

Empowerment for Nurturing of Global Thinking in Japanese University Students: A Practical and Provocative Approach in Utilizing Courses for Study Abroad Preparation and International Understanding and Exchange Activities

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日本人大学生のグローバル志向育成強化： —実践的かつ挑戦的アプローチとして「留学のための教養講座」と 「国際交流活動論」講座を活用して—

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Abstract

In recent years of this era of globalization and internationalization in Japan, the general public including university students are said to be inert, inbound or inward looking. Noting this as a serious issue, in order to contain the situation, the Japanese government has been pushing for the empowerment in and nurturing of global thinking in its citizens. As such, the paper here presents a practical and provocative approach that has been conducted at a former Japanese national university for almost three years. The study subjects of this research are divided into two categories. Firstly, the study targeted student subjects who are affiliated to various faculties and have willingly chosen and made time to attend a non-credit “preparatory course for study abroad”. Secondly, the targeted subjects were those students who are affiliated with one faculty and are preparing to be future teachers of the English language and international understanding. These students have signed up compulsorily for a credit course called “international exchange activities theory”. Although the nature of the classes and subject groups of students differ, the objectives are synonymous in that they both aim at the revisit, rediscovery and comprehension of one’s own culture, language and society, thus identity. Upon clarification and confirmation of such, as a consequence, the subject students reported that they gained confidence in 1) venturing out into the global arena with a fair knowledge of oneself in the form of study abroad, and 2) through the utilization of teaching materials available, feel more prepared and confident to teach the English language and international understanding to returnees and international pupils and students in the future.

Keywords:

Empowerment, Global Thinking, Language, Society and Culture, Identity

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen the concept of globalization which has been sweeping through the Japanese society in all aspects like no other precedence in its history. The notion of globalization is so influential that its synonym of internationalization as in countries and borders has been practically hidden. However, with retrospect to the times, the numbers of Japanese students venturing out

to study abroad has been on the decrease. The trend is also evident among Japanese corporate personnel indicating their unwillingness to take up overseas postings. Naturally, the government positions this situation as a major issue, whereby it has taken on a number of countermeasures in the nurturing of global thinking for its citizens. To materialize such government initiatives, as a nationally affiliated educational institution, the author's affiliated university is also pushing towards the realization of the initiatives. As a means for implementation of the government initiatives, the approach of empowerment in nurturing global thinking, especially in Japanese university students arose. Of course, going to study abroad is not the only solution, although, should that be the case, the prospective student should be more confident and possess the necessary skills and knowledge about one's own culture, language and society before endeavoring into the world.

2. Background and Aim of the Study

The background of this study goes back to consultations and guiding of students in their preparations for study abroad and exchange on campus. The Japanese students generally appear to know fairly well about their own country from what is being taught at school and available through the news. However, the authors felt that this was not enough for the students' exchanges and interactions with their international counterparts at school. Let alone it also was fairly insufficient for the students to be expressive should they opt to exchange either on campus and or venture out for study abroad to the world at large. The general trend stands out as the Japanese focusing more on learning about their destination compared to the contrary of knowing more about oneself. Such is the focus of the practical classes conducted here where the Japanese language is being revisited from a learner's perspective which proved to be rather challenging. The language seems to be somewhat generally known but for explanation to a learner, it requires a deeper understanding and comprehension in order to be expressed clearly. Both student subject groups studied here found this approach to be provocative, thus providing for a revisit and rediscovery of their own language. Likewise, culture studies seen from an international student's viewpoint was also offered. This is where the Japanese students become guides of their own local communities and homelands and explain firstly in the Japanese language and then in the language of their preferences, if they have any. The results show that the subject students' knowledge of their home towns and prefectures was limited. Therefore, they felt the need to search and revisit national, prefectural, municipal and historical publications so as to be more informed. Many of the subject students actually felt challenged at how little they knew about their own culture, language and society. As a consequence, this sparked up their will to know more about themselves, whereby the revisit, rediscovery takes place, thus the connection leading to an empowerment in nurturing their global thinking.

2.1 What is empowerment?

To start with, let us look at the word itself. According to Heather Lausch, "Empowerment is a word that has so often been used widely that its definition has become blurred. Activist groups use the term empowerment to rally behind different issues, while academic circles frequently cite the word in scholarly articles. However, what do they mean when they say "empowerment" and whom do they wish to "empower?" That is actually where the authors step in and continue to extend the viewpoint of empowerment. As also mentioned by Alsop, Bertelsen and Holland (1), "Empowerment

in Practice from Analysis to Implementation” they define the term empowerment as the process of enhancing an individual’s capacity to make choices and then transform those choices into the sought after outcome”. As authors, we can all agree upon some overall themes of empowerment. First of all, empowerment is rather very multidimensional and it can be exercised on many different levels and domains. Empowerment can look different at the individual level versus the community level, and it can look different in the state versus the market. Empowerment is also relational, for it occurs in relation to whom a person interacts with. The authors here agree with writers like Mason (9) and Narayan (10), who are quick to point out that empowerment, is not a zero-sum game, but rather different types of power, such as power over, power to, power with, and power within. Finally, the literature stresses that empowerment is extremely culturally specific, and this can be seen in articles written by Malhotra and Mather (8), Mason (9) and Narayan (10). Empowerment is related to the norms, values and beliefs of a society; therefore empowerment can be revealed differently in different societies. The term empowerment may have some general agreed upon qualities and definitions in the academic community, but how the word is used in organizations or among individuals may still vary.

3. Methodology

Noting the definition and its utilizations, the authors would like to apply the term empowerment to the contents to follow. Both student subject groups were guided in a different approach towards the end, where the subjects basically responded in a similar fashion. Firstly, unlike many study abroad preparedness studies currently available, the authors endeavored on challenging and provoking the students to re-think otherwise. In other words, the students were guided and instructed in a manner where they learnt together like their international counterparts in studying about their own Japanese language, culture and society. They studied about their own culture and language, many a times to extents where they had to explain not only in Japanese so as to re-confirm their own comprehension and understanding, but also to express it not only in English but also in a third language, if that was the aim of student subjects’ participation in the courses, especially for study abroad preparedness. On the contrary, it also posed as quite a challenge again for the subject students who were to become future teachers. They had to not only comprehend the contents themselves, firstly as future teachers, but to also prepare materials for actually taking on such a situation should it arise. However, the results gathered after class surveys showed that the approach was practical, provocative, trendy and new in its outlook that the study subjects had never even thought about themselves in such shoes, especially with regard to their very own culture and language in this perspective for shaping their own mindsets.

4. The Significance of Global Thinking and Citizenship and Identity

The term ‘global thinking’ as per se is somewhat broad. However, with regard to the research contents here, the authors attempted to approach it in a manner that provides self-examination, rediscovery and revisit of oneself as opposed to others. This notion is of significance whereby the usual Japanese understanding would be to know more about the other while oneself is taken for granted and is expressed rather vaguely. The point is to clarify this ambiguity and thus enhance

expressiveness which leads to equality in introductions and sharing of knowledge about one's own language, culture and society. Having presented oneself clearly, only then can there be a fair sense of global citizenship which comes from deep down. Naturally, with due knowledge of one's own origins, the features and characteristics of oneself, then pride will be derived, thus leading to the shaping of an identity. This is again a notion that the Japanese so very vaguely possess when compared with their international counterparts. Actually, the biggest of all differences probably lies in this notion of having pride and a sense of identity

5. The subject groups and their natures

The subject groups studied in this research are divided into two totally different groups but with very similar objectives. One was a subject group that had students signing up from various faculties and grades all gathering for purposes of study abroad preparation. This is a course that saw totally voluntary and active participation because the students were determined to gain out of the time they had made to attend the course despite the setting being on an afternoon where they could have opted otherwise of not attending. In addition, the course was so called a colloquium course that did not carry credits. After completion of the course, quite a good number of the students ventured out on short term and long term study abroad programs. Many of them utilized the university and other scholarship programs for their adventures and reported of their experiences in university organized seminars.

In the meantime, the other group of study subjects belonged to a single faculty. The course was compulsory and it naturally carried credits. Since it did so, it was set in a classroom style-setting. The students were in their second to fourth year of studies to become teachers of English and / or International Understanding classes when they pass their national teaching certificate examinations and get posted to elementary and middle schools where pupils and students needing such assistance and services would be allocated. This study group of future teachers seemed inert and exemplified the Japanese reality where they would be silent in class and be on the receiving end but expect to be spoon-fed. Seeing this, the authors were somewhat anxious about the future of global education in Japan.

The similarities that the authors would like to put forward are the fact that both subject groups were purpose-driven. The first group's purpose was for study abroad while the other one was to equip oneself with knowledge for preparation to take on pupils and students with global educational needs.

6. Preparatory Courses for Study Abroad

The 'preparatory course for study abroad' was a course set up after a couple of trials both in a classroom setting with not much publicity but in a seminar and omnibus style. After reflecting back, the authors thought it would be more accessible to the general student body if it were to be designed in a way that it gains access by students as a colloquium course that was open to all despite the fact that it would be non-credit and run on an afternoon that would be a determinant factor. Despite these prerequisites, the turnout was good. The course was divided into two parts. After general introductions, the authors, also acting as instructors, set out teaching firstly the Japanese language

features which brought into light their own cultural and societal aspects into view. This was then followed up by a provoking cultural and global approach with a sense of explanations basically in English otherwise another language. This part of the course proved useful in that the students were very participative since they were purpose-driven. The course was planned in such a way that should the administration division in charge of study abroad programs conduct an explanatory session, which only was purposeful, the students would be encouraged to attend and participate in such sessions because programs broadened their opportunities for venturing out into the world.

7. International Understanding and Exchange Courses

The ‘international understanding and exchange course’ was one that was set up as a compulsory credit course catered towards equipping future teachers with local and global perspectives. It started off with introductions and then much of the course was centered around Japanese language revisit guided by one of the authors who also guides for active teachers reviewing their skills at university on such review seminars. The course was basically conducted in Japanese where the students had to view themselves as both Japanese and non-Japanese learners of their own language so as to prepare for such Japanese returnees and international pupils and students they will most probably be in charge of as teachers under this global world. The latter part of the course was guided partially in English and Japanese so as to get a feel of the situation that would be at hand. Naturally, as teachers-to-be, they need to be able to express themselves clearly in their own language about their own origins, culture and society. The materials utilized in the course were those that were comparatively designed and produced by elementary and junior high schools with the pupils and students and their teachers for the 2005 Aichi Exposition. The comparative views presented in the articles covering the countries listed would be very helpful for the future teachers in their material development and lesson plans.

8. Comparisons

When comparing the two aforementioned courses, one has to take into account the course outlines given and the purposes mentioned. The preparatory course for study abroad was designed for motivation of students who were interested in venturing overseas. In the meantime the international understanding and exchange activities course was for future teachers in equipping them with a global outlook. Both courses were taught similarly. However, the former had an international and study abroad taste where the students needed to equip themselves with expressiveness about one’s own language, culture and society before acquiring much about their study destination. The latter, on the contrary, needed to review and rediscover language, culture and society not only for oneself but also in preparation of teaching materials for classes where such need would arise. Both study subject groups mentioned frankly that they thought they knew much about themselves but they realized that there was a need to revisit, rediscover and relearn one’s own language, culture and society which they took for granted.

9. Findings and Discussions

As mentioned earlier, the findings in this research would be such that the Japanese students in both study subject groups felt they needed to return to where their origins were so as to be better equipped to take on the challenges ahead may it be in study abroad or in teaching. The classes conducted were designed more for international students but since the subjects were Japanese students, a provocative approach in testing of one's common sense and knowledge was implemented where the results showed fairly positive. Many of the participants felt the courses were worth the while. They had other expectations such as studies only on the destination if it was going to study overseas or that it would be either about English but more so, the point was about how much Japanese they were. If there is space for discussion, one would wish to see a discussion with international students so as to broaden that perspective acquired.

10. Recommendations

There were two courses targeted in this research. One was non-credit and voluntary while the other was compulsory and credited course. The motivation in the students also showed that the voluntary subjects attended and participated more actively despite its non-credit status which the students knew very well about. The other class did have its pros and cons, but since it was a compulsory and credited course, the participation was good but with less interaction. The authors would like to see more of these type of courses offered for the provocation of global perspectives in the students who will be the future global leaders. The origins of these courses go back to 2015 when a seminar for study abroad was held by the authors. It was not that well attended but it did have its results by seeing all of the students being granted university subsidies to study abroad. For study abroad preparations and further international understanding and exchange activities, one would like to see active participation

11. Conclusions

In conclusion, the courses posing as subjects for the study were originally derived from different viewpoints. In addition, although, the students and the purposes were also different, the results show similar in that subjects of both study groups reported that they felt a boost in their knowledge of their own self, language, culture and society, thanks to the courses. They even felt more confident about deciding on participation in a study abroad program. One student in the study abroad preparatory course did actually report that they gained more confidence in themselves, and could decide on where to go for what. The teacher-to-be study group mentioned that it had opened up the window for a better understanding of one's own local community, municipality, prefecture and then country. As such, the authors feel that if the subjects can gain some form of enhancement or boost in their confidence and become more positive in undertaking either study abroad or teaching in the future, the endeavor here of empowering the nurturing of the Japanese university students in relearning one's own language, revisiting and rediscovering one's own culture and society has seen the light. Hopefully, the future is bright in light of the knowledge gained and the confidence to venture out on one's own way with pride, thus, a possession of an identity can be concluded.

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