Japanese university students to learn?
    b. How can you achieve effective intercultural communication?
    c. How do you feel about Japan's continued internationalization?

The post-departure interview will address the following questions:

4. What did students achieve through their participation in the SA program?
    a. Improvements to linguistic ability?
    b. Improvements to intercultural communication?
    c. Was there any "value added" by participating in the SA program that they would not have been able to achieve had they stayed on campus?
5. What are students' views on intercultural communication?
    a. Is intercultural communication an important skill for Japanese university students to learn?
    b. How can you achieve effective intercultural communication?
    c. How do you feel about Japan's continued internationalization?
6. How would they describe their experience to other students who are interested in participating in SA programs in the future?

The quantitative tests will gauge the student's pre-and post-SA English ability. Results will then be measured against the qualitative data to ascertain whether there exists a link between improvements in linguistic ability and heightened interest in intercultural communication?

Research Philosophy

The majority of inquiry cited within the literature review relies on mono-method analysis alone. Of the 13 papers containing original research, eight employed qualitative methods, four quantitative, with only one utilizing a mixed approach, suggesting a slight bias towards qualitative methods within

this context. To this end, the proposed inquiry will employ a sequential exploratory mixed methods design. The study will attempt to contribute to the existing body of research, by investigating whether linguistic improvements on SA programs lead to increased interest in intercultural communication, employing a somewhat under-represented research methodology. As well as directly addressing the lack of mixed methods research on SA and Japanese students, this approach is also partly in response to the lack of skill-based testing by Japanese universities upon students' return. Ultimately, it is hoped that links between linguistic improvements measured in the test data, and interest in intercultural communication can be established to inform future research.

As this study attempts to reconcile student experiences with intercultural communication while participating in SA programs with improvements to their linguistic test data, a pragmatic worldview is embraced. Pragmatism is a philosophical paradigm that allows researchers to select the design and methodology best suited for addressing the research questions (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Placing pragmatism within an ontological register, applicability is assessed "not by its ability to render a truth but by its ability to assist in revealing the nature of reality" (McCaslin, 2008, p. 673). Philosophically, pragmatism holds that reality manifests through actions and renegotiations within our world (Williams, 2016). Denzin and Lincoln (2018) posit that the pragmatic meaning of an event cannot come before experience; thus, the focus should be on the "consequences and meanings of an action or event in a social situation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 556). With this basis in mind, the qualitative strand of the present study intends to uncover the "truth" about participant experiences during SA.

As the qualitative element of the study seeks to discover the truth of the participant experience during SA, the pragmatist philosophy that *beliefs originate from experiences, which then informs future actions*, will prove pivotal in gaining a deeper understanding of post-SA views (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). While the proposed sample comprises learners studying at the same institution, the pragmatist epistemology that knowledge manifests through experience suggests that each actor's knowledge is unique; yet, given the communal nature of this reality, actors share specific knowledge created from socially shared experiences (Kaushik & Walsh). Therefore, while no two people share identical worldviews, people may act in similar ways and assign similar meanings to actions depending on the extent of their shared beliefs on a particular phenomenon, such as SA (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).

As pragmatists view reality in terms of truth, they neither possess an *entirely* objective view, as held by positivist-quantitative researchers, nor a subjective one, as held by qualitative interpretivism. Instead, pragmatists prioritize the research question over dichotomous paradigms such as positivism and constructivism (McCaslin, 2008; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Thus, there exists a "general consensus in favor of taking a pragmatic stance for conducting a mixed-methods research" (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019, p. 7). In this way, rather than viewing quantitative and qualitative approaches as conflicting and incompatible, pragmatists tend to believe that both quantitative and qualitative approaches possess individual strengths and weaknesses that complement each other when used in conjunction (Hewson, 2006). Indeed, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) note pragmatism to be the most practical philosophy for supporting mixed or multiple methods social inquiry. Pragmatism compliments mixed designs given pragmatic researchers are often conceptualized as pacifists seeking to "bridge the two paradigms

that are seen by the purist as incompatible (McCaslin, 2008, p. 673).

Denzin and Lincoln (2018, p. 556) assert that the compatibility thesis found within mixed-methods research (MMR) should be viewed positively and that no "incompatibility between QUAN and QUAL at the practical or epistemological levels" exists. Pragmatists believe that combining methods is advantageous as aggregated datasets generated from multiple perspectives lead to a fuller, richer, and more complete understanding of the research question (Hewson, 2006; Greene et al., 2005). Therefore, the proposed study employs an MMR model with a pragmatic worldview to uncover the truths of the student's experiences to relate this to student's test data and gain a deeper understanding of the research issue.

Research Design

Mixed methods research grew in popularity in the 1970s and 1980s as a practical response to the so-called "paradigm wars" that saw researchers espousing quantitative *or* qualitative strategies (Williams, 2016). Due to its rejection of quantitative and qualitative incompatibility, MMR is characterized by "eclecticism, paradigm pluralism, a celebration of diversity, a rejection of dichotomies, an iterative approach to inquiry" while emphasizing the research question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 555). This diversity, rejection of binary paradigms, and emphasis on research questions inform the use of MMR in the proposed study. The decision was a practical one, stemming from the requirements to link personal experiences to quantifiable data (Greene et al., 2005). Indeed, MMR can be utilized to investigate links between measurable progress and a range of direct and indirect influences on participant's personal and professional lives (Day et al., 2008)

Mirhosseini (2018, p. 6) suggests that MMR is increasingly embraced in the field of language education "for its purported potential as a tool for facilitating more comprehensive scrutiny of issues under investigation." This belief is mainly in part to MMR's ability to triangulate and corroborate data from multiple data sources, potentially extending the scope of the study leading to emerging discoveries or perspectives (Hendren et al., 2018). As the issue addressed in this proposal is not an area that is wholly devoid of research, the study will attempt to add to the body of research using MMR, hopefully uncovering new perspectives that may be expanded upon in further studies.

Nevertheless, consideration of how qualitative and quantitative strands interact with one another throughout the research process is essential. For example, the respective weighting given to each is dependent on several factors, including researcher goals, philosophical lens, and the nature of the research question (Hewson, 2006, p. 180). In light of its pragmatic basis, qualitative, semi-structured interviews will arguably be the most critical component of the study. The quantitative testing strand will corroborate or contradict the theory that linguistic improvements made during SA may influence interest in fostering intercultural communication. Thus, while indeed essential, the quantitative phase serves to complement qualitative findings. Both elements are, however, required. While the quantitative element views participants as elements of aggregation, the qualitative component views them as individuals, and it is this combination that may lead to more profound results (Kushner, 2002).

The proposed study will utilize a sequential exploratory mixed methods design, an approach

"primarily concerned with discovery and with generating or building theory" (Davies, 2006, p. 110). The main focus of an exploratory design is to explore issues in detail to gain a better understanding of the problem under scrutiny (Singh, 2007). It is well-suited for pilot studies or initial research phases acting to form the basis for more conclusive research or even helping to determine research design, sampling, methodology, and data collection for later studies (Singh, 2007). Therefore, while the study proposed here *may* not provide conclusive answers, it may provide new insights into SA (Singh, 2007).

An exploratory sequential design is appropriate as it gives priority to the qualitative phase of the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The qualitative strand – in this instance, semi-structured interviews – will be conducted first to "build theories and identify variables" (Guetterman et al., 2019, p. 181). As the study aims to assess students both pre and prior SA, the study consists of pre-and-post-departure phases. To ensure results comparability, both the pre and post-phases will be as similar as possible. Regarding interviews, questions will change from investigating predictions based on previous knowledge to probing lived SA experience. To facilitate direct comparisons, meanwhile, pre-and post-SA quantitative language tests will be identical.

Pre-departure interviews will investigate what students hope to achieve through participation in an SA program, as well as their views on intercultural communication. Meanwhile, the quantitative stage, consisting of an English language test, will quantify the student's current linguistic ability. The semi-structured interviews gauge areas where the students hope to improve throughout their SA program; this data will then be used to create the English language test. By testing students on areas in which they wish to improve specifically, the researcher hopes that data will address the research question comprehensively, providing a link between learner improvements (or lack thereof) and SA experiences. It is essential to use qualitative data to inform the quantitative stage of the study, as data sets help or explain each other – an element vital to sequential mixed-methods designs (Creswell, 2008; Hewson, 2006).

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Both pre-and post-SA data collection phases will consist of a qualitative, semi-structured interview and a quantitative language test. The language tests will take the form of a web-based multiple-choice test for reading, listening, grammar, and vocabulary. There will then be a separate communicative ability test administered either via online software, such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom, or, ideally if circumstances permit face-to-face on-campus contact at the research site.

1. Qualitative Data Collection

Researchers tend to rely on interviews to acquire unique, non-standardized, and personalized information about participant worldviews (Cohen et al., 2007). Indeed, interviews represent the most appropriate data collection method for this study, as the main focus of the qualitative phase is to uncover students' views regarding their experiences with SA. Through interviews, researchers gain a greater insight into the participant's views, and, in this way, the process can be an exciting and enriching experience leading to detailed descriptions of SA (Kvale, 1996). Interviews enable

the researcher to probe for information and clarification, meaning they are "well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues"(Barriball & While, 1994, p. 330).

Of the various interview formats considered for this study, semi-structured interviews were selected. Semi-structured interviews are beneficial given their adaptability to almost any research setting, versatility, and flexibility (Prior, 2018; Kallio et al., 2016). In semi-structured interviews, the researcher has more control over the topics and questions to be covered in the interview (Ayres, 2008). Compared to structured interviews that may rely on closed questions, semi-structured sessions are not limited by a fixed range of responses to each question (Ayres, 2008). The semi-structured format also allows the interviewer to make field decisions regarding language use and the order of questions, and the ability to make these decisions can influence interview success (Bariball & While, 1994). Indeed, "careful selection of words reacting to participant responses acknowledges that not every word has the same meaning to every respondent and not every respondent uses the same vocabulary"(Barriball & While, 1994, p. 330). This flexible, probing style builds rapport, which can elicit further information, and less "socially desirable answers" than questionnaires or structured interviews (Ayres, 2008; Barriball & While, 1994, p. 331). Therefore, semi-structured interviews have been deemed the most conducive format to elicit the most pertinent data to address the research questions.

The elicitation of detailed responses is undoubtedly crucial to this study, yet it is also vital to ensure that the participants experience the interviews in a way that facilitates comparison between respondents. Therefore, an interview guide will be created to center the interviews on research themes and predict the depth of information to be collected (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide will include both questions and a list of topics to be covered, allowing the researcher to jump back and forth based on participant responses (Ayres, 2008). Prior (2018, pp. 233-4) suggests that "Interviewing requires flexibility, patience, active listening, a good memory, and strong interpersonal communication skills to adapt quickly and manage the unpredictability of the interview situation". By systematically engaging with the literature-based and empirical knowledge found within the guide, the researcher will hopefully mediate subjective bias, allowing them to collect more reliable data in as thorough a process as possible (Kallio et al., 2963)

In the 2019-2020 academic calendar, 31 students from the research site in question participated in SA. With this number in mind, the study aims to recruit approximately 10-to-15 students. As SA participants do so voluntarily, it is hoped students may be more motivated to take part in this study. Regarding interview logistics, there are several factors to account for. First and foremost is how the interviews will be conducted. As participants are all students in the same department, it would be prudent for interviews to occur in a public space on campus, so learners feel safe in a familiar setting. However, if this were to prove difficult, online interviews via Skype, MS Teams, or Zoom would also be acceptable. However, this would raise concerns relating to access to computers, smartphones, and the Internet. Therefore, it is very likely that interviews will be negotiated on a student-by-student basis while considering safety and comfort for all involved in the interview process.

2. Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data collection relies on a mixture of analysis and interpretation to reach conclusions

（Alhojailan, 2012）. Interpretation of data is thus influenced by the epistemological and theoretical positions adopted by the researcher （Willig, 2014）. As a result, "effective" qualitative research needs to draw interpretations consistent with literature-based and empirical knowledge collected in the first phase of any study （Alhojailan, 2012, p. 40）. With this in mind, thematic analysis can detect and identify factors or variables raised by the participants and determine the relationships between concepts to facilitate comparison with existing data. Alhojailan （2012, p. 40） posits that:

> By using thematic analysis, there is the possibility to link the various concepts and opinions of the learners and compare these with the data that has been gathered in different situation at different times during the project. All possibilities for interpretation are possible.

Thematic analysis identifies themes within data that capture meaning relevant to the research questions while attempting to create links between the identified themes （Willig, 2014）. It thereby attempts to describe the participant's social reality through the systematic process of coding and examining collected data, attempting to uncover subjective meanings and social realities （Vaismoradi et al., 2016）. Alhojailan （2012, p. 41） suggests that thematic analysis is an approach that "fits in with analyzing the different phases of data collection, e.g., pre-/post-data," such as those to be adopted in this proposal.

Willig （2014） questions whether researchers should accept themes generated at face value as directly reflecting participant experience or whether the researcher should approach the theme as something to be further explored in its own right. In this way, thematic analysis shares common ground with grounded theory. In fact, there are those who suggest that "thematic analysis *is* grounded theory" （Kellehear, 1993 as cited in Tuckett, 2005, p. 76）. Although the proposed study is not considered "pure" grounded theory – and makes no claims to the contrary – searching for observable patterns between collected data is undoubtedly a *facet of* grounded theory （Hayhoe, 2020）. It is difficult to ignore the influence of grounded theory on thematic analysis, as some of the themes produced through the induction of somewhat abstract data are not easily observed, with themes potentially leading to new theories （Hayhoe, 2020）.

To achieve "analytical thoroughness," all data must be managed systematically （Tuckett, 2005, p. 77）. Consequently, software such as NVivo will be utilized in the qualitative data analysis phase. An external reviewer will also evaluate if identified themes are compatible with the research questions and avoid researcher bias （Alhojailan, 2012）. This reviewer will fulfill the role of a 'critical friend', a Japanese teacher with no direct connection to the research, thusly negating the main researcher's inherent biases, and identifying any underlying prejudices （Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005）.

3. Quantitative Data Collection

The quantitative data collection phase will consist of pre-and-post-departure language testing. Quantitative analyses dominate language testing and assessment the world over （Rahman, 2017）. However, this proposal assumes language testing to be a complex social phenomenon, hence using qualitative results to inform the language test （Fulcher, 2010）. Tests demonstrate "one's

competence-incompetence, ability-inability" (Rahman, 2017, p. 103). As such, they serve as vital benchmarks for progress in a given linguistic area. In the proposed study, language tests provide insight into which proficiencies (if any) have improved. Having the students take the same tests will allow the researcher to assess progress while comparing performance between the pre-and-post-departure test scores (Rahman, 2017).

The tests will consist of five sections to provide a comprehensive overview of pre-and-post-departure English ability. Considering both average English proficiency levels at the target institution and time constraints, the reading, listening, grammar, and vocabulary section will be part of a combined online, multiple-choice test. Multiple-choice question tests are one of the most common types of English language tests, providing test takers with comprehension questions that include prescribed options, of which the test takers must choose based on their knowledge and understanding of the linguistic function being tested (Liao, 2018). This format enables as many students as possible to test how and when they feel comfortable doing so. The test will be timed to minimize the opportunities for cheating, but this cannot account for the inherent weaknesses of multiple-choice tests such as random guessing, which could potentially lead to false data (Liao, 2018). As the students will be participating in the test voluntarily, it is the researcher's opinion that cheating will not be an issue, yet it is certainly worth considering the possibility of such data emerging from the study. There will be three response options for each multiple-choice question, as it has been suggested that this is the optimal number of choices in such a test with regard to difficulty (Rodriguez, 2005). Carefully balancing the difficulty of the test in this way, could potentially help to further reduce the chance of cheating, or random guessing. Finally, there will be a communicative ability test in the form of a short interview test. These will be held in the same manner as the qualitative interviews outlined above.

Although multiple-choice testing provides easily comparable and quantifiable data, due to the somewhat subjective nature of a communicative test in the form of an interview, this part of the testing process will require more scrutiny to score the students fairly. A strict scoring rubric will be put in place outlining the scales and criteria of assessment and how scores will be allocated to produce quantifiable data that can be integrated with that of the multiple-choice question test (Jeong, 2015). As rubrics often contain teachers' beliefs about grading, it is advised that practitioners include a "rater" in the research process to assess the rubric on behalf and reduce bias - thereby increasing reliability and validity (Jeong, 2015). In the proposed study, the aforementioned 'critical friend' - a native Japanese language teacher - will be recruited in the dual role of rater and bias/sensitivity reviewer. This teacher will be a would possess extensive professional experience working in local educational settings to ensure test appropriateness (Fulcher, 2010). If possible, the selected teacher will be involved with the creation of the rubric to ensure "quality and coherency in assessment" (Jeong, 2015, p. 10).

4. Quantitative Data Analysis

Although quantitative data tends to be objective (Banda, 2018), the choice of methods analysis should reflect the type of data to be produced (Xu et al., 2017). In the present case, pre-and-post-departure language tests will produce interval data with two comparable data sets. A paired t-test is

the most appropriate tool for analyzing this data, as it is perhaps the most used widely used method of comparison between two data sets (Xu et al., 2017; Banda, 2018). This method is commonly used to compare groups "meaningfully related" in some way (Banda, 2018, p. 52); as pre-and-post-test participants are the same, they are meaningfully related and are therefore dependent on each other, lending them perfectly to analysis through a "dependent samples [paired] t-test" (Banda, 2018, p. 52). Finally, t-tests are appropriate for inquiries with small sample sizes – approximately, or less than, 30 – such as in the present study (Banda, 2018). While carrying out data analysis, it is also important to consider the validity and reliability of the paper.

5. Validity & Reliability

Considered "essential criteri [a] for quality in quantitative paradigms" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 601), *validity* and *reliability* are two concepts most often associated with sound research. At their base level, validity in quantitative research refers to the extent to which a concept is accurately measured with the correct research instrument, while reliability refers to the accuracy of the instrument (Heale & Twyvross, 2015). While the terminology tends to differ when conducting qualitative research, the quality control criteria are often similar, examples of this terminology are detailed in Table 1 below. As such, this study will follow guidelines for quality control such as those established by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and shown in Table 1.

Table 1   Quality Criteria: Quantitative & Qualitative terminology

Criteria	Description	Quantitative	Qualitative
Truth Value	The study's ability to measure what it is intended to measure, the "truth" of the study findings in relation to respondents and context.	Internal Validity	Credibility
Applicability	The possibility that the findings could be used in other settings.	External Validity	Transferability
Consistency	Whether the outcome of the study is able to be replicated.	Reliability	Dependability
Neutrality	Assessment of the researchers influence on the findings.	Objectivity	Confirmability

Source: Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nilsson, 2010

The present study aims to achieve validity and reliability through rigorous scrutiny of research tools as outlined above. A language test is valid when it fulfills the purpose for which it was designed (Heale & Twyvross, 2015), in this case, assessing the student's linguistic ability. Reliability will be achieved through the use of carefully designed rubrics and the inclusion of a second language teacher in the role of a "rater" and "bias/sensitivity reviewer" (Jeong, 2015; Fulcher, 2010). The rubrics will be designed following what Stevens and Levi (2005) suggest are the four stages to constructing a rubric, reflecting on expectations, listing the learning objectives, grouping and labeling the preceding stages, and application of the previous steps to create the rubric. In addition to the rubric, a reliability

coefficient, such as Cronbach's alpha will be used to quantify the reliability of the response data from the language tests (Gadermann et al., 2012). Finally, with regards to the second language teacher acting as a "rater", Cohen's kappa will be utilized to measure interrater reliability. Cohen's kappa was selected as it is one of the most effective methods of measuring interrater reliability when there are two researchers involved (McHugh, 2012).

By following the steps listed above, this study can avoid what Oluwatayo (2012, p. 398) refers to as "threats" to validity and reliability in quantitative research: conceptual bias, design bias, sampling bias, and process bias. Indeed, these threats can be avoided in educational research through clearly supported research questions, appropriate research design, valid and reliable instruments for data collection, and appropriate tools for data analysis (Oluwatayo, 2012), all of which have been carefully considered in the construction of this proposal.

As with most social sciences, the most important factor to consider in the qualitative stage of this study is using the correct measurements to quantify and observe human behavior to achieve 'trustworthiness' and 'consistency' within the study (Drost, 2011), while also striving to achieve reliability, or what Golafshani (2003, p. 601) refers to as "trustworthiness" and transferability. To achieve this, qualitative inquiries must employ appropriate techniques such as the standardization of semi-structured interviews, which allows the researcher to adjust each interview to obtain accurate and complete data (Barriball & While, 1994). In the present study, this will be achieved through the use of an interview guide, which serves to both maintain standardization and enhance trustworthiness (Kallio et al., 2016). Thus, in semi-structured interviews, trustworthiness, and transferability do not depend on repeating the questions or words; instead, it is essential to convey consistent meaning throughout the interview process (Barriball & While, 1994). In the case of the present study, the interview guide, and 'Thick description' (Geertz, 1973) will be utilized to facilitate transferability by including detailed descriptions of the research context.

6. Ethical Considerations & Researcher Positionality

Considering research participants are students at the researcher's university, power-related considerations must be accounted for when considering the relationship between teacher/researcher and students/participants (McNamee, 2001). While familiarity with key actors, institutions, policy, and procedures is undoubtedly advantageous, educational researchers working in familiar environments must leave their values and commitments in the classroom and assume the "mantle of objectivity" (McNamee, 2001, pp. 438-9). Researchers working within their own educational setting "have an ethical responsibility to acknowledge their impact on the research site and their role in the co-construction of the data set (Hett & Hett, 2013, p. 498). With the COVID-19 pandemic still an issue at the research institution, considerations for student safety and comfort during tests and interviews will be enacted, with both tests offered either on-campus or online. The researcher will be open and transparent about the research goals throughout to mitigate any potential harm to participants that may arise from potential misunderstandings of the research goals (Hett & Hett, 2013). The proposed study will provide complete anonymity for all participants as this can be an essential factor in creating and maintaining trust with participants (Hett & Hett, 2013). All participants will also be provided with informed consent forms, in both English and Japanese, to ensure the students

are aware of any implications concerning how the data will be used that may arise through their participation in the study (Bryman, 2012).

As well as considerations for the researcher's relationship with the participants, considerations must also be made for the researcher's relationship with the local cultural context, and how they are viewed by local stakeholders. When conducting research in an outsider cultural context, researchers must recognize "complex cultural and contextual differences" (Robinson-Pant & Singal, 2013, p. 417). This is especially true if the researcher could be considered "foreign" to the context in which they are studying; they need to be aware of deeply embedded, normalized "discourses of othering in Western society" (Hett & Hett, 2013, p. 497). With this in mind, it is therefore essential to consider my positionality in relation to this study. There are "multiple cultural, socio-economic, linguistic and power dimensions which contribute to shifting positionings while conducting cross-cultural research" (Milligan, 2016, p. 9). In my positioning as a foreigner in Japan, it is necessary to consider the fact that although I could certainly be considered an *outsider*, my familiarity with Japanese linguistic and socio-cultural norms puts me in a position that could be said to be neither inside nor outside, rather somewhere in between, taking on different positionings depending on the situation (Milligan, 2016).

In response to this, it has been argued that if researchers have immersed themselves in the richness and complexity of local sociocultural dynamics, people from outside a community can have an understanding of the experience of insiders, albeit via a different understanding (Bridges, 2001). Indeed, even within a given community, "the different social, personal and situational characteristics that constitute their individuality may well outweigh the shared characteristics" (Bridges, 2001, p. 373); the most significant factor is the experience of the *individual*, a philosophy argued throughout this proposal. Therefore, it could be argued that with my command of the Japanese language and my ten years of experience working within the Japanese educational system, I have adequately immersed myself in the local socio-cultural dynamics to mitigate some of the issues outlined above that may arise through my outsider status.

7. Conclusions and Implications

Using a sequential-exploratory mixed design with a pragmatic worldview, this study intends to discern the extent to which SA participation impacts Japanese students' linguistic ability while seeking to discover if this affects interest in intercultural communication and SA. Williams (2005, p. 356) notes that "in today's world of higher education, demonstrated outcomes and applicability to the real world are vital to the sustainment of academic programs". As a result, there will be a continued push for competency-based evaluations and tests to measure the outcomes of SA, and without concrete evidence of positive outcomes, they may be in danger of losing credence (Williams, 2005). Therefore, research of this kind, in which competency-based evaluations are combined with qualitative interviews, could potentially aid universities in Japan if they are to continue to address the issues surrounding Japanese student's lack of "cross-cultural competencies" (Porter & Porter, 2020, p. 57) as addressed in the introduction of this proposal.

Potential findings from this study may have implications for policymakers in Japanese higher educational institutes. It is the author's hope that by establishing a link between increases in linguistic proficiency and heightened interest in intercultural communication, policymakers could use

this information when promoting the benefits of SA programs to students and when enacting new policies that may affect how HE institutes in Japan continue to cultivate intercultural competencies in learners, as described in the introduction of this proposal. Depending on the findings of the study, data could also be used to create more focused pre-departure preparation programs to further enhance students' SA experiences by identifying commonly occurring issues that arise through analysis of the pre-and-post-departure data. Even if there is no link established between linguistic improvements and intercultural communication, the qualitative interviews may still provide useful data that may help to illuminate any other common factors amongst students who had both positive and negative experiences concerning intercultural communication while on SA. Therefore, it is believed that the findings of this MMR study have the potential to serve as an impetus for further research.

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