

Study Abroad Program Design From a Positive Psychology Perspective

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Abstract

Empirical research within the past several decades has established study abroad (SA) as a high impact practice for university students' academic development, retention, and global education skills development (Redden, 2012; Tillman, 2005, 2014). Five major theoretical frameworks have been identified (Ogden, 2015). However, current research evidence from a positive psychology perspective in study abroad program design appears to be limited. Database and archive searches yield few research articles utilizing a positive psychology theoretical framework, SA program build, or research-based assessment or validation from a strengths-based approach. Our research focuses on study abroad program design referring to students' study patterns of strengths and weaknesses with an eye towards program betterment and individual strengths development. We collected one set of data one year before and two years of two data sets after the Covid-19 epidemic. We report the results of the analysis of the first-year data set (n = 546) which featured variables related to study abroad. The results show student liking for English, attitudes towards learning English and study abroad interest. We also report the results of patterns amongst general motivation as measured by the hope construct (Snyder, et al., 2002), academic self-efficacy (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992) and their relations with important academic skills such as time management versus academic procrastination and outcomes such as TOEIC[®] scores (ETS) from the second (n = 110) year of our research. Lastly, we will discuss the implications for future SA program development from a strengths based, positive psychology perspective.

Keywords: Study Abroad, Program Design, Positive Psychology, Academic Self-Efficacy, Hope Theory, Quantitative Research

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Introduction

Study Abroad Program Design and Positive Psychology

We begin with an overview of theories applied to study abroad program design and the importance of study abroad as a motivational factor in knowledge acquisition at the tertiary level. We then follow with a brief discussion of the historical background of positive psychology and two of the constructs that we are applying in our multiyear, longitudinal, research project. Namely, the academic self-efficacy construct (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992) and the hope theory construct (Snyder, et al., 2002). Next, we discuss the analytic method of assessing simple correlations used as a means to gather evidence. This is followed by the quantitative results section and a discussion of the associations of the academic self-efficacy construct and hope construct with important academic skills such as time management, academic procrastination. We also discuss sample results pertaining to outcomes such as TOEIC® scores. Given the size and the amount of data created by this longitudinal research project, we necessarily present selected results. Specifically, we briefly discuss and highlight results from research conducted in 2021. We then conclude with a discussion of theoretical implications for future program design, limitations, future directions, and practical implications of our research project.

Study Abroad Program Design

Background

In Japan, tourism promotion has been positioned as one of the most crucial national policies, and various inbound strategies have been actively pursued since the Tourism-Oriented Country Declaration of 2003. The "Visit Japan Project" has especially contributed to a rapid increase in the number of foreign visitors since 2011. However, it has been frequently pointed out that there is insufficient development of tourism management professionals and individuals capable of globalizing tourism businesses, particularly in higher education institutes.

In response to this situation, we established the Tourism Business Department within the Faculty of Business Administration in 2018, aiming not only to impart business management skills but also to foster global talents proficient in English. However, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 resulted in unprecedented impacts on society. Simultaneously, the significance of tourism as a representative industry driving the economic recovery of our country, with its substantial economic ripple effect (approximately 27 trillion yen), was once again recognized.

While exploring new approaches to tourism, the government announced a strategy in December 2020 to prepare for inbound recovery. The concept of "new tourism" is expected to increase demand for "global talents" equipped with environmental responsiveness, digital transformation (DX) skills, international business acumen, problem-solving abilities, effective communication skills, and understanding and tolerance of diverse international societies.

Therefore, our university, which pioneered tourism studies in Japan with the establishment of the Tourism Department in 1967, has established the Faculty of Global Tourism and Business in 2022, aiming to contribute to the realization of sustainable tourism and business

development by nurturing professionals capable of engaging in international exchange and cooperation.

Faculty of Global Tourism and Management

In our faculty, there are three departments: International Tourism, Tourism Town Planning, and International Business. In the International Tourism Department, students learn about the management of the tourism industry and the importance of hospitality and service. In Tourism Town Planning, students study the planning and development of policies for municipalities that welcome tourists, as well as the revitalization of local industries. The International Business department offers a curriculum focused on practical learning, including the management of global enterprises and marketing strategies, aiming to prepare students for active careers both domestically and internationally.

One of the department's distinctive features is its strong collaboration with industry and government. The students have opportunities to attend classes held in collaboration with various organizations, including tourism agencies from around the world, ANA Comprehensive Research Institute, JTB, Daimaru-Matsuzakaya Department Stores, TV Osaka, Sakai, Takatsuki, and Sanda City.

Another significant feature is the study abroad program. In the first year, students have opportunities to participate in short-term overseas training (1-3 weeks), and in the third year, they have the option of long-term study abroad (4 to 8 months), with scholarships provided for both programs. For this purpose, English education is offered in small classes with individual guidance outside of regular classes, and the support is provided collaboratively by Japanese and native English professors and instructors from the English Education Center. Thus far, as a result, 100% of the students who graduate from our faculty have been able to secure their career paths, with many entering fields such as aviation, hotel management, travel industry, finance, manufacturing, retail, services, and public administration, depending on their aspirations.

The Importance of Study Abroad

Empirical research within the past several decades has established study abroad (SA) as a high impact practice for university students' academic development, retention, and global education skills development (Redden, 2012; Tillman, 2005, 2014). Five major theoretical research frameworks have been identified (Ogden, 2015). Ogden identified these research frameworks as student learning, intercultural learning, student development, student engagement, and communication. Our approach to study abroad program design includes drawing upon established, validated constructs from positive psychology (and the relevant data sets) to investigate a new theoretical approach to study abroad program design. It was felt by the researchers that recent advances made by researchers in the field of positive psychology would be useful in specifying the underlying mechanisms and processes relevant to learning, engagement, and communication as noted above and, perhaps, open up an entirely new line of research and further enhance SA as a high impact practice.

The Background of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology researchers make a deliberate effort to study human strengths and positive psychological constructs at the individual, group, and institutional level. Positive

psychology is the scientific approach of investigating optimal functioning and the best that our species is capable of achieving. In this regard, positive psychology has the potential to make important contributions to the field of education including second language acquisition and applied linguistics. Though the area of research is more than 30 years old now, it is still in the early phases of development for cross-cultural and cross-sample research at the international level (López & Snyder, 2003). Next, I address two phases specifically relevant to applied linguistics.

Dewaele et al., (2019) indicate that there are two distinct phases in the development of the relationship between positive psychology and applied linguistics. They believe that the first phase began in 2012 with the efforts of MacIntyre and Gregersen. They further indicated that the second phase of growth in positive psychology (PP) and applied linguistics is now underway with the “gradual recognition in applied linguistics, growing popularity of PP, and an exponential increase in publications in more mainstream journals” (p. 1). However, earlier examples of the attempt to bring awareness of the theories and practical applications of positive psychology to the field of applied linguistics do exist (Ring, 2009, 2010a, 2010b).

There have also been attempts to teach introductory short courses in Japan, relatively recently (Rombs, 2015). We believe that our own efforts at a positive psychology-based exchange program represent the first attempt to develop a high impact practice based on this approach. Finally, there is a Positive Psychology Association in Japan which was started in 2011 and there is also a positive Japan Positive Psychology Research Institute founded in 2018.

Academic Procrastination, Academic Self-Efficacy, and Hope Theory

Academic Procrastination

Academic procrastination has been defined in a variety of ways. Importantly, definitions indicate that the behavior is avoidable and that the procrastinator can suppose to suffer more for the actions of postponement. Two definitions are used in this research. The first comes from Solomon and Rothblum, who define procrastination as an “act of needlessly delaying tasks to the point of experiencing subjective discomfort” (1984, p. 503). The second definition comes from Steel who defines procrastination as a choice “... to voluntarily delay an intended course of action despite expecting to be worse off for the delay” (2007, p. 66).

Academic Self-Efficacy

The academic self-efficacy instrument was developed to measure “...students’ perceived capability to use a variety of self-regulated learning strategies such as planning and organizing their academic activities, ..., resisting distractions, motivating themselves to complete school work, structuring environments conducive to study, and participating in class” (Zimmerman et al., 1992, p. 665). Self-efficacy is a well-established construct in psychological and educational research. In fact, it has been described as “ubiquitous” in psychology (Maddux, 2002, p. 277). Given the construct’s well-established nature and evidence in relation to academic outcomes, it was chosen because it appeared to be likely to generate useful data and evidence in the application of positive psychology in study abroad program design.

Hope as General Motivation

Hope is also a well-established and well validated positive psychology instrument. It is used to measure general motivation levels for future goals (Snyder et al., 1991). According to the formal definition, hope is operationalized as “a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy) and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)” (Snyder, 2000, pp. 8–9). That is to say, hope is a cognitive set developed by a person with a successful sense of *agency* for goal pursuits. Agency is one’s self-knowledge of “successful determination”. According to the theory, high hope individuals have established their mindset and thought patterns from successfully accomplishing goals in the past and present. Such individuals therefore anticipate being able to successfully continue to accomplish goals in the future. The second component of hope, *pathways*, comes from a sense of successful creation of plans and schedules in order to accomplish goals (Snyder et al., 1991). The pathways component is the hopeful individual’s ability to generate means to an end. High hope individuals therefore also have a well-developed sense of self-knowledge for their ability to generate a number of possible avenues to successful goal accomplishment. Though the construct used in this research measures general levels of hope filled motivation, it is the intention of the researchers to develop a language acquisition specific instrument as well as a study abroad specific instrument based on current endeavors. We will take this issue up again in the implications and conclusion section of this paper.

Method

Concerns With Student Motivation and Procrastination

Typically, students who enter this faculty and our university have a liking for English and have high hopes to improve their English. However, after a period of time a certain number of students avoid attending class, delay submitting their assignments, and avoid in-class presentations. This tendency is especially noticeable with recent first-year and second-year students who have had to take their first semester classes online and have had their study-abroad opportunities postponed.

Concerns and Issues

The following issues are based on observations gathered at the research site by the researchers. The first concern is that those students with weak basics struggle with maintaining motivation to study English for the time required to make proficiency advancements. The second concern is that a number of students are not self-regulated, independent learners.

Multiyear Research Project

Thus far we have conducted three years of research. In 2018, the members of the research team conducted pilot tests of their constructs and gathered evidence at separate research sites. In 2021 the researchers conducted validation studies of their instruments, continued to gather evidence, and conducted a pilot study of a positive psychology based academic intervention. They applied the Integrative Cognitive-Behavioral Coaching (ICBC, Dias, Palmer, Nardi, 2017) to assist students who were struggling with academic time management and developing proper study habits. In 2022 we continued to validate current forms and also to Validate new forms and gather evidence. In 2023 we have added further new forms to the validation

process. We are also piloting a positive psychology based academic intervention which will be a brief Hope one time intervention for long term study abroad students conducted in a single class time period based on Feldman & Dreher's 90 minute Hope intervention (2012).

Instrument Translations, Participant Selection, and Data Collection

After receiving approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the university research site responsible for ensuring ethical conduct in research involving human participants, we conducted the research using the academic self-efficacy and hope disposition scale instruments as translated by two of the researchers in this project. Both have extensive experience in translation. One is a native speaker of English and the other is a native speaker of Japanese. However, one weakness of this research is that these instruments have not been back-translated.

Participant Sample Characteristics

The Procrastination Assessment Scale-Students I (PASS I), the Procrastination Assessment Scale-Students II (PASS II), the Self-efficacy for self-regulated learning scale (ASE), the Hope Disposition Scale (HDS), and Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC®) which is an English language proficiency test were administered to a sample of 110 university undergraduates (demographic information such as gender and mean age were not collected). All students were members of the faculty of business at a midsized private university in the southern central part of Honshu, Japan.

Sampling Procedures and Data Screening

After receiving informed consent, all participants completed the PASS I and II, ASE, and HDS questions online via Google forms. There were 17 participants who did not answer all questions on the forms. The final sample for all instruments was 110 participants which was reduced to a final sample size of 102 after screening for outliers. The outliers were removed from the study based on patterns such as replying with contradictory response patterns the PASS I and PASS II, for academic self-efficacy and hope disposition instruments such as marking the lowest possible score for the highest possible score in all categories. Finally, 77 participants of the 110 self-reported their TOEIC® scores. It was decided to use the mean linear trend at point replacement function in SPSS (Version 28) for the missing 35 scores.

Quantitative Instruments

There were four quantitative survey instruments used in this study and the TOEIC® proficiency test. The Procrastination Assessment Scale-Students I (PASS I) was utilized to measure the frequency or prevalence of academic procrastination on the part of university students. It consists of a 5-point Likert scale. It is designed to measure six areas of academic procrastination: writing a term paper, studying for an exam, keeping up with weekly reading assignments, performing administrative tasks, attending meetings, and performing academic tasks in general. In our version of the PASS I we changed the items that measure meeting attendance to class attendance. The Procrastination Assessment Scale-Students II (PASS II) was utilized to measure the self-reported reasons for academic procrastination. It also consists of a 5-point Likert scale. Only the results of the PASS I analysis will be reported. The statistically significant PASS II results will not be reported due to space limitations.

Furthermore, the Self-efficacy for self-regulated learning scale (ASE), and the Hope Disposition Scale (HDS) were applied to measure motivation. The TOEIC® test was applied in order to examine the patterns between procrastination, motivation, and English proficiency, a necessarily important skill for students who will study abroad.

The procrastination assessment scales, PASS I and PASS II, were developed by the researchers Solomon and Rothblum (1984). The PASS I consists of items such as *Writing a Term Paper: To what degree do you procrastinate on this task?; To what degree is procrastination on this task a problem for you?; To what extent do you want to decrease your tendency to procrastinate on this task?* and the PASS II consists of items such as: *You were concerned the professor wouldn't like your work; You didn't have enough energy to begin the task;* and *You were concerned you wouldn't meet your own expectations.* The PASS I and PASS II instruments were chosen given the high prevalence of disregard by students for conducting homework according to national self-report statistics in Japan.

In Japan, approximately 85% of university students in Japan self-report that they spend less than 10 hours a week on independent study according to research done in 2007 by the The Department of University Management and Policy Studies at Tokyo University with the support of the Japanese Ministry of Education (政策研究センターCRUMP, 全国大学生調査, 2007).

Furthermore, according to that report, it would appear that 10% of students do not do homework at all. This is an intriguing conundrum given that according to the most recent report available (2010) Japan had a 93% graduation rate (OECD, 2010).

Next, the subscale Self-Efficacy for self-regulated learning (ASE) was used to investigate individual levels of self-efficacy within the university environment for self-regulated learning. The ASE was developed to investigate the relationship between students' self-efficacy beliefs and academic goal achievement (Zimmerman et al., 1992). The ASE has two subscales. The first subscale is designed to measure self-efficacy for self-regulated learning. Only this component was used in this research. The second subscale is designed to measure self-efficacy for academic achievement in nine different domains such as mathematics, algebra, and science. It was not utilized in this stage of the study. The original 7-point Likert scale was converted to a 6-point scale. The instrument used in this study consists of items such as, *How well can you: Finish homework assignments by deadlines?; Study when there are other interesting things to do?; Arrange a place to study without distractions?; and Motivate yourself to do schoolwork?*

Finally, the Hope Disposition Scale (HDS), is a general motivation measure designed to assess an individual's enduring goal-setting architecture across time and place. It is composed of agency and strategies cognitions for goal accomplishment. The original 4-point Likert scale was converted to a 6-point scale. The HDS consists of agency items such as *I energetically pursue my goals;* and pathways items such as *Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem.* Prior research has established the validity and reliability of these instruments with the sample (Kunieda, Sakai, Ring, 2022).

Results

The PASS I instrument detected the same pattern of delay and avoidance for all six areas of academic procrastination. These patterns of nearly always or always avoiding academic tasks

(19.1% – 41.8%), considering it a problem (38.2 % – 59.1%), and wanting to decrease procrastination (56.3 % – 66.3%) were prevalent in all six areas.

In the case of writing a term paper, 30% nearly always or always avoid writing tasks, 55.5% nearly always or always consider procrastination on writing tasks a problem, and 65.5% very much or definitely want to decrease their tendency to procrastinate on this task.

Second, in the case of studying for an exam, 41.8 % nearly always or always avoid studying for an exam, 55.4 % nearly always or always consider procrastination on studying for an exam a problem, 60 % very much or definitely want to decrease their tendency to procrastinate on this task.

Third, in terms of keeping up with weekly reading assignments, 25.5 % nearly always or always avoid weekly reading assignments, 40 % nearly always or always consider procrastination on weekly reading assignments a problem, 66.3 % very much or definitely want to decrease their tendency to procrastinate on this task.

Fourth, when considering the performance of administrative tasks, 24.7 % nearly always or always avoid administrative tasks, 50.3 % nearly always or always consider procrastination on administrative tasks a problem, 66.3 % very much or definitely want to decrease their tendency to procrastinate on this task.

Fifth, when students self-report attendance, 33.6 % nearly always or always avoid attendance, 50.9 % nearly always or always consider procrastination on attendance a problem, 60.9 % very much or definitely want to decrease their tendency to avoid attendance.

Finally in terms of performing academic tasks in general, 19.1 % nearly always or always avoid general academic tasks, 49.1 % nearly always or always consider procrastination on general academic tasks a problem, 58.2 % very much or definitely want to decrease their tendency to procrastinate on general academic tasks. Next, we report the results of the correlation analyses for the academic self-efficacy construct and TOEIC® scores and conclude the results section with a discussion of the relationship between Hope disposition and TOEIC® scores.

As shown in Table 1, self-efficacy and TOEIC® Scores were positively correlated, $r = .28$, $p = .002$, one-tailed. The moderately weak relationship accounts for 08% of the variance in scores.

Table 1: *Pearson Correlation for TOEIC® Scores and Perceived Academic Self-Efficacy for Self-Regulated Learning*

		TOEIC Score	Academic Self-efficacy
TOEIC Score	Pearson Correlation	--	
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	707095.524	
	Covariance	7000.946	
	N	102	
Academic Self-efficacy	Pearson Correlation	.284**	--
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.002	
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	21259.539	7899.814
	Covariance	210.490	78.216
	N	102	102

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Note. Perceived Academic Self-efficacy for Self-regulated Learning Subscale consisted of 11 items ($\alpha = .869$), and measures students' perceived ability to apply self-regulated learning strategies. Original 7-point Likert scale converted to 6-point scale.

Next, as shown in Table 2, Hope Disposition Scores and TOEIC® Scores had a positive, weak correlation, $r = .17$, $p = .045$, one-tailed. The correlation accounts for 03% of variance in scores,

Table 2: *Pearson Correlation for TOEIC® Scores and Hope Disposition*

		TOEIC Score	Hope Disposition Score
TOEIC Score	Pearson Correlation	--	
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	707095.524	
	Covariance	7000.946	
	N	102	
Hope Disposition Score	Pearson Correlation	.169*	--
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.045	
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	7402.508	2726.667
	Covariance	73.292	26.997
	N	102	102

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

Note. Hope Disposition Scale (HDS) measures an individual's goal-creating architecture. Original 4-point Likert scale converted to 6-point. Consisted of 8 items, one item removed to improve reliability ($\alpha = .861$).

Conclusion

Discussion

In the following section, we examine the limitations and future directions of study abroad program design. We give a brief overview of our own next steps in gathering evidence as part of our multiyear research project. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications for future SA program development from a strengths based, positive psychology perspective that we hope will be beneficial for the field.

Limitations and Future Directions

As this is a correlational research endeavor, care must be taken in assigning causation to the shared variance found. Though higher levels of both academic self-efficacy and hope appear to be positively associated with higher TOEIC® scores, the opposite may very well be the case. Correlational, cross-sectional studies cannot ascribe causality.

The long-term implications must include, in the opinion of the authors, development and testing of hope and self-efficacy interventions for those who have low levels of the aforementioned in preparation for study abroad, especially in university programs (such as ours) where the general expectation is that all students will have an opportunity to study abroad. Further, curriculum that supports maintenance and promotes increases for the higher levels of self-efficacy and hopeful goal-focused motivation might also prove beneficial for students who wish to challenge themselves by spending a year abroad or eventually working overseas. Our research team is currently working on such a program based on efforts conducted by Feldman and Dreher (2012). The program will be an intervention study specifically aimed at third year students studying abroad for 3 to 6 months. This is scheduled to begin in the autumn of 2023 and will include a 90-minute hope intervention as modeled on Feldman and Dreher. However, our study will include periodic follow-up and maintenance sessions with the students while they are studying abroad.

Finally, future research questions for the field may include: can second language acquisition (SLA) domain specific self-efficacy and/or hope scales more accurately predict SLA outcomes and expectancies? Can a study abroad domain specific self-efficacy and/or hope scale more accurately predict study abroad attrition and outcomes? We hope to bring further insight into these relationships between strengths-based motivation, study abroad, and second language acquisition as we continue our research program.

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