

The Use of Social Skills by Japanese Students While Studying in the United States

米国留学中の日本人留学生によるソーシャルスキル使用

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Abstract

The authors of the paper have been providing Japanese university students who are planning to study in the U.S. with an American social skills learning session before their study in order to promote their intercultural adaptation. The purpose of the study is to investigate the use of social skills and social support networks by Japanese students during their study in the U.S. in order to analyze the influence of the pre-departure session. To achieve this goal, the authors compared questionnaire and interview responses of two groups of students after their study abroad: those who had joined the pre-departure session and those who had not.

The results show that both groups actively used their social skills in the last stage of their study in the U.S. No clear difference between the two groups was found regarding the use of social skills at that stage. The students who had participated in the pre-departure session, however, were more people-oriented than those who had not. In other words, those who had joined the session tended to attach greater importance on making friends during their study abroad. The reasons for this are discussed.

[Key Words : Japanese students, social skills, American social-skills learning session, social support, social-support network]

要 旨

我々は異文化適応の促進を目的として、米国留学前の日本人学生にアメリカン・ソーシャルスキル学習セッションを提供してきた。本研究の目的は、日本人学生の米国留学中のソーシャルスキル使用およびソーシャルネットワークの形成を調べ、渡航前ソーシャルスキル学習セッションの影響を探ることである。そこでセッション参加者と不参加者の2つの留学生グループに対して、帰国後に留学中を振り返る質問紙調査と面接調査を行った。

2群の語りと反応を比較しながら検討したところ、全てのグループの学生たちが留学の最終段階においては、ソーシャルスキルをさかんに用いていたことが明らかになった。この点では、参加者と不参加者との間に明確な差異は見られなかった。しかし、参加者の学生たちは、不参加者と比べてより対人関係形成への志向性が高いという示唆が得られた。彼らは留学中に友人を作ることをより重要視していた。

[キーワード: 日本人学生、ソーシャルスキル、アメリカン・ソーシャルスキル学習セッション、ソーシャルサポート、ソーシャルサポートネットワーク]

1. Introduction

Although the U.S. has been the most popular country for Japanese people to study, the number of Japanese people who study in the U.S. is declining these days (Sasada, 2009). As studying abroad is an opportunity for mental growth, it is necessary for the institutions concerned to take measures

to deal with the situation by finding the economic, language, and psychological factors that prevent Japanese students from studying in the U.S. Japanese universities, which provide students with various study abroad programs such as exchange programs and short-term language learning programs, also needed to support students to participate and succeed in studying abroad.

From this perspective, the authors of this paper have been providing Japanese university students planning to study in the United States with an educational session in order to promote their intercultural adaptation. A previous study conducted by the authors (Takahama, Nishimura, & Tanaka, 2009) indicates that the use of social skills based on the sociocultural context of where Japanese students study contributes to create a social support network. "Social support network" is a general psychological term that indicates personal relationships that can be expected to provide both tangible and intangible support and to promote cross-cultural adaptation (Tanaka, 2000). Thus, the session aims to assist students in learning American social skills before their departure to the U.S. In the summer of 2007, seven Japanese students joined an American social-skills learning session before their study in the U.S. (Tanaka & Takahama, 2008; Takahama & Tanaka, 2009a, 2009b). In the session, the students used role-plays to practice ways of dealing with such situations as introducing oneself, asking a professor for help, and asking for a replacement for a broken pen. These role-plays aimed to foster the students' understanding of such cultural values as the importance of assertiveness and verbal expressions, and of the behaviors corresponding to these values. Based on the analysis of the students' perception, it was noted that the students' confidence and skills improved during the session (Takahama & Tanaka, 2009b).

In the follow-up survey conducted after the session, the students were interviewed in the U.S. about their life when studying abroad with regard to whether or not they were actually using the learned skills, and with regard to their human network (Takahama & Tanaka, 2009c). It was found that, at the beginning of their study in the U.S., the students were actually using some of the beginner and intermediate skills learned in the session. Further, it was found that they were coping with the difficulties encountered during the study abroad period using the skills learned.

The previous researches focusing on the period before and in the beginning of the study abroad period show that the students learned behavioral repertoire in the session, and that they actually used the learned skills in the beginning of the study abroad period. These results, however, do not say anything about the students' state in the last stage of the study abroad period.

As such, we conducted another follow-up study in Japan after the students returned from the U.S. to ask them for their reflections on the last stage of the study abroad period. This seems indispensable to clarify the students' use of the

skills learned in order to understand their achievements with regard to learning and the effect of these skills during the short study abroad period. This study reports on the last part of a longitudinal case study of Japanese students who learned American social skills before they studied in the U.S. The following research questions are addressed: As a whole, how did the students use their American social skills throughout their study abroad? Did they obtain social support by making use of those social skills? In order to analyze these questions, the authors employed contrast groups composed of students who had not joined the pre-departure study session before their study in the U.S. This paper reports the results of their post-study-abroad interviews and questionnaires in order to reflect on their study-abroad experiences as a whole.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Seven Japanese university students participated in our research (Table 1). All of them were short-term exchange students who had obtained the English test scores required by the American universities. The students were classified into three groups:

1. Group S: Originally, seven students (S1 to S7) studied social skills in the session for about 12 hours before their study in the U.S. Three of the seven students (S2, S3, and S6) who could participate in both the follow-up field survey in the U.S. and another upon returning to Japan are selected as the participants of the study. They learned eight social skills in the session: (1) self-introduction and listening skills, (2) greeting a person (a roommate) for the first time, (3) making friends, (4) asking a professor's advice, (5) giving one's opinion in class, (6) telling a professor one's needs, (7) negotiation, and (8) refusing to accept a favor. The skills with higher numbers are more advanced. The students studied in the U.S. for about nine months.
2. Group N: Originally, four students (N1 to N4) participated in the study. They belonged to the same Japanese university as those in Group S, did not learn social skills in the session. They acquired social skills naturally, by themselves. Two of the four students (N2 and N3) who could participate in both the follow-up field survey in the U.S. and another upon returning to Japan are selected as the participants of the study.
3. Group U: Originally, seven students (U1 to U7) participated in the study. They belonged to a different university, did

Table 1. Breakdowns of participants by sex, grade, and American university where they plan to study.

Group	S			N		U	
	S2	S3	S6	N2	N3	U1	U2
Sex	F	F	F	F	M	M	F
Grade	3	3	4	3	4	3	4
University	A	A	B	C	C	A	A

not learn social skills in the session. Like Group N, they obtained social skills naturally, by themselves. They studied at the same American university as S2 and S3 and stayed there for about one year. Two of the seven students (U1 and U2) who could participate in both the follow-up field survey in the U.S. and another upon returning to Japan are selected as the participants of the study.

During the students’ study abroad, only one student (S6) lived off-campus. The others lived in a dormitory on campus. None of the students had stayed overseas for more than one month before their study abroad. At the time of the research (from September to October 2008), about two to three months had passed since Groups S and U returned to Japan and about eight months had passed since Group N returned.

A few students who did not participate in the interview but did participate in the questionnaire were not included as participants in the study.

2.2 Procedure

All of the students participated in both the interview and the questionnaire survey conducted in Japan in 2008 after their return from the U.S. Both of these were conducted in Japanese. Table 2 provides an outline of the questionnaire. The interview questions address their use of social skills and social networks (e.g., the social support they received from five important people in their social-support network), as well as their study-abroad experiences as a whole. They were also asked to complete the following two sentences: “Study abroad is...” and “What I have obtained from study abroad is/are....” It took approximately one hour for each of them to complete the interview and questionnaire. We tape-recorded and transcribed the interviews with their consent.

Because the number of study participants is limited, the study does not aim to generalize the results. Instead, it aims to focus on the details of each case.

3. Results

3.1 Social skills

Table 3 shows whether the students used the social

skills. We must note a few inconsistencies. First, on the questionnaire, S3 answered that she did not use Skill 1, but because we discovered from her interview that she did, we decided that she used it for the purposes of the results. Second, Group N might not have understood the meaning of the question because they left the questionnaire blank. We therefore determined whether they used the skills from their interview responses.

One student from Group S said she did not use Skill 4, and two students from the same group said they did not use Skill 8. Two of them did not do so because they did not have an opportunity to use the skill, while the other student forgot the skill.

Based on their responses, we inferred that all of the groups actively used both easy and advanced social skills in the last stage of their study abroad. Regarding the use of social skills, we found no remarkable difference between the three groups.

3.2 Tips to enjoy study abroad

The outline of the results from the questionnaire is summarized below. When asked about how to get things done well while studying abroad, the members of Group S answered that they believed people around them (i.e., their social-support network) helped them. On the other hand, only N2 and U1 answered that it is important to listen to others.

With respect to the social-support network, Groups N and U regarded it as important to make individual endeavors while studying abroad. On the other hand, Group S tended to regard it as more important to acquire social support from their social-support network; this was because Group S believed that people around them would offer them help.

< Group S >

- When you are depressed, do not continue to be depressed for a long time. Of course, people around us will help us, but our mental strength is also very important in helping us recover from our shock. (S2)
- I made efforts every day to learn from others by meeting

Table 2. Sample questions from the study questionnaire.

<Group S> Questions about using skills learned at the session

You have learned some or all of the eight social skills listed below in the session prior to your study abroad. Did you use these skills during your study abroad? Circle “learned” if you were part of the session or “did not learn” if you did not participate in the session, and then answer the following questions.

(1) Self-introduction and listening skills → learned, did not learn(i.e., I was absent from the session when the skill were taught)

① I have used the skills → when/to whom/where/which part of the skills/results and effects/how did you feel?

② I have not used the skills → why?

(Questions about Skills 2-8 follow the same format.)

<Groups N and U> Questions about how to associate with people in the U.S.

During your study in the U.S., how did you deal with the following situations? Tell us about your way of thinking, judgment, and behavior. If you have not dealt with a certain situation yet, circle “I have not dealt with” and explain the reasons why, if any.

(1) Self-introduction and listening skills

① I have used the skills → when/to whom/where/which part of the skills/results and effects/how did you feel?

② I have not dealt with → (why?: _____)

(Questions about Skills 2-8 follow the same format.)

<All groups> (Essay questions)

Write a message for those who plan to study abroad about how to get things done well while studying abroad.

Table 3. Numbers of students in each group who used or did not use the eight social skills taught at the session during their study in the U.S.

Group	S (N = 3)			N (N = 2)			U (N = 2)		
	Used	Did not use	No answer	Used	Did not use	No answer	Used	Did not use	No answer
Skill 1	3	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0
Skill 2	3	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0
Skill 3	3	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0
Skill 4	2	1	0	2	0	0	2	0	0
Skill 5	2	0	1	2	0	0	2	0	0
Skill 6	3	0	0	2	0	0	1	1	0
Skill 7	3	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0
Skill 8	1	2	0	0	0	2	2	0	0

with a lot of people and to be more active. You might have difficulty during your study abroad, but it is important to ask people for help and to try to start from what you can do. (S3)

It is not good to always be with Japanese students, but they might introduce their American friends to you. (S6)

- It is important not to easily give up to express one’s opinions. (S6)
- It is important to understand and accept people. (S6)
- I recommend that you not only study at your desk, but also play during your study abroad. Although we are busy because professors assign a lot of homework at an

American university, I recommend you increase your number of friends by going to a bar and joining a party. (S6)

- Be positive when you feel depressed because we can learn from our depression/failure. (S6)
- Be active and speak out in class. It is good to visit your professor so that he/she remembers you. If you do so, he/she will help you. Also, remember that your classmates are interested in you and in Japan. (S6)

< Group N >

- In order to enjoy study abroad, you need to not only assert yourself but also to listen to other people's opinions. My nine months of study abroad passed in an instant, so it is important to cherish each day of your study abroad. (N2)
- When you feel frustrated because you have difficulty speaking and listening to English, make use of the frustration and strive to overcome the difficulty. Because we are the same human beings, we can communicate with each other in many ways. (N3)

< Group U >

- If you are flexible enough to listen to other people's opinions while having your own opinions, you will not have trouble making friends and enlightening yourself. (U1)

- Do not worry about trifle things too much. Be natural when you do not understand. Try to see things around you because you can learn a lot from them. (U2)

3.3 Social-support network

Table 4 shows the five most important people during the students' study abroad. Based on previous research done by Takahama, Nishimura and Tanaka (2009), we classified the people first by the location where the network exists and then by the following four categories: people of the host country (American people), Japanese people, people from other foreign countries, and university professors and staff. With respect to the nationalities of the members of the social-support networks, Group S's network had the highest number of Americans (eight out of 15 members, 53%), compared with Groups N (four out of 10, 40%) and U (three out of 10, 30%). Group U did not list any Japanese people in the U.S., and other foreign people comprised the largest category in their network (seven out of 10, 70%). None of the groups listed any Japanese people in their networks.

3.4 Meaning of study abroad

The 35 responses each for the completion of the sentences "studying abroad is..." and "I achieved the following from

Table 4. Classification of the participants' social-support networks.

Location where the network exists		I. Local (U.S.)				II. Japan
		(1) people of the host country (American people)	(2) Japanese people	(3) people from other foreign countries	(4) university professors and staff	
Informant	S2	(1) friend in the dorm	(2) friend (3) friend in the dorm	(4) friend (5) friend		
	S3	(1) classmate (2) friend in the dorm (3) friend in the dorm	(4) friend	(5) friend in the dorm		
	S6	(1) host mother (2) conversation partner (3) host father (4) friend	(5) friend			
	N2	(1) friend	(2) classmate (3) friend in the dorm	(4) classmate (5) classmate		
	N3	(1) classmate (2) friend (3) friend	(4) friend in the dorm (5) friend			
	U1	(1) roommate (2) classmate		(3) roommate (4) classmate (5) classmate		
	U2	(1) friend		(2) classmate (3) friend (4) friend (5) roommate		

studying abroad: ...” were classified based on the KJ method as in Takahama & Tanaka (2011). Figure 1 and 2 show the results of the sentence-completion questions. As Figure 1 shows, two out of three students in Group S and two out of

four students in Groups N and U answered that study abroad is meeting with people. This was the most common answer.

Additionally, as shown in Figure 2, all of the students in Groups S and N, and one out of two students in Group U,

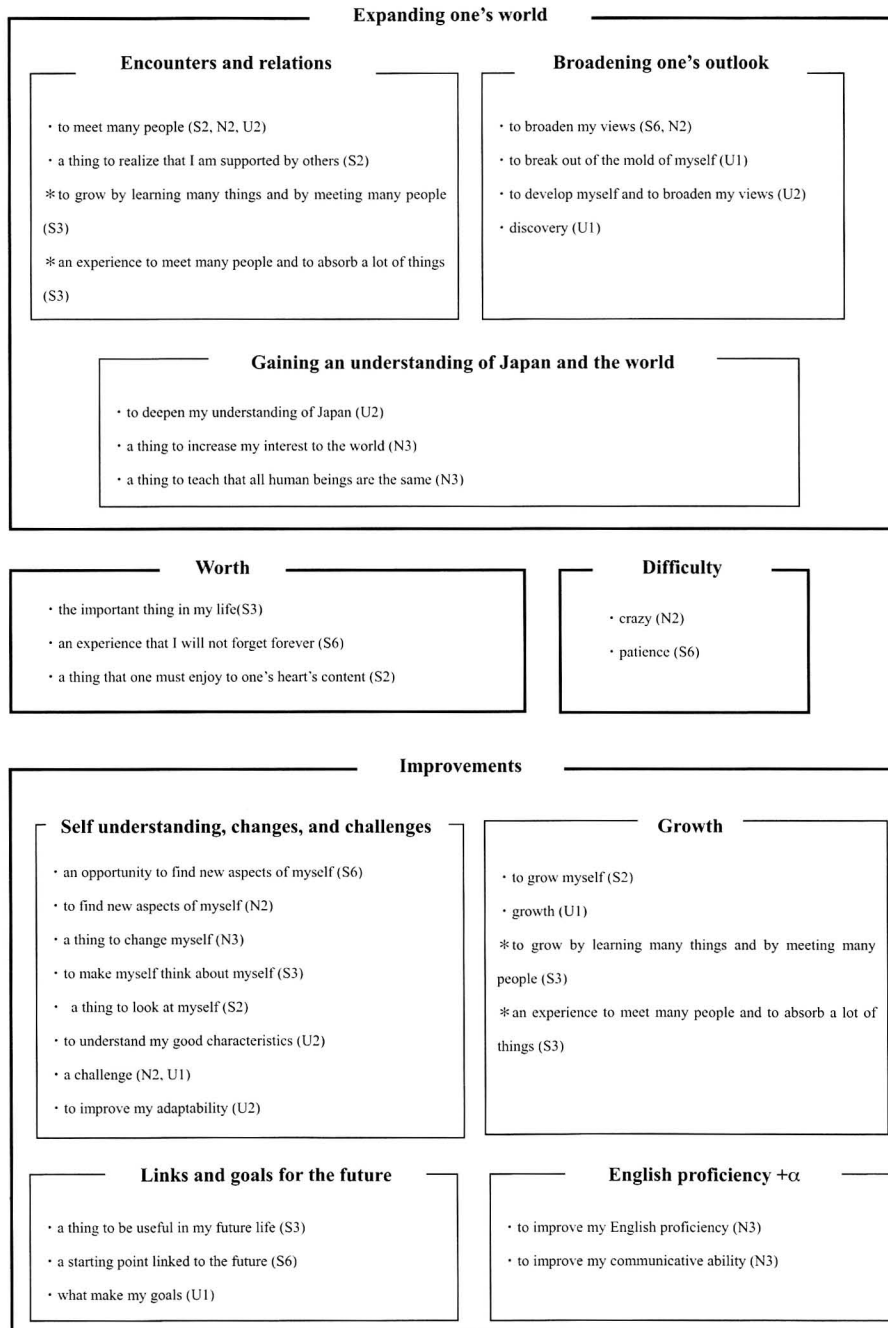


Figure 1. Sentence completion: “Studying abroad is....”

*The answers were translated into English by us.

** Items indicated with * belong to at least two categories.

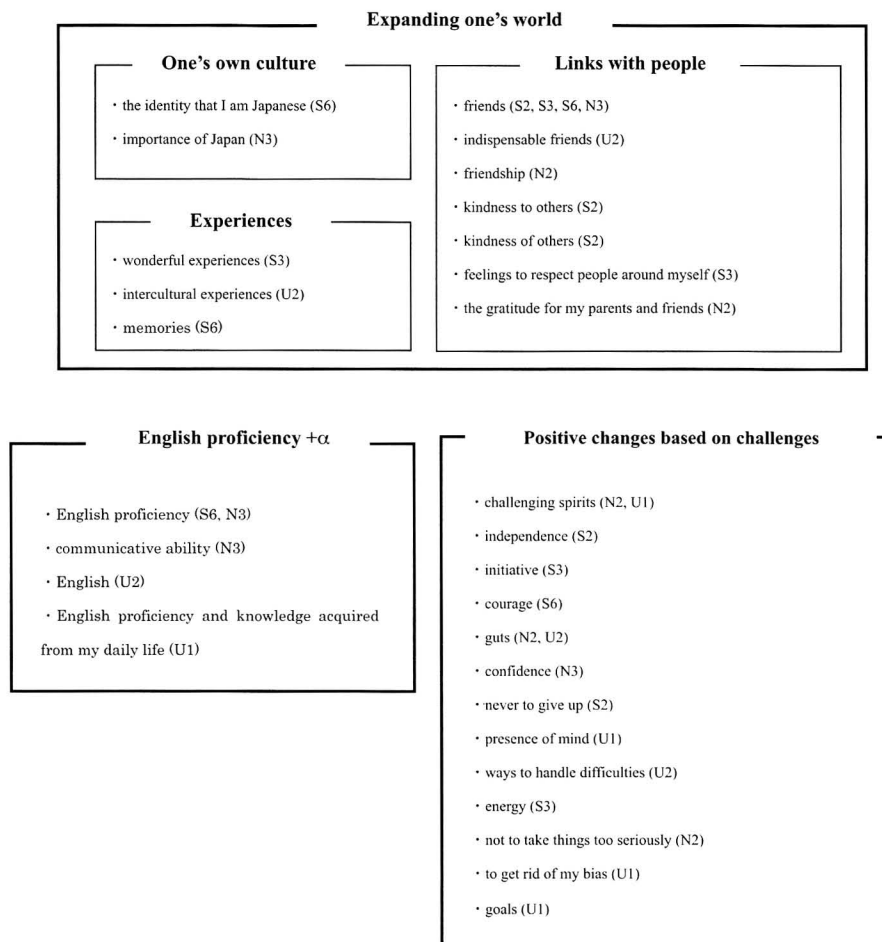


Figure 2. Sentence completion: "I achieved the following from studying abroad:...."
 *The answers were translated into English by us.

answered that friends were what they obtained from their study abroad. This was the most common answer to the second question.

Therefore, we inferred that Group S tended to regard their study-abroad experiences as an opportunity to network with and meet people more than students in Groups N and U did. Thus, Group S seemed to be more people-oriented than the other two groups. Additionally, the results showed that all of the groups enjoyed their study abroad and regarded their study-abroad experiences positively.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the study is to investigate the use of social skills and social-support networks by Japanese students during their study in the U.S. To achieve this goal, the authors

compared questionnaire and interview responses from three groups of students who had and had not joined the American social-skills learning session before their study in the U.S. Based on the interviews and questionnaires, we found that all of the groups actively used their social skills in the last stage of their study abroad. Clear differences were not found between the three groups regarding the use of social skills during this stage. Although Groups N and U did not have the opportunity to join the skill-learning session, they seem to have learned the skills naturally, by themselves.

The authors did note, however, that Group S was more people-oriented than the other two groups—that is, as compared to the other groups, the students in Group S tended to attach greater importance to making friends during their study abroad. This might have been either because the students belonging in Group S learned the importance of

making friends during the pre-departure session or because of their respective personalities.

In our American social skills learning session, not only social skills themselves but also the sociocultural background and attitude to use these skills were taught (Tanaka & Takahama, 2008; Takahama & Tanaka, 2009a, 2009b). For example, the sociocultural background is that the American society expects people to assert themselves and the attitude is that it is important to speak out if English grammar is not perfect. Group S's answers in the study show that they thought that "it is important to ask people for help (S3)" because "people around us will help (S2)." From these answers, it is inferred that they understood the American sociocultural backgrounds and that they put the attitude into practice. Moreover, as seen in Figures 1 and 2, Group S actively worked "to absorb a lot of things (S3)" in addition to passively receiving social support from people around them while studying abroad.

Given the above, the results of the three studies done during the session—before the study abroad period, in the beginning of the study abroad period, and during the last stage of the study abroad period—are summarized as follows. The social skills were quite new to the participants of the session since they were unaware of the behavioral aspects of American culture prior to studying abroad. Further, they gained confidence, an active attitude, and an understanding of the American culture by learning through role-play practices in the session. In the beginning of the study abroad period, it was indicated that their active attitude was advantageous in cross-cultural adaptation when they coped with the difficulties encountered using their social skills. In the last stage of the study abroad period, though the non-participants of the study may have learned the skills by themselves, the participants seemed to be more people-oriented. That is, the social skills gained by the students resulted in them not only adopting techniques but also developing an attitude that made their study abroad period richer in terms of communicating with the people around them: such students were able to solve their problems and cultivate friendships with the people around them.

Lastly, we identified two future challenges as a result of the study. This longitudinal study focused on following the students' situations both in the beginning and in the last stage of the study abroad period in details. In this sense, this is a case study that employs students who had not joined the skills learning session as contrastive groups. Using qualitative data from interviews, this study aims to describe the students' attitudes toward using social skills and the

processes involved in the use of these skills. Although these contextual viewpoints are important, it should be noted that the participants are not representatives of all Japanese students studying in the U.S. This is because the number of participants is limited, and because the sex ratio of Group S is different from that of Groups N and U. By including more participants, it is possible to gain clues to generalize the results of this study. Therefore, our next task is to consider together the number of students who participate in the session and to continue to do the follow-up study on them. This will contribute to improving the quality and quantity of the pre-departure sessions in order to promote the students' intercultural adaptation while studying abroad. Second, it is necessary to investigate whether the students continue to use the American social skills after they return to Japan. If they do, it is also important to analyze why they do so and how they feel when they do so. This will help us understand not only the differences in social skills in Japan and the U.S., but also the way to relieve reverse culture shock when they return from studying in the U.S. Further study on these challenges is needed.

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