

# **How does a short term study abroad influence language learning strategies?**

## **- The case of the Intercultural Communication Program at Yamagata University -**

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### **1. Introduction**

A study abroad is one of the best ways to learn a foreign language. As Azuie and Winke (2009) have pointed out, “[s]tudying abroad offers a different level and type of language input, opportunities for interaction, and exposure to the target language” (p. 366). Much research has been done on exploring the relationship between the studying abroad experience and learner’s development of language proficiency (cf. DeKyser, 2007). However, there has been little research on investigating how studying abroad, especially for a short time, changes learners’ language learning strategies (LLS).

It is important to examine the effect of a short term study abroad on LLS for two reasons. First, many universities in Japan have study abroad programs for as long as a year or more and for as short as a week. It appears that short stays are more popular amongst universities because they can take a lot more students compared with long term study abroad which usually requires high language proficiency and stricter visa requirements. It is essential for language teachers to know what benefits the participants can obtain through a short term study abroad.

Secondly, a lot of language teachers are now aware of the importance of LLS as they know that classroom instruction alone is not sufficient for a language learner to achieve high proficiency in a target language, especially in a foreign language learning environment such as Japan. It is necessary for foreign language learners to be autonomous, which means taking responsibility for their own learning goals (Benson, 2001). If language learners are submerged in an environment surrounded by a target language and culture even for a short term, it is to be expected that they will change their LLS. It is important to know how the participants change their LLS through short term study

abroad.

In the context of these important areas, the present study seeks to examine the change in LLS experienced by participants in a short term study abroad. The participants in this study showcase how a short term study abroad affects LLS.

## **2. Language Learning Strategies**

Language learning strategies (LLS) are defined as “being a specific plan, action, behavior, step, or technique that individual learners use, with some degree of consciousness, to improve their progress in developing skills in a second or foreign language” (Oxford and Schramm, 2007: 47-48). The reason why LLS has gained such attention is because much research has revealed that language learning success is heavily dependent upon how a language learner utilizes LLS under given learning conditions. More specifically, the more proficient learners become, the more strategies they employ (Green and Oxford, 1995; Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006; Oxford and Ehrman, 1995).

Oxford (1990) classified language learning strategies into two: direct strategies and indirect strategies. Further, both direct and indirect strategies are classified into smaller strategies (types of strategies) as Figure 1 shows. Direct strategies include memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. Memory strategies are used for helping store and retrieve information by mental linkages, for applying images and sounds, for reviewing, and for employing actions. Cognitive strategies are used for manipulating and changing the target language by practicing, for receiving and sending information, for analyzing, for reasoning, and for creating input and output structures. Compensation strategies are used for covering a lack of knowledge by guessing during listening and reading and for overcoming limitations in writing and speaking.

Indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies include centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating our learning strategies in order to modify own learning process. Affective strategies include lowering anxiety, encouraging oneself, and taking our emotional temperature in order to control emotional factors. Social strategies include asking questions, cooperating with others, and empathizing with others in order to have smooth communication.

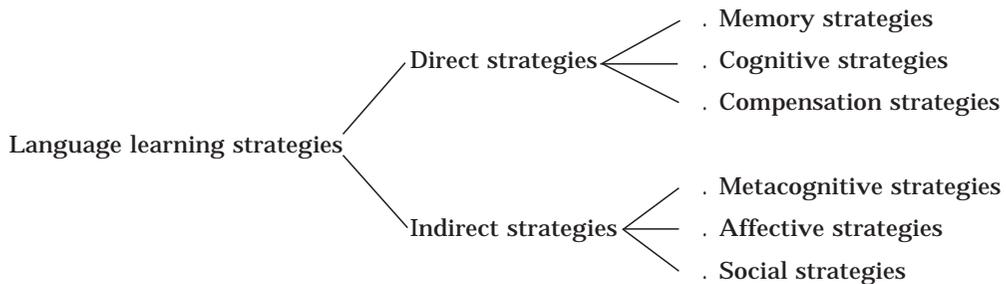


Figure 1. Classifications of Language Learning Strategies (Oxford, 1990)

### 3. Influence of Short Term Study Abroad on LLS

There are a few studies on how a short term study abroad affects language learning strategies used by Japanese learners of English. Takeda (1998) investigated how learning motivation and learning strategies changed after a three and half month overseas study program. The results showed that there was no change in the use of memory strategies but the participants used cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies more after the program than before. Additionally, he divided the participants into two groups based on a listening test and reported that the lower scoring group used memory strategies more often than the higher scoring group. It was concluded that a short term study program positively affected language learning strategies.

Kimura (2007) examined how language learning strategies changed after a three week study abroad program in New Zealand. Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990) was used. The results showed that those who participated in the program used more language strategies than those who did not. Moreover, the strategies used by the learners who joined the program were kept and used one month after they came back to Japan, which means that those strategies were not just used temporarily but had a lasting effect. Another finding was that the participants favored compensation strategies rather than memory or affective strategies. This study, however, did not conduct a statistical analysis as to which strategy types were employed more post- rather than pre-program.

These previous studies have shown that a short term study abroad experience has a positive affect on language learning strategies in terms of variety of strategies and the length of their effect. Because there are not many studies on the influence of short term staying abroad on language learning strategies, it is beneficial to accumulate studies of

a similar nature, especially with a shorter period such as two weeks. More importantly, it is important to know which types of strategies can be developed through a short term study abroad program.

#### 4. Purpose of Study

The purposes of this study are to examine the following two questions;

- 1 ) How does a two week study abroad program affect the use of language learning strategies?
- 2 ) Which types of strategies did the learners use more after participating in the program?

#### 5. The Intercultural Communication Program

The International Communication Program (ICP) was held in Cairns, Australia from the 5th to the 21st of September, 2008. A detailed itinerary is shown in Table 1. The participants had English classes from 9:00 to 15:00 almost every day at an English conversation school and stayed with their host families after school. There was only one

Table 1. Detailed Itinerary for ICP

Day	Event
Day 0	Leaving Yamagata for Cairns
Day 1	Arriving at Cairns and meeting with host family
Day 2	Free day with host family
Day 3	Morning: Orientation and English lesson
Day 4	Activity on Green Island
Day 5	English lessons
Day 6	English lessons
Day 7	English lessons and activity at Cairns Tropical Zoo
Day 8	Free day with host family
Day 9	Free day with host family
Day 10	English lessons
Day 11	Activity at Kuranda
Day 12	English lessons
Day 13	English lessons
Day 14	English lesson and farewell lunch
Day 15	Free day with host family
Day 16	Leaving Cairns for Yamagata

Japanese learner of English staying with each host family.

There were 18 students participating in the ICP. One of them was male; the others were female. Eight of them were 1st year students, 7 were 2nd year students and 3 were 3rd year students. One of them majored in engineering and the others belonged to the Faculty of Literature and Social Sciences, all from Yamagata University.

## 6. Materials and Data Collection

In order to see how the participants' language learning strategies changed after the ICP, the Japanese version of Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990; translated by Shishido and Ban, 1994) was used. SILL was developed based on the LLS classification described in section 2. There are 50 questions in SILL (See Appendix for all the questions used). For direct strategies, there are 9 questions related to memory strategies, 14 questions related to cognitive strategies and 6 questions related to compensation strategies. For indirect questions, there are 9 questions related to metacognitive strategies, 6 questions related to affective strategies, and 6 questions related to social strategies.

The participants were asked to answer each question on a 5 point scale: 1 for 'never or almost never true for me', 2 for 'usually not true for me', 3 for 'somewhat true for me', 4 for 'usually true for me', and 5 for 'always or almost always true for me'. The higher a question's average, the more likely the strategy was used by the participants.

The participants were asked to answer the questionnaire twice. The first session was held on the day of departure. The second was held on the final day in Australia. There was no time limit. In each session, it was announced that there were no right or wrong answers and the questionnaire would not influence grades.

## 7. Results and Discussion

### 7.1 Overall Use of Strategies

Figure 2 (also see Table 2) shows the change in average points for all strategies before and after the ICP. In order to compare the overall use of the strategies, a paired t-test was conducted. The result was significant ( $t(17) = -1.95, p=0.68$ ) and indicates that more strategies were used after the ICP than before. It is clear from the results that the ICP had a positive effect on the participants' use of language learning strategies.

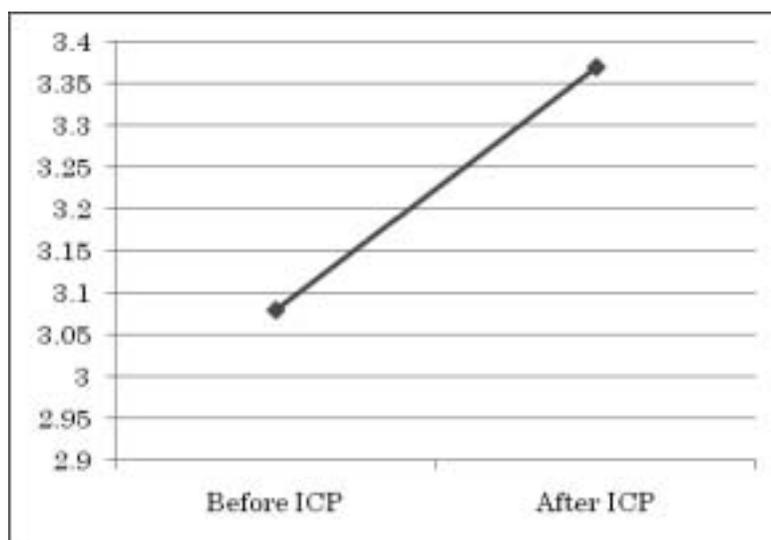


Figure 2. Change of Average Points for LLS before and after ICP

### 7.2 Each Group of Strategies

Table 2 and Figure 3 show the changes in average points for 6 types of strategies between the two time periods. Four out of 6 types of strategies showed significant differences between the two time periods: memory, cognitive, affective and social strategies. These 4 types of strategies were used more after the ICP than before it. The following sections will discuss each group of strategies.

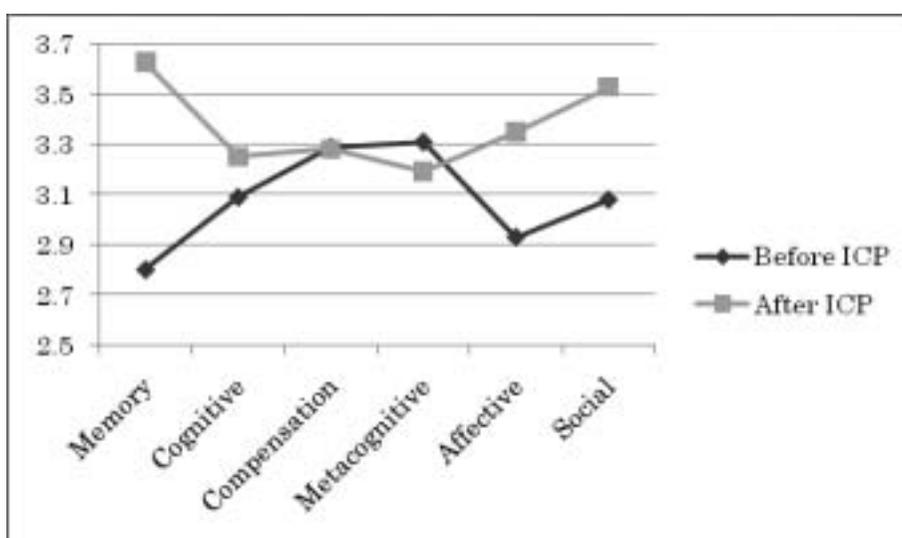


Figure 3. Change in Average Points for Strategy Types before and after ICP

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Results of t-tests for by Strategy Types

Type	Before ICP		After ICP			
Strategies	Average	SD	Average	SD	After- Before	t value
Memory	2.80	0.51	3.63	0.55	0.83**	- 4.51
Cognitive	3.09	0.54	3.25	0.56	0.16**	- 4.25
Compensation	3.29	0.60	3.28	0.60	- 0.01	0.09
Metacognitive	3.31	0.57	3.19	0.79	- 0.12	0.35
Affective	2.93	0.50	3.35	0.53	0.42**	- 2.59
Social	3.08	0.81	3.53	0.57	0.45*	- 1.78
Total	3.08	0.54	3.37	0.43	0.29 †	- 1.95

n=18

† < 0.1, \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01.

### 7.3.1 Memory Strategies

Memory strategies show the most significant differences before and after the ICP. In the ICP, the participants encountered thousands of new words and realized that a lack of vocabulary and expressions made it hard for them to communicate with native English speakers especially in situations where they lived with native English family members. This realization might have made the participants use more memory strategies and find those strategies to be more important than before the ICP.

### 7.2.2 Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies show significant differences before and after the ICP. These kinds of strategies seem most familiar for participants who have learned English in a classroom situation because cognitive strategies are mostly found in classroom tasks. The participants had English classes during the ICP, which were different from the English classes conducted in Japan. One of the major differences was that the classes in ICP were student-centered while the classes in Japan were mostly teacher-centered. The participants might have needed to adjust their learning styles to the student-centered classes, which might make the participants use some of the cognitive strategies they had not used previously in Japan.

### 7.3.3 Compensation Strategies

While compensation strategies do not show a significant difference before and after

the ICP, these kinds of strategies displayed a high average score even before the ICP. Most participants knew that they had some difficulties in English communication and had to formulate a strategy to resolve them. For example, they needed to use gestures or paraphrase when they could not say what they wanted to express. With the same high average score after the ICP, it is clear that the participants continued using the compensation strategies.

#### 7.3.4 Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies also did not show a significant difference before and after the ICP. As with compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies displayed a relatively high average points total even before the ICP. These kinds of strategy are essentially related to the mental and physical organization of the learning environment. The results indicate that the participants continued to feel it beneficial to monitor and plan their language learning before and after the ICP.

#### 7.3.5 Affective Strategies

Affective strategies show a significant difference before and after ICP participation. It is widely known that affective factors such as anxiety or nervousness are deeply related to language learning (cf. affective filter hypothesis by Krashen, 1985). It is assumed that the ICP gave the participants more confidence in their abilities to communicate with native English speakers. One of the reasons was because the native speakers involved in the ICP were accustomed to communicating with non-native speakers without giving them too much pressure to produce language. Once the participants were confident in their ability to communicate with native speakers in English, it must have been easier for them to control their anxiety or nervousness. In short, increased confidence provided the participants with opportunities to examine, and realize the importance of controlling, their anxiety or nervousness.

#### 7.3.6 Social Strategies

Social strategies show a significant difference before and after the ICP. As previously defined, social strategies are used in learning English through interacting with others. There is no doubt that the participants experienced various social situations where they needed to interact with others and which led them to use these types of strategies.

More importantly, the participants did not use social strategies often before the ICP. One reason for this was the dearth of opportunities to interact with native English speakers in English in a foreign language environment. However, in the ICP, they had to interact with native speakers without expecting any help from other Japanese participants because the ICP arranged there would be only one Japanese learner of English per host family. Through communicating with native English speakers by themselves, it can be said the participants were given opportunities to use social strategies and realize their importance.

### **8. Conclusions**

One interesting contribution of this study is the finding that even a study abroad program of just two weeks can produce significant changes in LLS. The participants used more language learning strategies after than before the ICP. The detailed analysis shows that 4 out of 6 types of language learning strategies were used more after the ICP than before it: memory, cognitive, affective and social strategies. The results also show that the other two types of strategies, compensation and metacognitive, were used widely both before and after the ICP. Therefore, it can be concluded that even a short study abroad program provides opportunities for Japanese learners of English to make use of language learning strategies.

The present study also has a number of limitations. One of them is that it employed quantitative measures of SILL that did not include any questionnaires investigating how the participants changed their use of SILL. Nor does this study include any follow-up sessions. The follow-up sessions can be done a couple months after coming back to Japan in order to ascertain whether the participants employed SILL temporarily or not. Finally, this study lacks a control group that had studied the target language in an at-home context.

There are some educational implications. The findings confirm the benefits of study abroad programs, even if as short as two weeks long, at the university level. From an educational point of view, it seems important to prepare language learners appropriately for the study abroad program. This preparation should include not only language knowledge but also language learning strategies. That is to say, the participants should be more aware of the need for language learning strategies beforehand. This may make the short study abroad program more fruitful for the participants.

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## Appendix

### Part A

1. I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.
2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.
3. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.
4. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.
5. I use rhymes to remember new English words.
6. I use flashcards to remember new English words.
7. I physically act out new English words.
8. I review English lessons often.
9. I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.

### Part B

10. I say or write new English words several times.
11. I try to talk like native English speakers.
12. I practice the sounds of English.
13. I use the English words I know in different ways.
14. I start conversations in English.
15. I watch English language TV shows or go to movies spoken in English.
16. I read for pleasure in English.
17. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.
18. I first skim an English passage (read it quickly) then go back and read carefully.
19. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.
20. I try to find patterns in English.
21. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.
22. I try not to translate word-for-word.
23. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.

Part C

24. To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.
25. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.
26. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.
27. I read English without looking up every new word.
28. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.
29. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.

Part D

30. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.
31. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.
32. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.
33. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.
34. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.
35. I look for people I can talk to in English.
36. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.
37. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.
38. I think about my progress in learning English.

Part E

39. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.
40. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.
41. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.
42. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.
43. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.
44. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.

Part F

45. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or to say it again.
46. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.
47. I practice English with other students.
48. I ask for help from English speakers.

49. I ask questions in English.

50. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.

## 短期海外研修は言語学習方略にどのような影響を及ぼすか —山形大学における異文化間コミュニケーション実習の事例—

森 田 光 宏

本研究の目的は、短期語学研修が学習者の言語学習方略をどのように変化させるのかを明らかにすることである。日本国内の多くの大学が短期海外研修を実施しているが、これらの研修が言語学習者にどのような影響を与えているのかに関する研究はそれほど多くはない。本研究では、山形大学人文学部において開講された異文化間コミュニケーション実習に参加した学習者が、オーストラリアのケアンズで2週間過ごす前と後で、どのように言語学習方略を変化させたのかを調査した。結果として、参加した学習者は、研修前よりも後の方がより多くの言語学習方略を使用していることが分かった。具体的には、記憶・認知・情意・社会の4つの言語学習方略が研修前より、研修後により多く使われた。研修前後で変化の見られなかった補償とメタ認知の2つの学習方略に関しては、研修前から多く用いられていることも分かった。これらの結果から、2週間という短い期間の海外研修であっても、日本人英語学習者による言語学習方略の使用を推進することが分かった。