The influence of social skills on getting social support for adolescents during study abroad:
A case study of Japanese short-term exchange students

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Abstract

This study investigates how short-term international students get social support and achieve cross-cultural adjustment during study abroad using interviews based on a recall method. The participants of the study are 8 Japanese students who studied in the U.S for about 6 months to one year. They were asked about their study abroad experiences in relation to their cross-cultural adaptation and about their social support networks. Two findings were obtained. First, the participants of the study could be roughly divided into two groups. The 6 students of the first group (enjoyment group) enjoyed their study abroad, which implies they achieved cross-cultural adjustment, while the other 2 students of the second group (non-enjoyment group) did not enjoy it. Second, the enjoyment group were able to obtain more social support than the non-enjoyment group. It is inferred from the study that the following 3 things are useful in obtaining social support: to acquire social skills, to put the skills into practice and not to give up too quickly. Thus, the results of the study imply that both a larger repertoire of social skills and more motivation to use them would be advantageous in achieving the cross-cultural adjustment of short-term international students through gaining social support.

KEY WORDS : social skills, social support, Japanese short-term exchange students

I. Introduction

When thinking about improving the quality of students' study abroad experience, a critical question that arises is how international students can achieve cross-cultural adjustment. As Ward and Kennedy (1996) proposed, there are two categories of adjustment. One of them is psychological adjustment which refers to feelings of satisfaction and well-being, and the other is socio-cultural adjustment which refers to the ability to negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture. According to a study on Japanese students carried out in the U.S. by Yashima and Tanaka (2001), the use

of social skills allowed students to build highly satisfactory human relationships and promoted cross-cultural adjustment. Tanaka (1994) defines social skills as behaviors that are necessary to create, maintain and develop human relationships. Some studies have indicated that social support enhances cross-cultural adjustment of sojourners (see, for example, Tanaka, Takai, Kohyama and Fujihara, 1994). Social support refers to both tangible and intangible support provided by people. A well-known definition of social support is that of Cobb, who defines it as "information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations (Cobb, 1976, p.300)". It is inferred from these previous studies that a series of social skills, social network, social support and cross-cultural adjustment exists (see Figure 1): those who are good at networking with people can obtain both tangible and intangible support which links to cross-cultural adjustment. However, this assumption of the existence of this series is based on the results of a questionnaire and has not been confirmed with any type of case study.

Figure 1. The relationship among social skills, social network, social support and cross-cultural adjustment
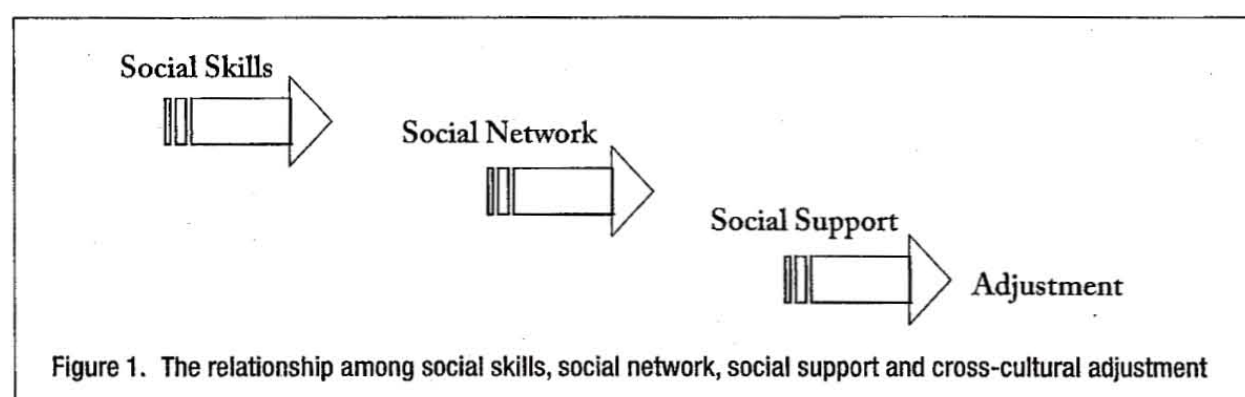
Previous studies have also failed to provide us with concrete answers to questions such as what kind of social skills does a real individual person use to create his/her human network? How does social support promote cross-cultural adjustment? and if one is not able to obtain support, how does it affect and/or hinder cross-cultural adjustment?

The aim of this study is to explore the proposed series using a case study methodology. First, international students were asked about the type and amount of social support they received. They were then asked about the type of network from which they obtained social support and how they went about networking – what strategies they used to network and obtain social support, and whether or not they

used any social skills. Lastly, they were asked about their overall sense of satisfaction regarding their study abroad experience in order to investigate their comprehensive cross-cultural adjustment and to discover how it links to social skills. In other words, the research question of the study was to look at individual cases in order to describe how students obtained social support, how the support is linked to social skills, and to confirm the existence of the series indicated in earlier studies.

Japanese short-term exchange students were selected as participants for the study. The participants used the short-term exchange programs of their universities which allowed them to study abroad for less than a year as special auditors based on inter-university agreements. One of the reasons for the selection of the participants was the ever-increasing need for educators to understand factors affecting cross-cultural adjustment due to the recent increases in number of short-term exchange students in Japan. Another reason was that short-term exchange students seem to run a high risk of having less time to network with people around them; because they stay for less than one year, they do not have sufficient time to network well after spending much of their time getting used to their new environment (Takahama and Tanaka, 2007). If it is established that cross-cultural adjustment is promoted by effective acquisition of social support in spite of the short duration of their study abroad, educators of international students will be able to provide ways to facilitate this because it is an adjustment strategy. At the moment, although most Japanese universities hold foreign language learning sessions prior to study abroad, they are still trying to develop a better way to help their students' adjustment during their study abroad: that is, cross-cultural adjustment depends mostly on the international student's own efforts and the challenges they face. In this sense, this study intends to develop a new way to help the cross-cultural adjustment of international students.

II. Method

1. Participants

The participants of the study were eight Japanese students who studied in the U.S. for about six months to one year as shown in Table 1. Six of them were female and the other two were male students. They were all in their early twenties. Except for one graduate student, the other seven students were undergraduate students.

Table1. Demographic traits and backgrounds of the participants : sex, age, previous experiences of staying and/or studying abroad, residence and U.S. university

Name	Sex	Age	Previous experiences of staying and/or studying abroad	Residence	U.S. university*
S1	F	22	1 month in the U.S. and 1 month in Canada	dormitory	A
S2	F	20	6 years in the U.S.	homestay	B
S3	F	20	5 years in the U.S.	dormitory	C
S4	F	22	Childhood in Malaysia and from elementary to high school in China	homestay (3 months) and dormitory	B
S5	F	20	From elementary to high school in the U.S.	dormitory	D
S6	M	23	(No experience)	dormitory	C
S7	F	21	(No experience)	dormitory	A
S8	M	24	(No experience)	dormitory	A

* S1, S7 and S8 studied at the same university (A). S2 and S4 studied at the same university (B). S3 and S6 studied at the same university (C).

2. Procedure

All of the participants volunteered to participate in the study. The aim and the methods of the study were explained to them prior to it. They were also assured of the protection of their privacy and their consent was gained for publication of the results of the study. Non-structured interviews of about one-hour in length were conducted in Japan within ten months of the student's return to Japan from the U.S. The interviews were conducted by the second author of the study. The interviews were carried out using a conversational style. Because the second author had also experienced study abroad in the U.S. herself, it seemed useful to use a conversational style in order to elicit conversation from the participants. The interviews were recorded and transcripts were made with the participants' consent. The participants were asked about their study abroad experiences in relation to their cross-cultural adaptation and about their social support networks. In order to explore the influence of social skills, careful attention was paid to how participants used their social skills

to obtain social support from their networks. Upon analysis, participants were categorized based on the similarities and differences of their statements.

III. Results and Discussion

In the following quotations from the interviews, the participants are indicated from S1 to S8. All of the interviews were conducted in Japanese. In this paper, their statements have been translated into English by the authors. Supplementary explanations are given in parentheses by the authors and important parts of the statements are underlined. To protect their privacy, parts of the statements have been changed or omitted. If their stories on a single topic become too long, part of the stories were abbreviated and are shown as "(omission)." As a rule, their conversational way of speech is quoted as it was, but some parts such as interjections that seemed to have less relation to the topic of speech were omitted.

The following characteristics emerged from the participants' statements. First, the participants of the study could be roughly divided into two groups as shown in Table 2. The six students of the first group (enjoyment group) enjoyed their study abroad, which implies their achievement of cross-cultural adjustment, while the other two students of the second group (non-enjoyment group) did not enjoy it.

Table 2. Enjoyment group and non-enjoyment group

Enjoyment group	S1, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8
Non-enjoyment group	S2, S3

When the participants were asked "if you were to summarize your study abroad experience in one sentence, what would it be?" In order to know their overall impression of their study abroad, the answers of the two groups contrasted a great deal. First, S4, S6 and S7 in the enjoyment group summarized their study abroad positively using words such as "enjoy" and "liked it very much."

< S4, S6, S7> About their overall comments on study abroad
S4 "For me, my one-year study abroad is a very precious experience. So I even thought I didn't want to return to Japan. I liked it very much."

S6 "Although I also experienced difficulties, <u>I enjoyed my study abroad very much</u> and it was really a good experience."

S7 "I'd love to study abroad again. At first, it was hard, but I did enjoy it."

In contrast, S2 and S3 who belong to the non-enjoyment group did not say that they enjoyed their study abroad. They summarized their study abroad negatively using words such as "hard."

<S2, S3> About their overall comments on study abroad

S2 "<u>I summarize my study abroad as a hard experience.</u>"

S3 "Well, <u>I could hardly find what I could enjoy during my study abroad.</u> (When asked whether she would like to study abroad again,) No, no thank you. It's impossible."

Second, the enjoyment group enjoyed more social networks and social support than the non-enjoyment group. The enjoyment group says that they actively asked for help and that they actually obtained support from people around them. For example, S1 and S5 asked their friends and university staff to help with their study and English checking. In order to get English support, S1 approached a student who worked part-time at the university and university tutors by herself and finally she got the necessary support from them.

<S1 ① > About English support

"<u>I asked the university staff 'Excuse me, could you check my English?' Also, because there was an office that provides international students with English help, I visited there.</u>"

Moreover, when she needed to complete a very difficult task in one of her classes, S1 herself made an effort to obtain maximum support despite her being aware that her social networks were not adequate enough.

<S1 ② >About support on a task to do interviews in one of her classes

"I had less friends, you know. So, I was at a loss what to do. <u>So, first of all, I asked my</u> <u>roommate for help.</u> In the fall semester, I had one more roommate. So, <u>I asked my</u> <u>three roommates to join my interview. Also, I interviewed my friends whom I met</u> <u>through the sports activities.</u>"

S5 of the enjoyment group also obtained English support from various friends when she was in need. She not only questioned to her friends when she was with them, but also got advice by explaining that she could not write in English very well although she wished to do so.

\<S5\> About English support
"<u>I often questioned my friends when I needed English help.</u> There was one Japanese student who graduated from an international school in Japan. (omission) He/she was good at English. <u>I asked him/her to help me.</u> There was also a friend of mine one of whose parents was American. <u>I asked him/her to help me as well.</u> Additionally, I asked my classmates who were friendly to me."

Support resources are not limited only to friends. S7 and S8 who belong to the enjoyment group asked their professors to give them advice as well. First, when S7 had trouble understanding the lecture in English, she approached the professor and got the support she wanted.

\<S7\> About English support when she was not used to English lectures
"I couldn't speak out in class at all. I didn't understand what was said in class. When I couldn't read what was written on the blackboard, I asked my classmates to show me their notes, but I still couldn't understand it. So, <u>I asked my professor for help</u> <u>because he/she helps me.</u> I got accustomed to English lectures by the end of the first quarter, so I felt better then."
"<u>As long as I asked for help myself, everybody helped me.</u>"
"When I was totally at a loss, <u>I visited my professor and said that I didn't understand</u> <u>the class.</u> Then, the professor was kind enough to teach me every week or twice in a week for about one to two hours in his/her office. He/she was the first professor that

I met, but he/she was really nice to me."

S8 also got some help from his professor. He said that he could solve the problems by himself during his study abroad, and basically he was trying to deal with troubles by himself. When he could not solve the problems, however, he asked for help. Regarding his classes, he asked his professors to help him.

<S8> About support on classes
"I don't think that I needed support from people around me. But, if there was a part that I didn't understand in class, for example, I visited the professor's office to ask. I said to the professor that I had come from Japan as an international student and that I had problems with understanding English lectures. I also asked the professor to teach me again."

Although the students of both groups used their social skills when they were in trouble, the students of the enjoyment group made better use of their skills than those of the non-enjoyment group. That is, students in the enjoyment group continued to rely on their social skills even if their first attempts were unsuccessful. Using their skills, they tried again and again to obtain social support from a variety of support resources. S1 said that she was confronted with difficulties at first, but she could increase her support through trying hard to obtain it. She knew that her English is not very good, but she actively tried to talk to people around her very often because she thought that it would be better to talk to get help than to do nothing.

<S1>About her mindset during study abroad to obtain social support
"I thought it would be better to talk with people around me to ask for help than to do nothing. If I did so, I might be able to do something. (omission) I even talked to strangers on campus. I also talked to professors by myself."

Among the enjoyment group, S1, S5, S7 and S8 made efforts to explore their support resources by themselves. The rest of the group, S4 and S6, said that "I

am grateful for the people I met during my study abroad (S4)" "The people I met during my study abroad were wonderful (S6)" and they appreciate the network they established and the support from the network.

The non-enjoyment group of students, on the other hand, quickly gave up if their first attempts at gaining social support to meet their needs were unsuccessful. The networks of the two students, S2 and S3, who belong to the non-enjoyment group, were not highly-developed. Neither did they get much support. It was by chance that they both have more than five years of staying abroad experiences which is longer than the other students (see Table 1). It is inferred that their English was good enough as S2 herself said "It's not hard to speak English." Although they were rich in experiences staying abroad and had a high English competency, S2 said "I didn't have friends to go out together with on weekends."

<S2①> About whether she could make friends in the U.S. or not
"Because I didn't make an effort to make friends in the U.S., it was more difficult for me to make friends than I expected. (omission) I didn't have friends to go out together with on weekends."

S2 did not let people around her know that she was in trouble while studying abroad. Also, she felt that she was not understood by them though she tried to let them know that she was in trouble.

<S2②> About whether she had someone to talk to in the U.S. when she was in need
"I had to study much more in the U.S. than in Japan. That was too much for me. (omission) I was driven into a corner mentally. But except for my parents, I didn't talk about it to people around me."
"I said to the exchange program coordinator that it was too hard for me to catch up with the classes. But he/she only said 'don't worry' and didn't understand me. It was so hard for me."

Furthermore, S2 had difficulties communicating with her host family. This is because she was "too scared to talk" with the family.

<S2 ③ >About communication with her host family

"Usually, we communicate face to face. But the host family emailed me to communicate with me. Their room is just in front of mine. (omission) If I didn't say hello, they didn't say hello to me as well. (omission) They put a note on a fridge door saying 'you can eat only bread and milk.' (omission) When they had something they needed to talk to me about, they wrote me a letter and slide it under the bottom of my room door. (omission) I felt very bad about this. (omission) They didn't buy me toilet tissue, (omission) so I was worried about what to do."

"The host family easily lost their temper, so I was too scared to talk with them."

In this way, S2 completed her study abroad without networking well enough to find those who could understand her.

<S2 ④ > About relationships with people around her

"Perhaps I needed people who understood me. I wished someone had said to me 'I understand you.' (omission) I didn't have such people around me while studying abroad. If I had had them around me then, it might have felt less hard than it did."

The other member of the non-enjoyment group, S3, regarded her study abroad experience as "totally support-less." Thus, she could learn to "persevere" and she spent most of the time "doing nothing alone." She thinks that she learned from her study abroad, but that the feeling of isolation was very "hard" for her.

<S3 ① > About support provided by the university

"Because the university was totally support-less, it was very hard for me. (omission) I emailed them to ask questions, but there was no reply at all. (omission) Problems occurred frequently, but thanks to that, I learned to persevere and to do it by myself."

<S3 ② >About what was learned through study abroad

"I don't regret my study abroad. I could obtain what I couldn't buy with money. (omission) I learned to persevere and to do everything by myself. (omission) I spent enough time doing nothing alone."

Compared to the enjoyment group, the non-enjoyment group obtained less social

support. However, it is supposed that both groups of students could not obtain social support by simply waiting or by chance. Because the enjoyment group actively used their social skills as S1 did, they could gain social support from their support resources. On the other hand, the non-enjoyment group didn't seem to try very hard. For instance, the member of the non-enjoyment group, S2, recognized that she could not obtain support without taking action by herself, but she did not do so. She chose to be alone and/or to be supported by her family in Japan rather than to network with the people around her.

<S2> About ways and mindsets to make friends
"In the U.S., we can't make friends if we don't take action to do so."
"I thought I would stay only one year in the U.S. and this somewhat affected my study abroad. So, I didn't try to find and join activities such as clubs. (omission)"
"(When asked who was the best supporter during her study abroad) The best supporter of my study abroad was my family. They came to the U.S. to see me and they listened to me as well. When my family left the U.S., I thought I would like to return to Japan with them."

IV. Comprehensive Discussion

In order to obtain support, first of all, it is necessary to obtain support resources. The participants made use of not only organizational resources such as the international student office and occupational resources such as a professor, but also personal resources such as classmates and roommates to a great deal. Support cannot be obtained simply by waiting passively. The members of existing social networks such as a family may approach the participants and/or ask them how they are doing even though the participant is waiting passively, since such existing network members consider the feelings of the other members. When starting a new network, however, action to obtain social support is indispensable. Moreover, additional action to convey what kind of support one needs and to negotiate until he/she obtains the appropriate support they want is also required. It seems to take a long time for international students to create their own networks of people who will consider their feelings as their families and old friends in Japan do. Additionally, it is difficult

for them to build such a network immediately, which would be desirable due to the short duration of their stay.

For example, S1 was nervous because of her language handicap, but because she continued to make an effort, she could finally extend her network and support. Mutual communication between her network members and herself was established, and support resources were made available. The relationship between network members and herself became deeper and she got so far as to be asked questions during classes. The series of support increase is found in this process; she decided to ask for help, took actions to ask, continued to take actions and finally her support increased.

Among the social skills used by the participants of the study, the skills of approaching and contacting were used first of all: approaching by talking actively to people around them and contacting people and organizations which could be a support resource. Next, the skills of explaining to others that they were in trouble or in need were used. Additionally, the skills of asking for help and asking questions were also used: they let others know that they were in need of support and learned from them with enthusiasm. Patience to continue negotiation and to ask repeatedly seems to be a kind of repetitive social skill. Besides such behavior, it would be reasonable to include cognitive skills as a way of thinking. For instance, being active and motivated are cognitive skills that lead to networking with people. Asking about what one does not understand is also a cognitive skill to positively consider one's needs of support. Being tolerant of one's language handicap and not being too nervous is another cognitive skill.

The enjoyment group made full use of these skills and therefore could create a support network around them. They were successful in completing academic tasks, solving problems and overcoming unfamiliar accidents. Then they came to be satisfied with, to be grateful to and to have positive feelings for the host country's people, saying that they enjoyed their study abroad. Their support network contributed to both the prevention and solution of problems, and the creation of added value to their study abroad. Although they had some difficulties at first, they appreciated their study abroad in the end. It would be reasonable to conclude that the use of social skills fostered cross-cultural adjustment of the international

students of the study by obtaining social support.

Some students of the study were not necessarily willing to network with people around them, but that was not because of their lack of language competency and experiences in foreign countries. S2 and S3, who did not develop their human relationships either qualitatively nor quantitatively, have a high level of language competency among the participants of the study. They said that they were passive because they found it troublesome to make friends and because they could stay only for one year. They chose not to approach people in their host country although they knew that it is important for them to make approaches themselves in order to make friends. In other words, they did not rely on the people of the host country. This might be because they did not think highly of networking and because they did not long for human relationships. It might also be because of differences in environments such as where they studied and what classes they took. If the social network of the international students was not developed enough and thus they had less support, it tended to be difficult for them to solve problems that occurred to them during their study abroad.

It is appropriate to conclude that networking will help international students to solve problems and to make their study abroad enjoyable. However, networking is not required unconditionally as a means to appreciating the meaning of studying abroad. Whether networking works well or not depends on an individual's preferences in what they expect from his/her study abroad. Nevertheless, if short-term exchange students wish to make their study abroad "enjoyable" and if they wish to prevent and/or solve "problems" and if they wish to "network" well during their study abroad, the series of forming a support network will be a key for them.

It is inferred from the study that the following three things are useful to obtain social support: to acquire social skills, to put the skills into practice and not to give up quickly (Figure2). For instance, when S7 needed English support, she actively used the skills of approaching and explaining her situation to people around her to obtain the support. Although she could not get the support she wanted from her classmates at first, she continued to use the skill with her professor. Finally, she was able to get support from the professor because she did not give up quickly. Thus, it is implied that both more repertoires of social skills and more motivation to use them would

be advantageous to achieve the cross-cultural adjustment of short-term international students through gaining social support.
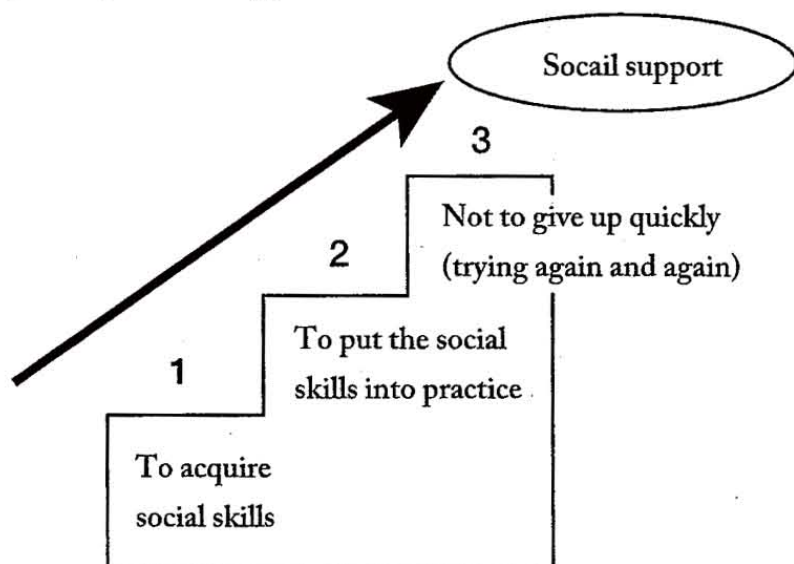

Figure 2. The three things which are useful to obtain social support

A limit of this study is that it is necessary to investigate more deeply whether the categorization and characteristics of the two groups is stable or not, since this case study was based on only eight students. Furthermore, it is also important to accumulate the number of cases so as to investigate the participant's affiliation, demographic factors and geographical environments.

Our next attempts will be to develop an educational program for those who wish to study abroad in the future; a program that is useful to foster social skills prior to studying abroad for those who are willing to create good circulation of the series shown in Figure 2. Improvement of such a program in Japanese universities as an educational option for study abroad is needed.

Notes

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