



Study abroad, survey-tests, and micro-narratives: Exploring the interface

by Tim Newfields & Ken Groger

Abstract

This article describes how 170 tertiary students at three institutions in Japan envisioned study abroad and overseas travel according to a 12-item instrument using Japanese language prompts to elicit English questions and answers. Statistically significant differences ($\chi^2 = 17.09$, $df=5$, p -value=0.00431) were found among male ($n=92$) and female ($n=78$) respondents in terms of interest in study abroad. Non-significant differences in linguistic proficiency and response length by gender were also noted. Interest in study abroad by academic major also appeared to be non-significant. This paper concludes by underscoring the need to address some common misconceptions about study abroad. It also suggests how more spelling, grammar, and pragmatic awareness raising activities are needed by the vast majority of respondents.

Keywords: study abroad, overseas travel, Japanese EFL linguistic proficiency, pragmatic competence.

概要

本論文は、日本の3大学の170名の学生の学生を対象に行った留学や海外旅行についての調査を基にしている。調査は、12項目の日本語による質問を与え、それを回答者が英語に訳し、またその質問に対して英語で回答した。海外留学への関心については、回答者（男性92名、女性78名）間で、統計学的に有意な違い($\chi^2 = 17.09$, $df=5$, p -value=0.00431)が見られた。英語の熟達度や回答の長さについては、性別による大差は認められなかった。また、海外留学への関心も専攻する学部による大差は認められなかった。最後に本論は、海外留学に共通するいくつかの誤解を解消する必要性について触れている。また、スペリングや文法能力を高め、語法についての理解を深められるような活動がほとんどすべての回答者に対して必要であると示唆している。

キーワード: 海外留学、海外旅行、日本人の英語能力、英語運用能力

Since 2009 an estimated 60,000 tertiary students from Japan have been studying overseas each year (Tabuchi, 2012, par. 13). Although only 2% of Japan's undergraduates study abroad (Yamagami, 2011, par. 1), the country's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology announced in 2009 the ambitious goal of raising this number to 300,000 by 2020 (MEXT, 2011, par. 17). To achieve this, it is necessary to better understand how tertiary students view study abroad. At least 15 papers have been published in Japan about the avowed motivations among Japanese students for studying abroad (SA). Most have consisted either of Likert-scale questionnaires about factors thought to be associated with SA. Another significant portion have consisted of qualitative interviews with a small number of informants. This paper uses a different data collection procedure, one that relies on the short written narratives provided in response to SA questions. As such, this paper not only seeks to explore SA attitudes, but also investigates some issues related to pragmatic competence. More specifically, it explores what 170 tertiary students in Japan think SA programs should include as well as some basic information about their overseas experiences (or lack thereof). Specifically, the following research questions are investigated:

- (1) How well can this group of students formulate inquires about SA in English if written Japanese elicitation prompts are provided?
- (2) How much interest do the informants report having in SA?
- (3) What is the biggest concern among the informants about SA?
- (4) What do the informants express the most interest in doing overseas?

Literature Review



Five studies informed this research, each of which is briefly summarized.

Van Der Meid (2003)

Van Der Meid (2003) explores factors thought to influence SA participation among 153 Asian American university students. Using one web-based questionnaire for those with no SA experience ($n=75$) and another for those with SA experience ($n=78$), self-reported reasons for SA decisions were explored. The desire to learn about new cultures, enhance foreign language skills, and simply "get away from school" were cited as primary SA motives. By contrast, 57% of the informants without SA experience felt it "did not fit" their major and another 31% cited financial constraints as impediments to SA. Van Der Meid also found that students with Chinese, Korean, and Japanese ethnic backgrounds were more likely to study abroad than those with Filipino or Vietnamese backgrounds. This suggests family income levels may impact SA decisions. Not surprisingly, Asian Americans tended to favor SA destinations in Asia more than other Americans. Van Der Meid's data further underscores how gender and academic major both correlate strongly with SA choices. Women tend to study abroad more than men. Those majoring in the humanities are more likely to engage in SA than science majors. One weakness of this study is that the results are expressed as simple raw percentages without any statistical analyses. For that reason it was difficult to ascertain whether observed differences were due to random chance. Moreover, the tabular results were hard to interpret since the author did not specify whether a 4- or 5-point Likert scale was being used. Despite these limitations, Van Der Meid does a valuable job in pinpointing some factors thought to be associated with SA.

Ogawa (2006)

Ogawa explored macroscopic factors thought to influence SA decisions among graduate engineering majors, conducting retrospective face-to-face interviews with 54 engineering teachers from Korea, China, and Taiwan who had studied in Japan or the United States. Ogawa posits that Cummings' (1991) *center-periphery hypothesis* does not adequately account for why specific SA destinations are chosen. He postulates that SA decisions are made on the basis of a range of factors such as future work opportunities, financial costs, and personal foreign language proficiency. The fact that the USA attracts seven times more foreign graduate students than Japan is noted. Although the information in Ogawa's study may be of limited relevance to undergraduate non-science majors, he aptly underscores how government policies can facilitate (or hinder) the influx of foreign students. Regrettably, the methodology behind this research is not explained adequately. For example, the sampling procedure and response rates are unspecified. Moreover, the interview format itself is opaque. Finally, the author relied solely on anecdotal stories: the raw data was not categorized or systematically coded. Despite these drawbacks, Ogawa's study does remind readers to consider the macroscopic policies behind individual SA decisions.

Sato (2012)

Although the focus of Sato's research was on changes in English oral fluency as a consequence of a 3-4 month SA program, the author conjectures that one reason many Japanese EFL students choose not to study abroad is because they are not ". . . convinced of the benefits of SA experiences" (p. 63). Sato underscores the need for more convincing empirical data about the benefits of short-term SA in terms of L2 fluency. An interesting aspect of her research was the detailed case studies of those who made significant English oral proficiency gains. She offers some clues about factors thought to influence SA motivation such as self-efficacy and out-of-class L2 social interactions.

Massey and Burrow (2012)



This paper explores factors thought to motivate and influence SA students. Two research questions were explored. The first examined how 187 students with SA experience from a university in Canada made their SA decisions. Out of the ten MC response options, 65% reported that institutional websites had a big impact on their SA choices. Another 52% talked with former SA participants, while 54% visited international centers at their schools. Massey and Burrow also explored why 166 overseas students selected Canada as a SA destination. Of the 13 response options available, the two strongest motivations appeared to be a desire “make acquaintances” in the host country and a wish to “learn more about [local] customs and traditions” by interacting with host community residents. This study underscores the ability of incoming exchange students to seek out information on their own, particularly from websites and school offices. These results also demonstrate the need for institutions to have current information regarding SA options both online and on campus.

One nice thing about this study is that in addition to reporting standard chi-square measures, the authors also indicate effect sizes via both Cramér’s *V* and Cohen’s *d*. Effect sizes are a valuable way to assess the difference between two groups (Coe, 2002). One shortcoming of Massey and Burrow’s study was that the questionnaire does not appear to have been adequately alpha- and beta-tested. As a result, not all the survey questions were clear. However, the authors did provide some useful insights about how SA decisions are made by university students.

Newfields (2012)

Newfields (2012) explored ways that 72 Japanese undergraduates conceptualized SA. This study relied on students’ response to a Japanese prompt that is often translated as "How much interest do you have in study abroad?". Answers were coded by a single rater according to a 5-point Likert scale in which 5 = strong interest and 1 = strong disinterest. Four misconceptions about SA among some informants were subsequently identified: (1) a belief that SA does not necessarily involve *study* abroad – just *going* abroad, (2) a belief SA does not necessarily involve *traveling* overseas, (3) a belief SA invariably entails doing a *homestay*, and (4) a belief SA can occur only through formal school affiliate programs.

Although this study did highlight some common SA misconceptions, it suffers from at least three drawbacks. First, the sample size was modest and drawn from a single faculty at one university. Second, all information was coded by one rater. A better practice would be to have at least two coders work independently, reporting their inter-coder agreement index. Third, it relied on only one question and a single response format. A better practice would be to have several questions in diverse formats to elucidate each core research question.

Situating This Study

This study differs from previous studies in at least four respects. First of all, the format of the research instrument is somewhat novel. It relies on a "survey-test", which will be explained in detail shortly. Second, a broader sampling is employed: students from three institutions in two Japanese prefectures are surveyed. Thirdly, the results were coded independently by two raters. Finally, this study systematically adjusts for the influence of item types by using three distinct forms of a survey-test with different response formats.

Method

Respondents

A convenience sample of 170 university students at three institutions of higher education in Japan taking EFL classes by the co-authors participated in this study. Their demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1.



Table 1. A Demographic Profile of this Study's Respondents

Gender	Male: 92	Female: 78				
Age	18: 24	19: 64	20: 36	21: 6	22+: 8	NR: 31
Academic Year	1st: 54	2nd: 114	3rd: 2	4th: 0		
Major	Econ.: 93	Edu.: 67	Other: 10			
Nationality	Japn.: 162	Chinese: 3	Korean: 0	Other: 5		
Times Abroad?*	∅: 83 - 85	1x only: 26-39	2x: 11 - 19	3x: 10 -14	4+x: 10 - 17	NR: 1 4- 16
Parents SA?	No: 137	Father only: 9	Mother only: 6	Yes, both: 1	NR: 17	
Parents FL Fluent?	No: 133	Father only: 15	Mother only: 6	Yes, both: 2	NR: 12	

* The numbers fluctuate since the answers were based on two differently worded questions coded independently by two raters.

This sample differs slightly from the entire population of Japanese tertiary students in three regards. Whereas only 1.2% of those receiving a tertiary undergraduate education in Japan are non-Japanese (JASSO, 2012), 4.7% of this sample's respondents ($n=8$) are. Foreigners are hence slightly over-represented. We were tempted to exclude the 8 non-Japanese from the data sample, but our interest in comparing their responses with the other 162 informants prompted us to use a non-exclusive sample.

Moreover, whereas 55.9% of the tertiary students in Japan are female (MEXT, 2012), only 45.8% of the respondents in this sample were; females are slightly under-represented.

Finally, 99% of the respondents ($n=168$) were first- or second-year students and the mean age was about 19.3 years. Third- and fourth-year students are significantly under-represented. Since English is required only during the first two years for non-English majors, this is no surprise. Only 13% ($n=21$) of the respondents in this sample were English majors. Others were either economics majors at a private university in Tokyo ($n=93$), education majors at a national university in Shizuoka ($n=67$), or students majoring in other subjects at a private college in Shizuoka ($n=10$).

Instruments

Three forms of the 12-item survey-test appearing in Appendix A (and online) were used in this study. Since survey-tests are not widely used, a brief explanation may be in order. If we conceive of "questionnaires" and "tests" in terms of an information-gathering continuum, then within the bounds of the spectrum something akin to a "survey-test" is postulated to exist. As Table 2 suggests, survey-tests share some of features of standard questionnaires as well as other features associated with criteria reference tests (CRTs).

Table 2. Some Key Differences between Questionnaires, Survey-Tests, and CRTs

	Questionnaires	Survey-Tests	CRTs
Graded?	No	Yes	Yes
Reflect Lesson Content?	No	Yes (ideally)	Yes (ideally)
Data Used for Detailed Content Analysis?	Yes	Yes	Seldom
Informed Consent Required?	Yes	No	No
Can Opt Out without Penalty?	Yes	No	No
Incentive to Complete All Items?	Seldom	Yes	Yes
Demographic Questions Included?	Usually	Usually	Usually Not

In short, survey-tests have characteristics of *both* standard questionnaires and traditional CRTs. What distinguishes them from these other two instruments is not so much the structure of the questions per se, but *how* the information is used. In survey-tests, items are graded in the same way as regular exams, but there is a detailed post-hoc content analysis. Also, standard questionnaires are usually



conducted in the respondents' native languages to facilitate speedy responses. However, in foreign language teaching contexts, survey-tests would consist mainly of the classroom target language, similar to ordinary tests.

Why should teachers go to the trouble of creating survey-tests? One reason is that response rates are likely to be higher than with standard questionnaires. Whereas there is seldom any incentive for students to complete classroom questionnaires, there is a graded incentive to finish survey-tests.

Another merit is that survey-tests do not reduce the amount classroom time devoted to *time on task* (Partin, 2009, p. 76): well-designed survey-tests cover class content. However, it should also be conceded they are driven by research agendas. Only if a researcher's agenda is congruent with a course's instructional agenda can survey-tests be ethically used.

In this study, six demographic questions were combined with six questions about SA or international travel as part of a mid-semester exam. In this design, students were asked to translate 12 questions in Japanese into English in three formats: (1) multiple-choice, (2) scrambled sentence, and (3) open-ended question. The *responses* to all questions were open-ended. Moreover, students were asked to respond "in a conversational manner" as if they were part of an ongoing exchange. Developing pragmatic competence was one of the main goals of the EFL courses taught by both instructors. Moreover, examples of so-called "conversational responses" appeared before each task type in the survey-test. For a discussion about how so-called "conversational responses" differ from standard test responses, refer to Newfields (2012, pp. 124-126).

The survey-test *questions* explored the ability of the respondents to inquire about SA issues in English, addressing Research Question 1. The *answers* explored their reported attitudes and experiences about SA and overseas travel, addressing Research Questions 2 - 4.

The Japanese prompts used in the survey test were created and validated according to a procedure recommended by Chen (2009) and outlined in Figure 1.

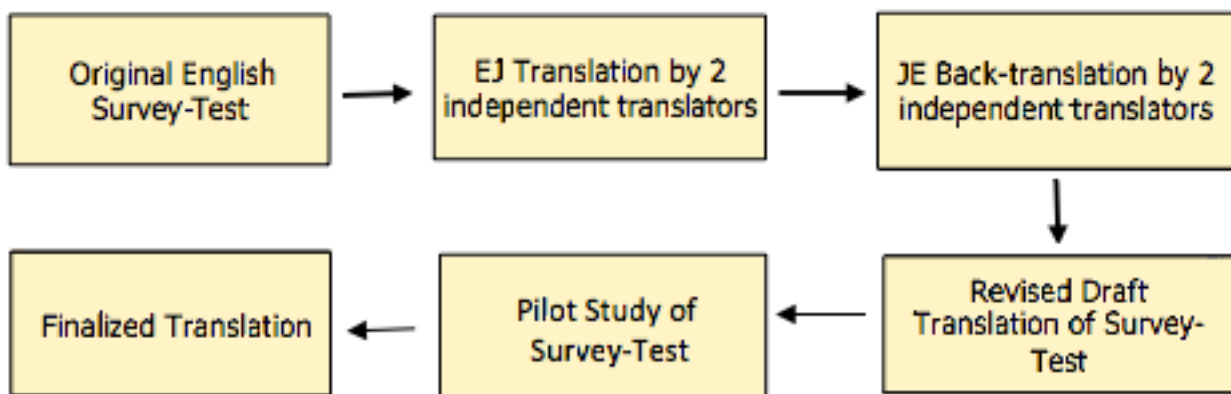


Figure 1. The Translation Validation Procedure Used in Creating the Survey-Test in Appendix A

One limitation that should be acknowledged in developing the Survey-Test in Appendix A is that it was piloted with just two students at one school. We concede that a larger and more diverse group should have been employed for piloting.

In addition to the survey-test, a rating rubric appearing in Appendix B was used to code responses. This was developed inductively without theoretical constraints by examining actual student responses: frequent response patterns were categorized and uncommon ones were subsumed into a convenient "other response" heading. The actual coding form (with one sample student's responses and one rater's categorization of those responses) appears in Appendix C. A profile matrix of that form reveals 110 data cells for 38 different fields.

Procedures



The procedures used in this research are summarized in Figure 2.

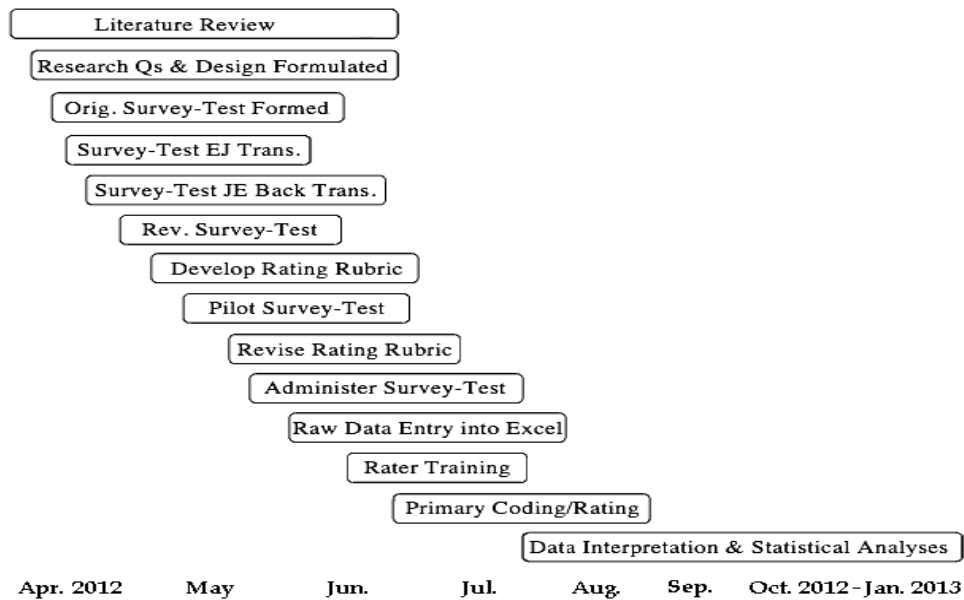


Figure 2. Research Timeline for This Study

In actuality, the process was more iterative than Figure 2 suggests. For example, even after the primary coding was complete we continued to explore published studies. However, the primary steps outlined in Figure 2 are accurate. Two items mentioned in Figure 2 merit further explanation.

Rater Training

Before the survey-test was coded, the co-authors developed a tentative rating rubric and then rated four simulated responses independently. After each session, they discussed their coding choices by phone. By the fourth time, both felt they were in agreement about the coding criteria. Indeed, the inter-coder agreement ratings (p_o) ranged from .88 to .99 with a mean of .96. Adjusting for of random chance agreements through Cohen's kappa, ranges from .84 to .96 were obtained. The mean Cohen's κ was .89. Since agreements of .61 or higher are considered "good" (Landis & Koch, 1977, cited in Sim & Wright, 2005, p. 261), it appears that both coders were adhering to the same criteria.

Rubric Revision

After piloting the survey-test, it was decided to truncate the "no response" and "no comprehensible response" categories. Also, one extra response category was added to Question IV to accommodate a wider range of replies.

Results

Let us now consider the results in terms of each of the four research questions.

(1) How well can this group of tertiary students formulate written inquiries about study abroad in English with Japanese elicitation prompts?

It is probably best to answer this question in terms of the four different sub-groups comprising this sample. The 96 economics majors had a mean score of 2.42 ($SD=1.14$). In other words, the majority of them could formulate less than half of the six questions correctly. The 21 English majors fared only slightly better with mean score of 3.41 ($SD=.89$). The other 46 national university non-English majors had the highest mean at 3.51 ($SD=1.20$). The remaining 10 private college students had



score distributions similar to the economics majors ($M= 2.47, SD=.68$). Regrettably, two students in this sample failed to get even a single question partly correct.

Female students ($M=3.11, SD=1.8, VAR_{sam}=1.16$) tended to do slightly better than males ($M=2.66, SD=3.25, VAR_{sam}=1.87$). However, when a 2-sample z-test comparing both means was conducted, no significant gender difference was detected at a 95% confidence interval ($Z=.64, 2\text{-tail probability}=.52$).

This data makes clear is that most students are not able to formulate even basic questions in English regarding overseas study or travel. The total mean score was 2.87, indicating that the average student could not express even half of the questions in English. However, the wide standard deviation of 3.64 suggests significantly different sub-groups within this sample.

An item analysis of the six questions reveals the mean item difficulty was .48 ($SD=.08$). Question II [Have you (ever)(traveled/been) overseas before?] was easiest ($ID=.63, SD=.42$) and Question I [How interested are you in study abroad?] was the most difficult ($ID=.32, SD=.40$). Now let us consider how students responded to some of those questions.

(2) How much interest do the informants report having in SA?

Question I explored the informants' reported interest in SA and 84% of them ($n=143$) offered intelligible responses. Those responses could be interpreted as pseudo-ordinal data in which 5 represents "a strong interest in SA" and 1 "a strong disinterest." 64% of the informants ($n=103$) indicated either a "strong" or "mild" interest in SA, with a mean of 3.88 ($SD=1.46, 95\% CI=1.96$).

As expected, females had more interest in SA than males. A chi-square test revealed this was significant at a $p > .01$ level ($\chi^2 = 17.09, df=5, p\text{-value}=0.00431$). With Yates correction, this came to 13.66 and the revised p -value was 0.017919 – still comfortably within a $p > .05$ range. Whereas the mean interest level among females was 4.35, among males it was a modest 3.88. Congruent with other studies, interest in SA also appeared to vary with institute and with academic major. English majors expressed more interest in SA than economics majors. The results are summarized in Figure 3.

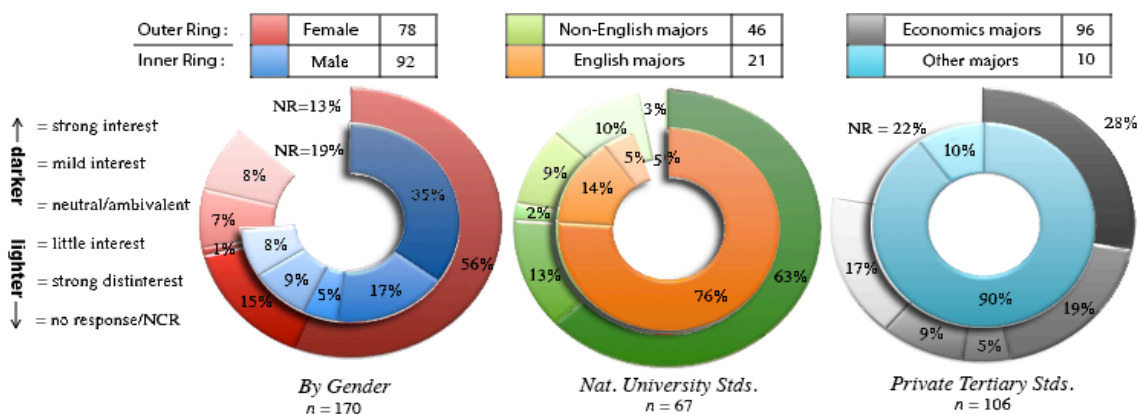


Figure 3. Interest in SA among 170 Tertiary Students according to Gender and Schools/ Majors

The reasons given for the responses are revealing. Although 68% ($n=100$) of the 146 students answering this question suggested no reason behind their preferences, others did the pragmatically appropriate thing of indicating a brief rationale for their preferences. A desire to improve foreign language skills was the most frequently reason for SA interest ($n=9$). By contrast, worries about time/cost were among the most common reasons for disinterest ($n=5$). Some reasons for SA disinterest were enigmatic. Three respondents, for example, expressed xenophobia by stating:

I want to live in Japan because I love Japan. And you? [S151, a 19 yr. old female economics major]

I have not [sic] interest. I like Japan. And you? [S161, a 19 yr. old male economics major]

I'm nothing [sic]. I like Japan school [sic]. And you? [S167, a 20 yr. old male economics major]



It is noteworthy that only 11% ($n=18$) of the students provided responses that were *pragmatically complete* in terms envisioned by Sacks et al (1974, p. 10, as cited by Hansen, 1998, p. 128). In addition to answering the question, such responses include information that actually promotes a communicative exchange. Typically, complete responses consist of a short answer, followed by a comment [elaboration or expansion], and finally a rejoinder [question]. Notice how this response contains all those elements:

I'm really interested in abroad study. It's so cool, isn't it? [S85, a 18 yr. old female economics major]

19% ($n=32$) of the informants offered only a short answer and comment with no rejoinder. Although such answers are not grammatically wrong, they lack a final turn-constructional unit. As a result, they contain no signal to continue a conversation. Pragmatically, this may indicate a lack of desire to sustain a dialog. Notice how the following response is less engaging than the previous one:

I'm interested in it so much. Next year I go to France. [S40, a 19 yr. old female education major]

11% ($n =20$) included a rejoinder with their short answers, but without any details about their responses. Although pragmatically engaging, such replies lack depth. Notice how the following informant swiftly – and almost glibly – turns the conversation back:

I'm intersting [sic] about going abroad a lot. And you? [S21, a 19 yr. old female education major]

More problematic, 47% ($n=80$) offered terse answers with no elaborations or rejoinders. Pragmatically, this is could be interpreted as either as inability to communicate or as a lack of interest in extending a communicative exchange, as these examples attest:

I'm not interested in [incomplete sentence]. [S32, a 19 yr. old male education major]

I don't interest [sic]. [S145, a 20 yr. old female economics major]

A little. [S74, a 19 yr. old female education major]

These responses suggest how many students appear to lack *pragmatic competence*: quite likely they do not know how to strategically continue ongoing L2 exchanges. Although the possibility of a design artifact in the survey-test itself cannot be ruled out, more than a few students do not seem to understand that a "grammatically correct" response is not necessarily a pragmatically appropriate one.

Sadly, 14% ($n =24$) offered no comprehensible response to Question I, representing a complete pragmatic failure.

(3) What is the biggest concern among the informants about SA?

Figure 4 indicates how students reacted to the prompt: 留学について最も心配な事は何ですか? This is often translated as, “What worries you most about study abroad?”. 92% of the respondents ($n=156$) responded intelligibly to this question. Those open responses were coded into eight categories. Since some students mentioned multiple concerns, the y-axis indicates raw numerical responses.

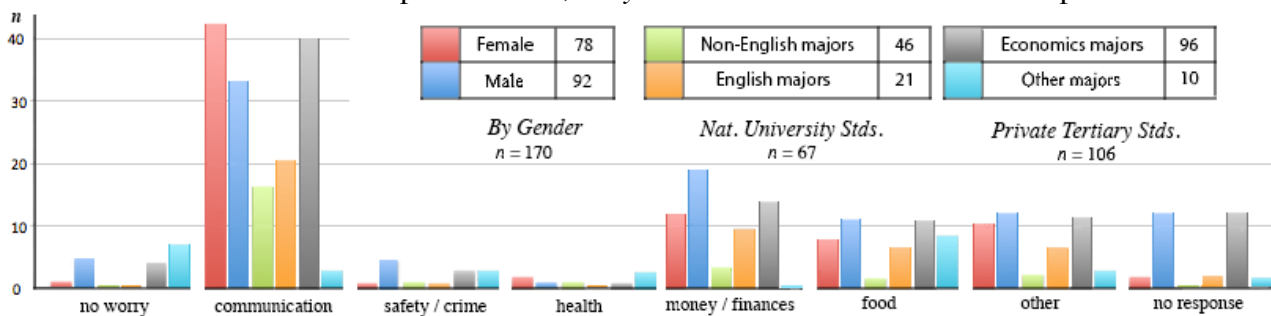


Figure 4. Concerns about SA among 170 Tertiary Students According to Gender, Schools, and Majors



As Figure 4 suggests, the foremost concern was communicating in a foreign language. 46% ($n=78$) expressed anxiety about conversing in another tongue. Monetary worries ($n=54$) and trepidation about foreign food ($n=38$) were also salient.

The micro-narratives shed further light on these concerns and revealed the pragmatic weakness of most informants. 66% ($n=112$) gave terse answers to Question III without any elaboration or rejoinders, as in these examples:

I worry about the problem of language. [S23, a 18 yr. old male education major]

My worry is food. [S27, a 18 yr. old female education major]

Culture gap is my biggest worry [sic]. [S31, a 18 yr. old male education major]

I'm worry money [sic]. [S165, a 19 yr. old female economics major]

Responses such as these often fail to fulfill the Gricean maxims of quantity and manner (Grice, 1989, p. 28). 9% of the students ($n=19$) offered brief answers and comments, neglecting to add rejoinders to sustain the communicative exchange. Notice how these examples are grammatically correct, but not socially engaging since they lack a turn-constructional unit:

I worry about money. I don't have so much money. [S1, a 19 yr. old female education major]

It is speaking English. I cannot speak English well. [S168, a 20 yr. old male economics major]

Another 9% ($n=16$) provided brief answers that were followed by rejoinders without contextual details. Notice how that lack makes the following responses tersely formulaic:

I am worried about language. And you? [S135, a 20 yr. old male economics major]

It is expensive to study abroad. And you? [S136, a male economics major – age not specified]

I worry to different culcher. [sic] What do you think? [S162, a 21 yr. old male economics major]

Only 5% ($n=9$) of the students offered “pragmatically complete” responses as in these examples:

It is language. So, I'm studying hard. And you? [S13, a 20 yr. old male education major]

I worry about money. My home is not rich. How about you? [S20, a 20 yr. old male education major]

Whether I can talk there. Maybe I can't speak. And you? [S86, a 20 yr. old male education major]

This data makes the need for more pragmatic competence abundantly clear.

(4) What do informants express the most interest in doing overseas?

Figure 5 summarizes how students reacted to the prompt: もしあなたが海外に行ったら、何をしたいですか? This is usually translated as, “If you went abroad what would you like to do?”. 90% of the respondents ($n=160$) responded to this question. Those open responses were coded into eight categories. Since some mentioned multiple activities, the y-axis indicates raw responses.

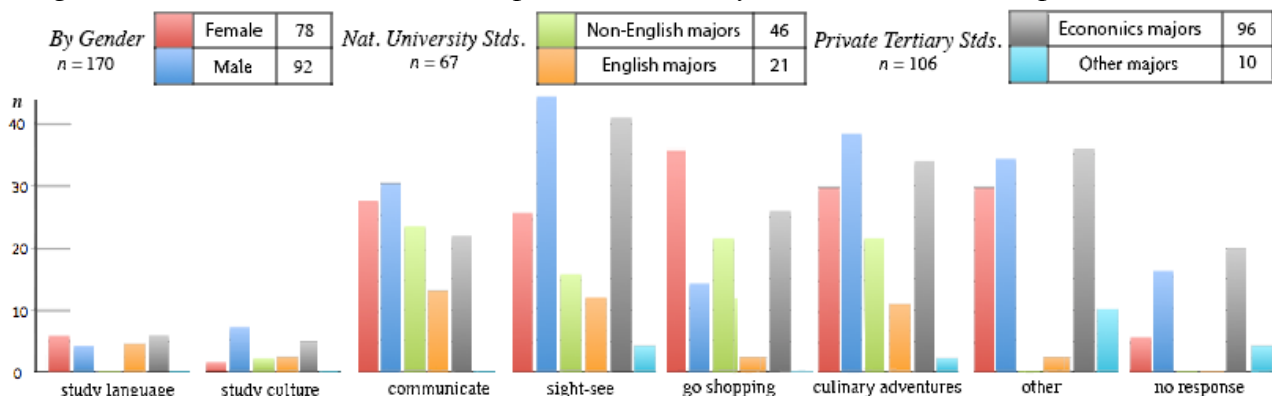


Figure 5. Preferred Overseas Activities among 170 Tertiary Students



Touristic activities such as sightseeing (45%, $n=76$) or tasting unusual foods/beverages (39%, $n=66$) were especially salient. Shopping was also a popular activity, and one with a clear gender gap. Whereas 46% ($n=36$) of the female respondents expressed an interest in this pursuit, only 16% ($n=15$) of the males did.

Academic study was an activity that few students appeared to be keenly interested in. Only 7% ($n=12$) expressed an interest in formal language studies, and a modest 6% ($n=10$) were interested in “studying culture.” Congruent with findings by Burrow (2010, p. 41), formal study does not appear to be the primary motive for most SA students.

The pragmatic responses for Question IV paralleled other survey-test questions. Again, a mere 9% ($n=15$) of the respondents offered “pragmatically complete” responses, while 64% ($n=108$) wrote answers without any elaborations or rejoinders. Only one person (S158) offered a response was both grammatically correct and pragmatically appropriate. Most students seemed to focus on grammatical correctness and avoid using many words. Indeed, the average response was merely 7.6 words ($SD=3.28$, $VAR_{sam}=10.8$). Although responses by female respondents tended to be longer than those by males, a chi-square test revealed this was not statistically significant ($\chi^2=.25$, $df=5$, $p\text{-value}=0.9985$). National university students also tended to write longer sentences than private university/college students, but this was not statistically insignificant ($\chi^2=.16$, $df=6$, $p\text{-value}=0.9999$).

Discussion

Two issues raised in this paper merit further discussion. First, we should consider the implications of these results for EFL teachers in general. After that, let consider what the results might mean to those organizing SA programs.

Implications for EFL Teachers in General

1. The need for more pragmatic instruction

Three classroom implications are suggested by this research. First, there appears to be a clear need to raise the *pragmatic awareness* of Japanese university EFL students. A pragmatic analysis of the micro-narratives by the 170 students in this study makes it clear that most merely focused on sentence-level grammar, demonstrating little awareness of the macroscopic features of extended discourse. Although this might be discounted as a research artifact, our interactions with these students over the course of a year suggests there is a genuine lack of pragmatic awareness among many informants. The distinction between a response in which only a minimal level of information is exchanged and a so-called “pragmatically complete” response seems opaque to the vast majority. For this reason, we believe more time needs to be devoted to pragmatic instruction. Jones (2004) describes one possible way of doing this.

2. The need for more grammar awareness

A second point borne out by this research is that many students are making fairly basic grammatical mistakes. An analysis of the survey-tests in Appendix A revealed well over 1,200 errors. The most frequent appear in Table 3.



Table 3. *Some Frequent Grammar Mistakes Among This Survey-Test Sample (n=170)*

type of error	sample lexis	sample incorrect sentence
agentive adj. / past part.	interested vs. interesting	* <i>I have great interesting in study abroad.</i> (S24)
singular vs. plural	other vs. others	* <i>I'm afraid of communicating with other very well.</i> (S132)
superlatives	biggest vs. most	* <i>My most worry is talking.</i> (S146)
null quantity adjectives	not at all vs. nothing	* <i>I have nothing it.</i> (S163)
ambiguous sub. / object	it is vs. I am	* <i>It is so-so.</i> (S43)
present perfect	been vs. gone	* <i>I have never gone to abroad.</i> (S11)
noun / verb contrast	worry vs. be worried	* <i>I'm worry money.</i> (S165)
adjectives of degree	little vs. a little	* <i>A little, I'm not going to study abroad.</i> (S63)
null prepositions	been abroad vs. been to	* <i>I have never gone to abroad yet.</i> (S111)
articles	a/an vs. the vs. ∅	* <i>I want to travel while I'm university student.</i> (S84)
gerund / gerund part.	shopping vs. go shopping	* <i>I want to shopping.</i> (S21)

Our position is that sentence-level grammar should not be considered irrelevant – it needs to be expanded to include awareness of discourse level features. Activities such as the “Grammar Awareness Raising Exercise” in Appendix D might be useful in elucidating some of the most frequent mistakes evident in this survey-test.

3. *English superring practice?*

Finally, this survey-test revealed how many students were unable to spell even basic words. 66% of the 38 spelling errors within the raw data were within the 1000-word level vocabulary range envisioned by Heatley, Nation, and Coxhead (2002). Many were CEFR A1 or A2 level words according to the LexiCLIL database (Lextronics, 2009). As Table 4 reveals, the assumption that most Japanese university EFL students are competent spellers needs to be reevaluated.

Table 4. *Spelling Mistakes Among This Survey-Test Sample (n=170)*

Word	CEFR	Frequency	Misspelling(s)	Student(s)
abroad	C1	2000 level	abrod	[S149]
airplanes	A1	2000 level	air plains	[S81]
beautiful	A1	1000 level	beautify	[S98]
culture	B2	AWL	culcher	[S161]
delicious	B1	∅	delisious, deliciouis	[S6, 14]
English	A1?	1000 level	Engliush	[S44]
famous	B1	1000 level	famos	[S136]
feel	A1	1000 level	fell	[S2]
foreign	A1	1000 level	forign	[S114]
gone	A2	1000 level	goen	[S117]
Hawaii	∅	∅	Hawai	[S86]
Italy	∅	∅	Itaria	[S165]
Korea	∅	∅	Koria	[S98, 139, 158]
little	A1	1000 level	lettle	[S104]
money	A1	1000 level	monwy, maney	[S80, 124]
nothing	A1	1000 level	noting	[S167]
now	A1	1000 level	nom	[S114]
places	A2	1000 level	praces	[S87]



once	A1	1000 level	onece	[S120]
plan	A2	1000 level	plane, pran	[S14, 138]
safety	A2	1000 level	safty	[S123, 139]
schedule	C2	AWL	scheduel	[S117]
sightseeing	B1	∅	shight seeing	[S150]
Singapore	∅	∅	Shigapola, Shingapol	[S114, 154]
speak	A2	1000 level	speek	[S139]
speakers	A2	1000 level	speekers	[S139]
summer	A1	1000 level	summar	[S130]
traveled	B2	1000 level	travelede	[S29]
whether	A2	1000 level	whther, wheather	[S40, 120]
worried	A2	2000 level	worryed	[S164]

The word frequency ratings in Table 4 were calculated through the University of Hong Kong’s *Vocabulary Profiler* (2001). Unfortunately, few (if any) EFL materials for university level students in Japan appear to systematically address the issue of spelling. This paper emphasizes the need to develop such materials.

Implications for Those Organizing SA Programs or Doing SA Research

Four points are highlighted by this study are pertinent to those administering SA programs or undertaking SA research:

(1) Be realistic about the linguistic handicaps of most SA participants.

The data from this study made it clear that most students could offer only limited, short responses to questions about SA in English. The average response to each question was only 6.9 words. Many replies were hard to understand. SA researchers working with informants like those in this sample probably need to include some L1 support in their data collection procedures: the majority from this sample were unable to communicate how they felt in English with any degree of textured nuance.

This study confirms other research about typical Japanese university student English proficiency. A study by Negishi, Takada, and Tono (2011) suggests that a sizable chunk of incoming university students are actually at a CEFR Pre-1 level, with the remaining bulk are at either A1 or A2 level. Due to sampling and methodological problems, their findings should be regarded as indicative rather than exact. However, a close look at Table 4 reveals that even students who are unsure about how the letters “m” and “w” differ sometimes manage to enter Japanese universities.

(2) Seek to alleviate mistaken fears that SA requires foreign language proficiency

24% (n=40) of the informants hesitated to embark on SA because they believed their English was not “fluent enough.” Study abroad organizers need to remind such students that fluency is not a requirement for many SA programs. In particular, short-programs are able to accommodate foreign students at any proficiency level (ISEP, 2010).

Unfortunately, at least 6% (n=11) of the students in this study seemed to associate SA with travel to *English*-speaking countries. SA organizers should let students know that Anglo-sphere countries are not the only SA destinations: increasingly Japanese are studying elsewhere in Asia or Europe (Asai, 2012, p. 33). In such programs, participants either learn other languages besides English or study English in tandem with a local language.

(3) Show students that low-cost SA options also exist.



14% ($n=24$) of students expressed a mistaken view that SA invariably involves huge sums of money. The fact is that low-cost SA options in places such as the Philippines, China, Vietnam, and Chile also exist (CSA, 2013; Colorito, 2012). Even if students choose to go to Anglo-sphere “inner circle” countries such as Britain, the USA, or Australia, innovative low-budget SA options are available. For example, one Japanese student we are aware of served as a JSL teaching aide at a secondary school near Washington D.C. during her junior year in college. She earned just enough money to cover her room and board for two semesters by teaching Japanese to American students. Another student worked at a souvenir shop in Alaska during her summer vacation, effectively covering her overseas expenses. Unfortunately, as Higuchi (2012, p. 54) points out many Japanese university students are not knowledgeable about the wide range of SA scholarships available.

(4) Exploit the touristic interests among respondents and see if they can be turned into learning experiences.

SA organizers should recognize that many participants are initially motivated by touristic motives: desires to shop, taste exotic food, see unusual sights, or meet different people tend to outweigh formal academic interests in foreign languages or cultures. It is our belief that well-organized SA programs can tap into the seemingly superficial interests of participants and encourage critical reflection, turning cursory observations into deeper learning opportunities. Elder and Paul (2002) describe one possible way to achieve this.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This paper has addressed four research questions. It provided clear evidence that most students have difficulty answering even basic questions about overseas travel and study abroad in English. It also suggested that although many students are interested in SA, misconceptions about it abound. Congruent with a 2009 MITI report of 2,150 Japanese with SA experience cited in Benesse (2012, p. 60), difficulties associated with communicating in a foreign language and getting used to foreign foods were among the biggest concerns Japanese thinking of SA have. Moreover, this paper has provided evidence that touristic motives for embarking on SA should not be underestimated.

Several limitations of this study need to be conceded. First of all, there were unquestionably some artifacts inherent in the design of this study. This study relied on written responses to open-ended questions with Japanese language prompts. As such, it should be regarded as a partial measure of Japanese/English translation ability. Particularly for the eight non-Japanese informants, the translation task raised some problematic issues. Also, although the survey-test asked respondents to write as if it were an “online keyboard chat” there is something admittedly artificial about this. Some students were no doubt writing in a typical test-response discourse style. In a genuine keyboard chat they might have used a different style. However, our close observations of the informants over the course of an entire year reveals most of them simply do not have multiple discourse styles in English: their English levels are so basic that they do not know how to switch, for example, from a “conversational style” to a socially-distant “cold” style.

Nonetheless, future research studies should explore how informants respond to oral prompts directly in English. More realistically, it might be good to include a dual-language design: if the informants are unable to respond to an English-language prompt within a 5-second time frame, a Japanese equivalent could be asked. This might allow those at a very basic CEFR level to respond to more prompts. A further accommodation would be to permit responses in Japanese, allowing even functionally monolingual respondents to participate.

A second limitation of this study concerns sampling: these 170 informants differ slightly from the entire population of university students in Japan in terms of age, academic major, gender, and nationality. This study makes no claim of being representative of all university students in Japan. Future research should explore how students at a wider range of institutions regard study abroad. In



particular, a larger number of female respondents and third- and fourth-year undergraduates should be included. Moreover, the attitudes of high school students towards SA are also worth exploring.

A final limitation of this study concerns the issue of triangulation. This study relied solely on three forms of a 12-item survey-test. There were not enough items in that test to evaluate the impact of the item types on response accuracy. Longer tests with more items and at least the same number of respondents are needed to do that accurately. Moreover, future studies should triangulate survey-test data with selected interviews and teacher observations. If researchers are working with students over two semesters, it should be possible come up with more richly textured data.

Despite these limitations, we believe this study has made the need for more pragmatic instruction clear. It has also underscored the need to address some common misconceptions about study abroad. Students need to learn that overseas study does not necessarily require a high level of language proficiency or entail huge costs, or even involve visiting “inner circle” Anglo-sphere nations. Finally, this study has also highlighted the need to address common grammar and spelling errors. The fact that roughly half of the students have not yet reached a CEFR B1 level of language proficiency despite over six years of English instruction is cause for reflection.

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Appendix A. The Survey-Test Used in This Study

NOTE: The Alpha form appears below.

The Beta form is available at http://jalt-sa.org/PDF/Newfields-Groger_Beta.pdf and the Gamma form is available at http://jalt-sa.org/PDF/Newfields-Groger_Gamma.pdf.

(ALPHA FORM)

PART I: Translate each question below into English, then write a "conversational" answer (using the 3A's) to each question.

例 Q: たばこを吸いますか? **Q:** Do you smoke? **A:** No. It is bad for health and an expensive habit. And you?

1. **Q:** 留学にどの程度関心がありますか? **Q:** _____

A: _____

2. **Q:** 今まで海外に旅行したことがありますか? **Q:** _____

A: _____

3. **Q:** あなたの専攻は何ですか? **Q:** _____

A: _____

4. **Q:** あなたの年齢を尋ねてもよいですか? **Q:** _____

A: _____

PART II: Mark the choice (A-D) matching the Japanese question best, then write a "conversational" answer (using the 3A's) to each question.

例 Q: あなたは通学にどれくらい時間がかかりますか?

__ (A) How much time do you come to school?

√ (C) How long does it take you to get to school?

__ (B) How long do you come to school?

__ (D) How do you commute from this school?

Your answer to this question: **A:** It takes me about 30 minutes. I usually bicycle here. And you?



1. **Q:** 留学について最も心配な事は何ですか?
 __ (A) What is the most worry about your study abroad? __ (C) What do you worry about most regarding study abroad?
 __ (B) What are worrying about going abroad? __ (D) What worry do you have about overseas study?
 Your answer to this question: **A:** _____
2. **Q:** もしあなたは海外へ行ったら何をしたいですか?
 __ (A) If you ventured overseas, what would you like to do? __ (C) If you will go to the abroad, what is the most thing to do?
 __ (B) If you went to abroad, what do you want to do? __ (D) If you go to overseas, what would you want to do?
 Your answer to this question: **A:** _____
3. **Q:** あなたの国籍はどちらですか?
 __ (A) What is your nationality? __ (C) What country do you belong to?
 __ (B) Where is your country? __ (D) Where are you a citizen?
 Your answer to this question : **A:** _____
4. **Q:** あなたは大学の何年生ですか?
 __ (A) What grade of college are you in? __ (C) What year did you enter university?
 __ (B) What year are you in college? __ (D) How is your university's grade?
 Your answer to this question : **A:** _____

PART III: Look at the Japanese question, then unscramble the English words to fit the question. Finally write a "conversational" answer (using the 3A's) to each question.

例 Q: あなたの英語の力は上達していますか、それとも低下していますか?

Do [ability English feel increasing or is you your] decreasing?

正しい順: Do [you feel your English ability is increasing or] decreasing?

Your answer to this question: I hope it is improving, but am unsure. How about yours?

1. **Q:** 今まで、海外旅行に何回行ったことがありますか?
 So [been have you far how many been outside of times] Japan ?
正しい順: So [_____] Japan?
 Your answer to this question: _____
2. **Q:** 今後5年以内に外国に旅行する予定はありますか?
 Are you [foreign countries next planning to travel to any in the] 5 years?
正しい順: Are you [_____] 5 years?
 Your answer to this question: _____
3. **Q:** あなたの両親のうちどちらかは、以前、海外で勉強したことがありますか?
 Have [(a) either (b) parents (c) of (d) previously (e) studied (f) your] overseas?
正しい順: Have [_____] overseas ?
 Your answer to this question : **A:** _____
4. **Q:** あなたの両親のうちどちらかは流暢に外国語を話しますか?
 Do [(a) either (b) a foreign (c) language (d) of (e) parents (f) your (g) speak] fluently ?
正しい順: Do [_____] fluently?
 Your answer to this question : **A:** _____

FEEDBACK: Take a brief moment to answer this question -

Which type of question was easiest for you in this test? (Check the appropriate box)

___ (a) the multiple-choice questions, ___ (b) the scrambled questions ___ (c) the open questions



Appendix B. The rating rubric used in this study

QUESTIONS

Open format questions should be rated by the following 5-level scale:

- 1 point *The English question was grammatically correct and communicated the Japanese meaning.*
Exemplars for Question I: How interested are you in study abroad? / How keen are you about overseas study?
- .75 points *Most core ideas are expressed, but the grammar/syntax were somewhat amiss.*
Exemplars for Question I: How much interest do you have study abroad? / How is your interest for study abroad?
- .5 points *About half the core information was conveyed, and grammar/syntax was rather amiss.*
Exemplars for Question I: How much interest are you study abroad? / How are you interested in foreign study?
- .25 points *Only one of the core ideas were expressed in English – most information was missing.*
Exemplars for Question I: How interested do you in _____? / How interesting in study are you?
- 0 points *None of the core ideas were expressed and/or no comprehensible response in English appeared.*
Exemplars for Question I: How concern foreign? / Q: _____
- NOTE:** Questions in multiple choice and scrambled formats, by contrast, should be rated by a simple dichotomous scale in which 1 represents "correct" and 0 represents "incorrect".

ANSWERS

Each answer should be rated according to a slightly different rubric, as summarized below -

Item I 留学にどの程度関心がありますか? [Tr: How interested are you in study abroad?]

- <5> *A strong interest in SA* Ex: I'm very interested in abroad study because I want to speak English fluently [T11]
- <4> *A mild interest in SA* Ex: A little. But, I like to go abroad. [K4]
- <3> *Neutral and/or ambivalent* Ex: It's so so. I want to study abroad, but I don't have money. And you? [T80]
- <2> *Little interest in SA* Ex: I have just little interested about study abroad. [K28]
- <1> *A strong disinterest in SA* Ex: I'm nothing, I like Japan school. And you? [T90]
- <NR> *Vague or incompressible response* Ex: Any blank response.

Item II 今まで海外旅行をしたことがありますか? [Tr: Have you (ever)(traveled/been) overseas before?]

- <4> *4 or more overseas experiences* Ex: Yes, I have. I went to about 5 countries. How about you? [T63]
- <3> *3 overseas experiences* Ex: Yes, I have three times. And you? [T85]
- <2> *2 overseas experiences* Ex: Yes, I went to France and Hawaii. [T9]
- <1> *1 overseas experience* Ex: Yes, I have. I have been to Korea. How are you? [T81]
- <0> *no experiences outside of Japan* Ex: No, I haven't. But, I will go outside in this summer. [T2]
- <NR> *NR or no compreh. response* Ex: Yes, I have travel overseas. [K54] [NOTE: No indication of how many times.]

Item III* 留学について最も心配な事は何ですか? [Tr: What do you worry about most regarding SA?]

- <A> *no worry* Ex: Nothing. I want to go. Hurry up! [T81]
- *communication* Ex: I don't know how to take a communicate. How about yours? [T89]
- <C> *safety or crime* Ex: Safty. [sic] I have heard many foreign countries are so dangerous ... [T62]
- <D> *health* Ex: It is water quality. [T83]
- <E> *money/finances* Ex: Money is the most concerning thing. [S87]
- <F> *food* Ex: I worry about the food.
- <G> *other* Ex: I worry if I become "Homesick". [S4]
- <NR> *NR or no compreh. response* Ex: It's life. I'm very worry. [S145]

Item IV* もしあなたが海外に行ったら、何をしたいですか?

[Tr: If you ventured overseas, what would you like to do most?]

- <A> *study language* Ex: I want study in English. And you? [S158]
- *study culture* Ex: I want to study the place's tradition. And you? [T163]
- <C> *communicate* Ex: I want to speak with native speakers ... And you? [S139]
- <D> *sight-see* Ex: I want to go to sightseeing. About you? [S80]
- <E> *shopping* Ex: I want to go to shopping. [S160]
- <F> *culinary: eating & drinking adventures* Ex: I want to eat this country foods. And you? [T89]
- <G> *other* Ex: I want to listen to music. [T75]
- <NR> *NR or no compreh. response* Ex: Any blank response.

Item V 今まで、海外旅行に何回行ったことがありますか?

[Tr: So far how many times have you been outside of Japan?]

- <4> *4 or more times* Ex: I have been abroad four times. [K14]
- <3> *3 times* Ex: I have traveled overseas three times. [S39]
- <2> *2 times* Ex: I had gone to abroad about 2. [S155]
- <1> *1 time* Ex: I traveled abroad only once. [S15]
- <0> *never* Ex: It's zero. [S165]



<NR> NR or no compreh. response Ex: I like overseas.

Item VI 今後5年以内に外国に旅行する予定はありますか？

[Tr: Are you planning to travel to any foreign countries in the next 5 years?]

<Y> yes Ex: Yes, I will go America. And you? [S170]

<N> no Ex: No, I'm not. But I think I want to go overseas. [S169]

<?> equivocal Ex: Maybe.

<NR> NR or no compreh. response Ex: Any blank response.

Appendix C. The Actual Coding Form with One Student's Responses And One Rater's Categorization of Those Responses

Survey-Test Data Entry & Coding Form									
Informant #:	T-79								
Informant's Test Form:	Alpha	Beta	Gamma	Delta					
Informant's Test Score:	21.25/48								
Gender:	F	M							
Age:	18	19	20	21	22	NR			
Major:	Economics	Education	Other: _____						
Academic Year:	1	2	3	4	NR				
Nationality:	Japanese	Chinese	Korean	Other: _____			NR		
Parents SA?	Mother	Father	Both	Neither	NR				
Parents FL Fluent?	Mother	Father	Both	Neither	NR				
"Easiest Question Type":	Open	MC	Scrambled	NR					
Question Coding		Answer Coding							
Item Number	Q. Correct?	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]	[6]	[7]	[8]
I	0				*				
II	1			*					
III	0.5		*						
IV	0.5						*		
V	0			*					
VI	0	*							
This coding was done by:		Tim	Ken						
I 留学にどの程度関心がありますか？ [Tr: How interested are you in study abroad?]									
Question Format:	Open	MC	Scrambled						
Informant's Question:	How [are you interested in study abroad]?								
Informant's Answer:	So so. I want to speak English. And you?								
II 今まで海外旅行をしたことがありますか？ [Tr: Have you (ever)(traveled/been) overseas before?]									
Question Format:	Open	MC	Scrambled						
Informant's Question:	Have [you ever traveled overseas before]?								
Informant's Answer:	Yes, I have. I traveled America. And you?								
III 留学について最も心配な事は何ですか？ [Tr: What do you worry about most regarding SA?]									
Question Format:	Open	MC							
Informant's Question:	What is the most wrong about study abroad?								
Informant's Answer:	I don't speak English. And I have to study English.								
IV もしあなたが海外に行ったら、何をしたいですか？ [Tr: If you ventured overseas, what would you like to do most?]									
Question Format:	Open	MC							
Informant's Question:	If you went to foreign abroad, what's want to?								
Informant's Answer:	I want to eat famous things. I love eating. And you?								
V 今まで、海外旅行に何回行ったことがありますか？ [Tr: So far how many times have you been outside of Japan?]									
Question Format:	Open	MC	Scrambled						
Informant's Question:	(A)								
Informant's Answer:	It is two times. I went to Hawaii and America. And you?								
VI 今後5年以内に外国に旅行する予定はありますか？ [Tr: Are you planning to travel to any foreign countries in the next 5 yrs?]									
Question Format:	Open	MC	Scrambled						
Informant's Question:	(A)								
Informant's Answer:	Yes, I have. I go to America. And you?								



Appendix D. A Grammar Awareness Activity about Study Abroad

PART I 日本語の意味と一致する文章 (A または B) をチェックしなさい。
Instructions: Check the sentences below (A or B) that match the Japanese text.

Ex. 地元の人々と話し合いたいと思います。

__ (A) I want to communicate with native people. (B) I want to communicate with local people.

1. 留学には、どのくらい興味を持っていますか。

__ (A) How interested are you in study abroad? __ (B) How are you interested in study abroad?

2. 私は留学の少し興味があります。

__ (A) I have a little interest in studying abroad. __ (B) I have little interest in studying abroad.

3. この5年以内に、あなたは海外へ行くと思いますか？

__ (A) Will you go to overseas within 5 years? __ (B) Will you go to overseas for 5 years?

4. 彼女は海外に行ったことがあります。

__ (A) She has gone overseas. __ (B) She has been overseas.

5. 私はアメリカへ行きました。

__ (A) I traveled America. __ (B) I traveled to America.

Extra Challenge: Explain how each pair of sentences above differ. If you can do that in English, great! If you need to use a little Japanese, that is also okay.

PART II 以下の文の(A)(B)どちらか正しい方に、チェックしなさい。

Instructions: Only one sentence in each pair below is correct. The other has either a “mistake” or unusual meaning. Check the sentences below (A or B) that are both grammatical correct and pragmatically common.

Ex. __ (A) I have never tripped abroad.

(B) I have never traveled abroad.

1. __ (A) I think go to study abroad.

__ (B) I am thinking about studying abroad.

2. __ (A) I have not been abroad

__ (B) I have not go to abroad.

3. __ (A) I have no interest in that.

__ (B) I have not interest in that.

4. __ (A) I want to sightseeing.

__ (B) I want to go sightseeing.

5. __ (A) My biggest worry is talking with people from overseas.

__ (B) My most worry is talking with foreigners.

Extra Challenge: Correct the mistakes in each of the sentences above.
 (Additional challenge: Paraphrase each sentence.)

PART III. 以下の文の間違いを訂正しなさい。各文は2~4箇所、間違いがあります。

Instructions: Correct the mistakes in the following sentences. Each sentence has 2-4 mistakes.

have been *twice*

Ex. So far I ~~had gone~~ to abroad 2 ~~time~~.

(or also - 2 times)

1. I have never been to overseas. I want to go finland. And you?

2. I have been to Korla. How are you?

3. I want to speak with native speakers when I travel to overseas.

4. I am interesting in abroad study, but family has little maney.

5. My farther studied in UK when he was a collage stewdent.