

Place-Based ESL Learning: Designing a “Beyond ESL” Study Abroad Program

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Abstract

Universities in Japan and South Korea resumed sending students abroad to improve their English skills, to experience new cultures, to acquire global perspectives, and so forth. An international program at a state university provides a 3-week English as a Second Language (ESL) program focusing on oral communication skills and cultural competency. I received a program request for interdisciplinary students to carry out experiential learning activities outside classrooms, learn presentation skills, and stay abroad for five weeks to meet their scholarship eligibility requirements. In response, I designed a 5-week exploration and research course initially in 2022 and revised it in 2023. I adopted the place-based learning approach, in which students use their residing location as a resource to access locally relevant and culturally significant knowledge through authentic learning experiences (Sobel, 2005) and acknowledges “multiple knowledge sources, meanings, and human-place-animal-plant relationships as valid sense-making tools” (McClain, Chiu, & Zimmerman, 2022). The course started with a series of outings in the community, whose focus ranged from microplastic issues to entomology to stream biodiversity, and students conducted group research and final presentations. This course allowed me to showcase culturally unique community locations and research organizations on campus while students gained knowledge from field experts and research and successfully demonstrated research findings and future implications for their lives back home. Based on course evaluations, this paper will conclude with suggestions for designing a place-based learning course to maximize students’ learning outcomes and areas for future improvements.

Keywords: Study Abroad, ESL, Place-Based Learning, Program Design

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Introduction

Study abroad is one of many educational opportunities that students at higher education institutions can take during their undergraduate and graduate studies. Regardless of the length of study abroad programs, it can enhance students' formal education in their home countries, raise the level of their global and cultural awareness and knowledge, improve their cross-cultural skills, and boost their potential for future employment opportunities (Smith & Mity, 2008). It also has a great influence on improving language skills (e.g., Arnett, 2013; Grey, Cox, Serafini, & Sanz, 2015; Masuda, 2011; Taguchi, 2011). There are other benefits of studying abroad, for example, improving students' self-efficacy perceptions (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013), and facilitating acculturation processes students go through while studying abroad (Doi, 2016).

I am a faculty member at Outreach College at a state university in the United States, and the college offers year-round lifelong learning opportunities for traditional and non-traditional students. In the unit I oversee, there are a variety of non-credit ESL programs including an intensive English program accredited by a specialized accreditation body, and short-term open-enrollment and a la carte (i.e., customized) ESL programs, and we had welcomed many college-age students in our programs before the Covid-19 pandemic. When various restrictions for international traveling and daily life started to get lifted at the end of 2021, I was approached by one foreign partner university with a unique programming request. I was asked to create a program option for a group of 15 interdisciplinary students to fulfill the following three goals:

- to improve conversation and presentation skills in English
- to carry out hands-on and experiential learning activities outside the classroom
- to study abroad for five weeks

The rationale for the last goal was that students could be eligible for study abroad scholarship opportunities by staying outside their home country for more than 31 days. This would help reduce students' financial burden on the costs involved in studying abroad. Upon learning about the three goals, I started to develop a new program option specifically for this group while working with a limited set of resources available within our unit, which had decreased significantly due to reassignments of staff and faculty to other units in the college during the pandemic.

Developing a New Program Framework

Our unit was set to offer an open-enrollment 3-week ESL program in the summer of 2022. The program focuses on improving students' oral communication skills and cultural competency through conversation-focused class activities in and outside the classrooms and a final speaking project all students have to complete at the end of the program. Therefore, having the students enrolled in the open enrollment program would fulfill the first goal set by the partner institution. However, the second and third goals required me to deviate from our usual lineup of program options including setting up a 5-week customized program for this group and to be creative, especially because (a) our unit was still recovering from a lack of human resources compared to the pre-pandemic level, and (b) I had to design and arrange a series of hands-on and experiential learning activities outside the classrooms. To overcome these challenges and deliver a meaningful study abroad program option to the partner institution, I designed an add-on 5-week course, which was complementary to the existing 3-week ESL program, and applied place-based learning principles to the 5-week course. In

other words, I had to think outside the box in terms of developing new courses. Literally, I had to design a “beyond ESL” study abroad program option.

Place-Based Learning Approach

Place-based learning is an instructional approach that aims to immerse students in local natural and cultural contexts and focus on developing students’ sense of place and learning through exploring their immediate environment. Depending on how exploration activities are designed and implemented, place-based learning can take many forms and occur in many types of settings such as museums, cultural centers, farms, parks, and beaches. According to some of the key place-based learning principles, students use their residing location, that is, a study abroad location, as a resource to provide natural, cultural, and historical contexts for their explorations (Sobel, 2005). These exploratory experiences serve as a foundation for further learning of course content (Knapp, 2005; Smith, 2022).

ESL instructors are trained to help students improve their English skills, but when it comes to providing information and activities that are unique to a location, they are not usually trained adequately. There are local informants and experts in the community who have a wealth of experience and knowledge of what each location can provide to students. It is critical to redefine our default teacher-student relationship (Irwin & Otteman, 2018) in implementing place-based learning activities. In contrast to how an ESL instructor “teaches” students in his or her ESL classroom, ESL instructors need to step aside and take the role of a facilitator in students’ explorations. By acknowledging “multiple knowledge sources” (McClain et al., 2022), new knowledge from explorations can be internalized in a realistic environment with true-life problems and decision-making requirements (Irwin & Otteman, 2018). Thus, depending on how students are asked to interact with each location by local informants and experts and how instructors guide their explorations and encourage divergent thinking (Irwin & Otteman, 2018), place-based learning can be a powerful approach to be taken in study abroad programs.

As shown in Figure 1, a conceptual framework for building intercultural competency in a place-based learning approach (Doi & Agullana, 2023) illustrates three main parties involved in this learning approach: educators (i.e., ESL instructors), local/cultural informants, and students. However, it is important to note that in this learning context, we need to redefine our instructor-student relationship. More precisely, instructors consider students as colleagues in their joint endeavors of carrying out their exploratory activities in an immediate context where all the parties involved can experience something authentic and culturally significant, and where such experience is relevant to each one’s life.

Building Intercultural Competency in a Place-Based Learning Approach

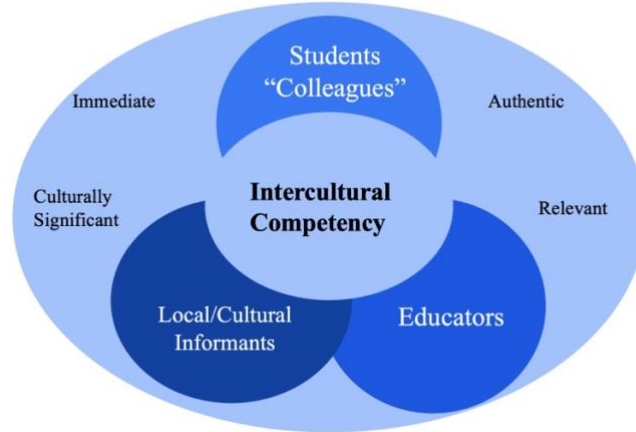


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for building intercultural competency in a place-based learning approach (Doi & Agullana, 2023)

Implementing a 5-Week Exploration and Research Course

This 5-week course was designed to add two more weeks to students’ stay in a study abroad location. I added one week of conducting fieldwork before the 3-week open enrollment ESL program and another week of preparing and presenting their research projects after. Following the place-based learning conceptual framework (Doi & Agullana, 2023), I chose a series of locations and activities that had significance to our lives and could satisfy a variety of interest areas among interdisciplinary students. I co-taught the course with another ESL faculty member in the unit. Table 1 shows how this 5-week place-based learning course was aligned with the 3-week ESL program and how activities in the 5-week course were sequenced.

week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • course and safety orientation • 4 site visits
weeks 2-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3-week ESL program • semi-independent group research • weekly research progress meeting (three times) • introduction to giving an oral presentation session
week 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • presentation rehearsal • final presentations

Table 1: 5-week course design

During the site visits, students had opportunities to engage in activities specially prepared for them alongside local or cultural informants and interact with them. Students were encouraged to take notes during and after each visit. They were asked to identify which site was the most interesting for them at the end of the first week, and we grouped students according to their interests. In the next three weeks, while students participated in the ESL program, each group researched the topic of their choice and met with us once a week to check in on their research progress. Since we treated students as “colleagues” in their exploratory endeavors, we focused on checking if students needed any additional guidance in where to look for information and whether they were making progress in putting group presentation slides together.

We provided a set of questions for students to guide their semi-independent group research from weeks 2 to 4. The following are the guiding questions:

- What did you learn at your location?
- Why is that important?
- How does this affect the local ecosystem/environment?
- What can be done about it?
- How does Hawaiian culture come into play?
- What further research have you found on the topic?
- What do you suggest should be done to fix/preserve/bring awareness to the issue?

We implemented this add-on 5-week course in the summer of 2022. Based on the first iteration of the program, we implemented it again in the summer of 2023 with some changes when we welcomed another 15 students from the same partner institution. Changes included incorporating more university-related sites for visits to showcase how unique our university is and what sort of research is undertaken by different academic departments at the university. Additionally, in order to help students plan their actions more efficiently, we utilized a Learning Management System (LMS) prior to their arrival in Hawai‘i and during the course.

Tables 2 and 3 show sites and activities covered in the course and research topics the students examined for their group projects in 2022 and 2023, respectively.

Site/Activity in 2022	Research Topic
Lecture on stream biodiversity by an aquatic biologist and stream biodiversity survey activity	Stream Biodiversity in Hawai‘i and Japan
Hands-on workshop on microplastic by a non-profit organization at Bishop Museum	Ocean, Plastic & Hawai‘i
Mānoa Heritage Center	Five Ways to Preseve Native Hawaiian Plants
University Insect Museum	Biocontrol in Hawai‘i

Table 2: Sites/activities and research topics in 2022

Site/Activity in 2023	Research Topic
Lecture on stream biodiversity by an aquatic biologist and stream biodiversity survey activity	Conservation of Stream Biodiversity in Hawai‘i and Japan
University Arboretum	Protecting Native Hawaiian Plants
Mohala Farms (organic farm)	Food Self-Sufficiency Rates in Hawai‘i and Japan
Hawaii’s Plantation Village	Hawai‘i Pidgin Language
University Insect Museum	Insect Conservation in Hawai‘i

Table 3: Sites/activities and research topics in 2023

Evaluation and Reflections

At the end of each iteration of the 5-week course, we conducted a course evaluation with the students. Given the small student enrollment number in the course, the sample size was small. For illustrative purposes, I will share the course evaluation results from the 2023 course. The

total number of students in the course was 15. However, some students missed outings and did not answer all the questions in the evaluation form.

The first part of the evaluation form was about sites and activities they participated in during the first week of the course. Figure 2 indicates an overall pattern of students' perceptions of how useful or interesting they found each site visit location or activity. The students responded on a scale of 1 (not useful/ interesting at all) to 5 (very useful/interesting). Overall, almost all the students who completed the questions about the site visit locations gave positive responses although they did not respond as positively to a visit at the insect museum as visits to the other sites. One of the challenges in designing the course was to select sites and activities that would be interesting to a majority of the interdisciplinary students, whose fields of study included physics, engineering, education, international laws, economics, and linguistics. I did not expect everyone to be completely satisfied with all the locations and activities, and it would be not an issue for me because I intended the first week of the course to be exploratory. Thus, I found it comforting to confirm that each of the students was able to find something that triggered his or her interests during the week-long fieldwork.

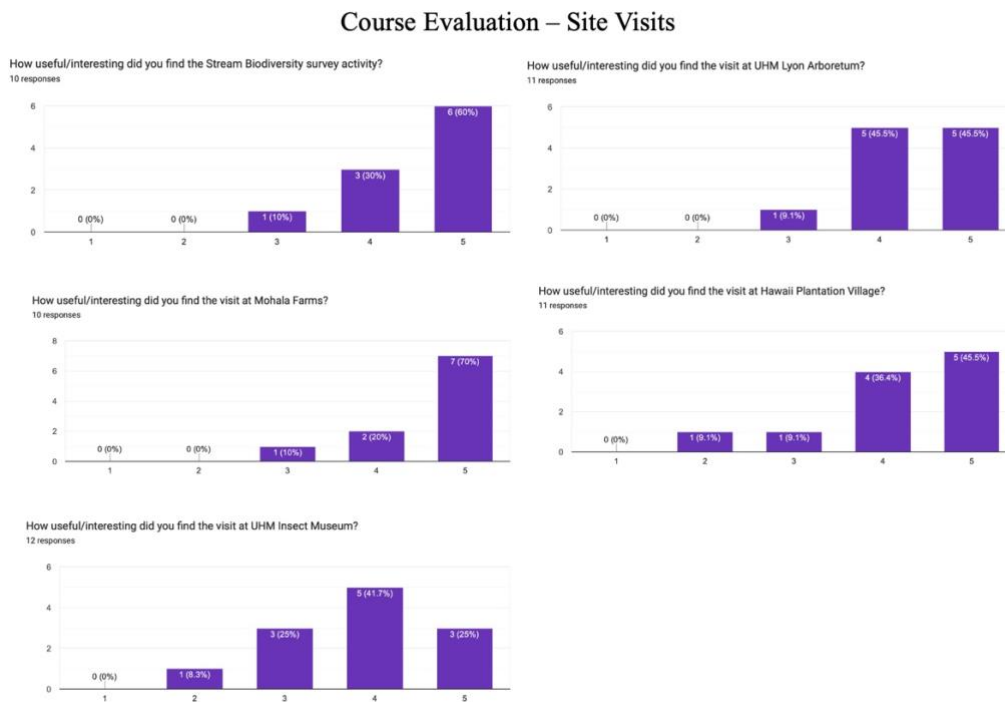


Figure 2: Course evaluation results (site visits)

Figure 3 shows the results of the second part of the course evaluation form. It focused on the semi-independent group research process and asked questions on students' self-evaluation and their evaluation of the effectiveness of the instructors. Generally, the students responded to these questions positively. Since we played the role of facilitators and treated the students as "colleagues" in the place-based research activities, the students might not have perceived the effectiveness of the instructors as much as they would have felt in regular ESL courses where the roles and relationships of instructors and students are clearly defined. It would have been interesting to include questions about the effectiveness of local cultural informants and experts they interacted with as well as the value they perceived in place-based learning activities while studying abroad. This would have provided a better understanding of

students’ perceptions about engaging in “beyond ESL” activities in their study abroad program.

Course Evaluation – Group Research Process

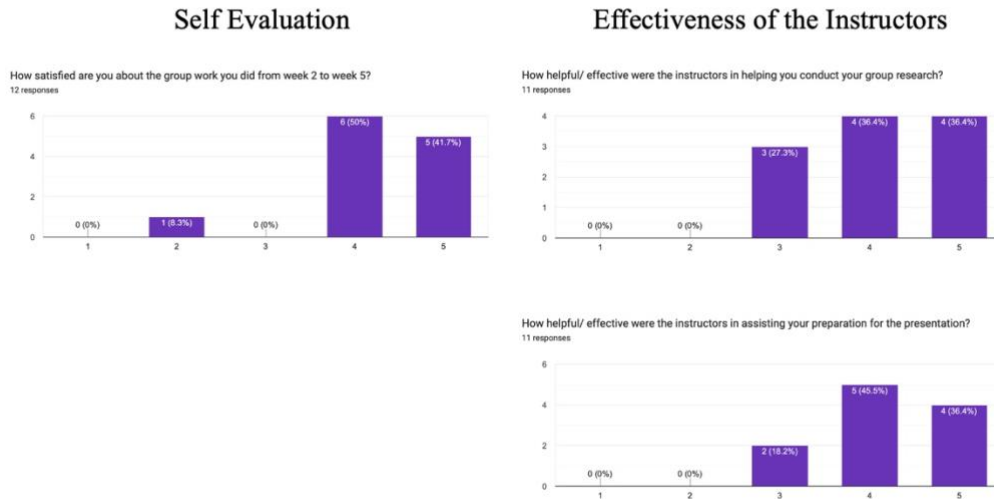


Figure 3: Course evaluation results (group research process)

One of the students left the following comment at the end of the course evaluation. It gave us a pat on our backs in designing and implementing a “beyond ESL” course following the place-based learning principles, and has motivated us to continue offering a course like this in the future.

“I appreciate for giving me great opportunities to learn English and Hawaiian culture. This month was definitely the best in my life. I will tell my experiences to my friends, and come back to Hawaii someday.”

Conclusion

Initially, it appeared challenging to create a new program option for international students with different academic majors while running existing ESL programs with limited resources available in our unit. However, by utilizing an existing open-enrollment program as a core of the 5-week study abroad program and providing a complementary program option to add, we were able to satisfy the requests made by our partner institution and sustainably expand our program offerings. In the past two years, a few other partner higher education institutions also showed strong interest in recruiting their students for a 5-week place-based learning course in combination with the 3-week ESL program. We are going to run another iteration of the course with a different theme this summer.

Based on my own experience in designing and implementing a place-based learning course, I would like to share some suggestions. When preparing a course, it is essential to invest a significant amount of time in preparation. This involves researching and identifying locations that align with the interests of students. This took more than a few months to prepare a place-based learning course in each iteration. It is also crucial to create a network of local and cultural experts who can provide insights and information to enrich the course. It is helpful to

get to know and build relationships with local and cultural experts by participating in activities organized by them and providing your service and time in such activities.

As for working with students, sharing clear expectations with them regarding their responsibilities is important, as is providing them with a course framework that includes timelines, requirements, and grading criteria in advance. Defining the relationship between students and instructors is also essential, and this definition should be shared with students on more than a few occasions. Engaging in dialogue with students, whether face-to-face, through emails, or via a LMS, is key to building a positive learning environment. It is also important to establish communication channels with local and cultural experts, which students can access if needed. Finally, encouraging students to think about how they can apply what they have learned to their future lives is an excellent way to foster critical thinking and promote lifelong learning.

There are many areas that we can improve in future implementations of the 5-week place-based learning course. I will continue to be creative to offer other “beyond ESL” programming options to meet the ever-changing needs of international study-abroad students and our international partner institutions.

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