

The Influence of Study Abroad Experience on Career Planning among Japanese Female University Students in the U.S.: A Case from a US Study Center of a Japanese University

日本人女子大学生のアメリカ海外留学経験がキャリア観に与える影響 —日本の某大学在米学習センターのケース—

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Abstract

Even though studying abroad seems to have an influence on students' career development, one of the factors that hinders Japanese students from seeking education abroad is related to career and job-search concerns (e.g., JASSO, 2012). The objective of this study is to understand how the study abroad experience affects career planning among female Japanese college students. In this study, Bronfenbrenner's human ecology model was used as a theoretical framework to examine how study abroad experience and interactions between personal and contextual factors affected students' career-related changes. Through the qualitative analysis of the interview data of 10 Japanese female students who were studying at a U.S.-based study center of a Japanese university, this study found that students experienced changes in their career perspectives (reexamination of their English language ability for their career and developing their career-related preferences) through their interactions with people in the United States, which was also affected by the complex interplays between the individual students and their multiple levels of ecological environment. The interview results also highlighted individual differences in their career development, such as the way they respond to the interactions and the access to career exploration opportunities.

[Key words: Japanese female university students, study abroad, study abroad and development, career development, career plans]

要 旨

海外留学は大学生のキャリア観の発達に影響を与える一方で、就職等に関する不安が留学の帰国者などから報告されている(日本学生支援機構、2012)。本研究は、日本人の女子学生のキャリア観がアメリカ留学中どのように変化したかについて明らかにすることを目的として行われた。Bronfenbrennerの人間発達の生態学理論を枠組みとして、留学中の学生の経験や、個人や文脈の要因がどのように学生のキャリア観に影響を与えたかについて、インタビューデータを質的に分析した。その結果、学生の留学中のキャリアや職業に関する意識変化は、個人と環境要因に複雑に影響を受けながら、アメリカでの人々との交流の中で形成されていることが明らかになった(英語の使用に関する認識、職業観に関する指向の深まりなど)。キャリア観の変化に際して、個人の特性による違い(人との交流に対する反応や、キャリア発達の機会へのアクセス等)も報告された。

[キーワード: 日本人学生、海外留学、留学と成長、キャリア発達、仕事観]

1. Introduction

Studying abroad provides an important learning opportunity for university students, not only in exercising language, academic, and cultural competencies, but also in providing a chance for career-related decisions to develop and change (e.g., Kauffmann, Martin, & Weaver, 1992). A survey of Japanese study abroad returnees reported that more than 60% of students found that their study abroad experience was helpful for their job-hunting or career decisions, and the abilities that were gained through study abroad experiences were useful in their career (Japan Student Services Organization [JASSO], 2012). Even though studying abroad seems to have an impact on students' career development, students frequently reported job search and career concerns related to studying abroad (JASSO, 2012).

In order to provide effective career-related support for Japanese students who study abroad and maximize the opportunity for learning, it is imperative to understand students' career development through their study abroad experiences. The objective of this study is to understand how the study abroad experience affects career planning among female Japanese college students. More specifically, this study aims to shed light on the effect of interactions between the individuals and their environment as the agents of change. This study particularly focuses on female students since there is a relatively larger number of female students study abroad than males; for example, the statistics of Japanese exchange students in 2011 showed that 6,559 men and 10,776 women studied abroad (JASSO, 2013). In addition, the increase in women's participation in tertiary education and the workforce (e.g., Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare [MHLW], 2009) also highlights the importance of career services for women at colleges and universities. In Japan, compared to men, women show different trends in their career; they tend to leave workforce to married or have children, and they are more likely to be hired as part-time or non-regular employment (MHLW, 2009). Although it has been changing, compared to the OECD average, women's participation in the workforce in Japan is still at a low rate (as cited in MHLW, 2009), though the Japanese government continues to improve the situation (MHLW, 2009). Therefore, understanding issues around women's careers continues to be an important issue. This study will help provide insights as to how universities can design study abroad programs that enhance female students' career development.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Relevant theories on experiences of study abroad and career development

Although the use of theory in research studies is helpful for describing the point of interest by using concepts and models to assist in the interpretation of available information (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010), previous studies on the experiences of study abroad have not always utilized theoretical perspectives. Moreover, the theories previously used were not sufficient to respond to the objective of this current study. For example, Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) and an assessment called the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI; Hammer & Bennett, 2001) have been repeatedly employed to describe students' development during the study abroad experience, especially focusing upon their development in intercultural sensitivity (e.g., Engle & Engle, 2004; Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004; Vande Berg, Balkcum, Scheid, & Whalen, 2004). While Bennett's model is helpful in examining the outcomes of studying abroad specifically in terms of students' ability in responding to cultural differences, this framework does not directly deal with career-related changes, which is the main focus of this study.

Theories of career development can be a helpful tool to examine the changes in career perspectives that occur during studying abroad, though most of them tend to discuss only a particular aspect of career. For instance, Hannigan (2001) utilized Super's (1963; 1981) career development theory and Barrett and Tinsley's (1977) assessment tool to report the increase in the clarity of vocational self-concept after students participated in work abroad programs. While the theory and the pre- and post- administration of the assessment help examine the difference in vocational self-concept through work abroad program, this model does not explain how the changes were introduced during studying abroad. Other career theories that take typological approaches (e.g., Holland, 1997; Myers, McCaulley, Quenk, & Hammer, 1998) also do not directly help to answer questions regarding the process of career-related change. In summary, a variety of career development theories can shed light on some factors of this study. However, a more comprehensive theoretical approach is required to account for the full set of interacting personal and environmental factors that affect the career development of Japanese students who studying abroad.

2.2 A comprehensive approach: Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development

To highlight how educational contexts and individual characters affect one's career-related development through studying abroad, Urie Bronfenbrenner's perspective of the ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1989, 1993, 2001) is used as the theoretical framework for this study. Bronfenbrenner's process-person-context-time (PPCT) model has a capacity to analyze the complicated interplays between developing individuals and their multiple environment levels. In addition, this theoretical perspective focuses on the environment as an important source of influence. It matches students' study abroad experience with a significant change in their ecological environment, including their living arrangements, lifestyles, daily interactions with people, and larger cultural and societal backgrounds. Bronfenbrenner's theory has been used in the studies of child development to view how children's ecological environment affects their development in a systematic way. Moreover, due to the comprehensive function of this theory, it has been utilized for examining the development of college students (e.g., Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Evans et al., 2010; Renn & Arnold, 2003) as well as women's career development (e.g., Betz, 2002; Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2005; Koert, Borgen, & Amundson, 2011), both of which are relevant to the population of the current study.

Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model consists of four concepts that affect development of individuals: process, person, context, and time (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). The conceptual diagram of the PPCT model is illustrated as Figure 1. The four concepts of this model are described in relation to the context of studying abroad in the following paragraphs.

The central component of the theory is *process*, in which the individual and environment interact and influence each other. Bronfenbrenner explains that development occurs through "proximal processes," which are described as "progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 2001, p. 6965). The experience of studying abroad can provide proximal processes by introducing situations that demand to complex skills, such as adapting to living in a different country and using a non-native language, and can act as a strong developmental catalyst for students.

The second concept is *person*, where Bronfenbrenner conceptualized personal qualities that affect human development as *developmentally instigative characters*; this includes individual characteristics that encourage or discourage responses from the environment and that influence their own trends to respond differently to the given environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, pp. 11–15). In the case of students

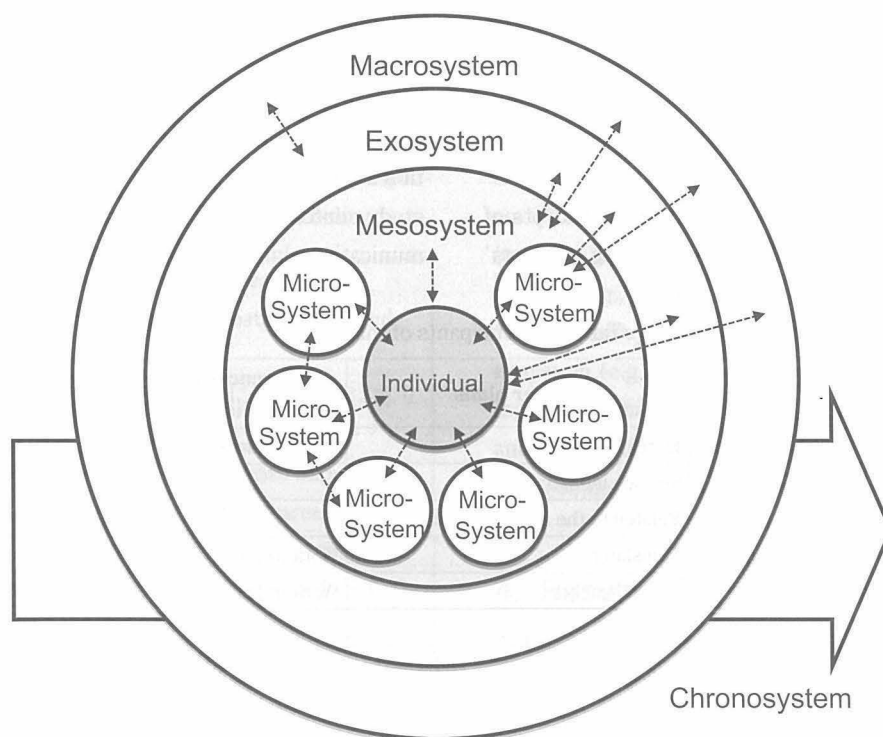


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's PPCT Model

who study abroad, individual characteristics such as being more willing to try English and seeking out to career-related opportunities might affect individual experiences in a unique way, and it might bring them changes in their career-related perspectives differently.

Bronfenbrenner describes environmental *context* as four layers of nested systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). The microsystem is the most direct immediate social environment where individuals spend time and have activities (e.g., residence halls, classrooms, and off-campus language schools). The mesosystem is the relationship between multiple microsystems. The exosystem is an indirect social influence on people, such as policies, rules, curriculum at the institutional level, and visa policies at the national level. The macrosystem is the broadest system that is shared in the society, and includes American culture and societal norms and the use of the English language. Each of these systems interacting with each other, and the individuals in the center of the system also influence the way they interact with their surrounding environment.

The final component of the PPCT model is *time*, and it is described as chronosystem in the model (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The time concept includes different levels, such as continuity or discontinuity of a proximal process, its period, and wider societal and historical norms and incidents (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For college students who study abroad, the factor of time is relevant as the length of the study abroad programs and their life stage as early adulthood, when they start to develop a sense of independence, interdependence, and a purposeful career plan (e.g., Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

As described in the above section, the four concepts of Bronfenbrenner’s model are all relevant during students’

time studying abroad. The use of the PPCT model helps examine how these interactions of individual and environmental components affect students’ development during the study abroad experience.

3. Method

In order to explore how students’ career-related perceptions have changed through study abroad experiences and complex interactions of individual and environmental factors, a qualitative method was used in this study. A qualitative approach is helpful to examine “how” and “why” of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002), which fits the objective of this study.

3.1 Research site and participants

The research site was the U.S.-based study center of a Japanese women’s university. This site was selected since it regularly hosts Japanese female students, which helped researchers find potential research participants. Participants were recruited from the students who had spent more than 12 months time in the United States and who had not had any previous study abroad experiences for longer than the span of one consecutive month prior to this visit. This was in order to examine their initial overseas experiences for an extended period of time. Ten students between the ages of 19 to 20 years old and in their second year of university participated in the study. The list of participants is provided in the Table 1.

Nine out of ten majored in English language and communication, and one majored in human sciences. Their preferences on work location and their thoughts on further education are discussed in the results section. The program at the study center focused on improving English language communication skills; the professors at the study center were

Table 1 Participants of this study

ID	Major	Career plans	Preferences on location	Thoughts on further education
1	English Language and Communication	Hotel	Work in Japan	
2		Service industry		
3		Related to the use of English		Grad school
4		Translator	Work in the US	
5		School teacher	Work in Japan	Grad school
6		NGO, NPO		Grad school
7		Related to international and sports		
8		Media and journalism	Work in the US	
9		Hotel, service industry	Work in Japan	
10	Human Sciences	Travel agency		Grad school

native English speakers and students were required to speak in English in the classroom. The students were not typical exchange students who enroll at universities in the United States for a semester or a year to take courses with American and other international students. They lived in a residence hall at the study center and take most of the courses together with other Japanese classmates who also came from the same university. Their study center was located in a suburb, and while this place was considered a quite safe area, students had to take a shuttle bus into the city for off-campus activities. The program also arranged a host family to all students to meet American people once every couple of months. As optional academic activities, students could audit a few courses held at nearby American universities. During semester breaks, students could attend private language schools optionally by paying extra money. As for the career support for students, though the home campus of the university in Japan had an office for career services and provided opportunities and programs for the exploration of students' career in various ways, the U.S. study center did not have an office or a designated staff member for career development for students at the site.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

Two researchers conducted a semi-structured interview with each participant individually for 60 to 90 minutes in Japanese during October and November 2011. Although the original interview protocol included 24 questions, not all of these were related to the issue of their career. Other types of questions included the selection of college and academic experiences during the time studying abroad. The examples of the interview questions, specifically on career perspectives that are relevant to this study are provided below.

Sample questions from the interview

- What was your dream in terms of occupation? How did you decide it?
(あなたご自身の将来における、職業に関する夢はありますか?それはどのように決まったのでしょうか?)
- How (if at all) do you think this study abroad experience has or will affect your career or your future career path?
(どのように、(もしあるとしたら) 留学経験があなたご自身の仕事や、将来の職業を選ぶ上で影響を与えている(ていく)と思いますか?)
- What kind of career support will be beneficial before, during, and after studying abroad?
(留学前、留学中、留学後に、キャリアに関してどのような支援サービスが役に立つと思いますか?)

The interview questions were ordered chronologically to follow the natural flow of the time. The researchers asked students' perceptions before studying abroad, including their original career plans before they studied abroad. Then, the researchers moved on to the experiences during abroad with the focus on interactions affecting students' career development. Finally, students were asked about their perceptions on career challenges and support. The interview consisted of open-ended questions in order for students to talk about what they thought was significant to them and to help minimize the bias of interviewers on the answers.

The researchers started the analysis as soon as interview data were transcribed, while simultaneously adding new participants, a method recommended by Patton (2002). The analysis started with reviewing and coding the transcript of the interviews line by line (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researchers used an open coding approach, in which the researchers gave codes to meaningful parts of the interviews (Creswell, 2007, p. 64). The researchers used Bronfenbrenner's ecology model as a guide to specifically look for students' comments regarding their perceived changes through study abroad experiences, as well as individual personalities, environmental factors, and interactions among them. In the second cycle of coding, constant comparative methods were used: the codes were compared and re-examined to form categories and themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). When the researchers finished the 10th interview, the data reached saturation, where no new information appeared from the interviews. The researchers met to discuss codes in order to reach a consensus about the analysis and categories. The categories included ecological factors, career plans, career-related changes, career challenges, and career support. The ecological factors included codes on microsystem (e.g., classroom, residence halls, and language schools), exosystem (e.g., institutional arrangement and national regulations), macrosystem (e.g., culture and societal norms), chronosystem (e.g., timing of career planning), developmentally instigative characteristics (e.g., interests, language ability, and proactivity), and proximal processes (e.g., interactions with people, and participations in activities).

4. Results

Two themes on career related change through studying abroad were the use of English language for career and the development of career specificity.

4.1 Clear ideas on their English language ability

One of the career-related changes resulting from studying abroad was the participants' skills in the English language. Although all the participants in this study had shown interest in learning English prior to study abroad, after their extended period of stay in the United States they examined their ability to use English in their future careers. One student commented as follows:

I came to think that I would like to choose my career in something related to English. As I work towards entering the workforce, I can now concretely imagine my future career using English, and my study abroad experience has influenced me in this regard. (Student #10)

All the participants indicated that they studied English harder at the study center in the United States than they did at home campus because of the required use of English in the classroom and the huge amount of homework assignments. Among them, seven students reported that they gained confidence in using English after studying in the United States. They stated that the confidence was mainly gained through an increased use of English in their interactions with people in the United States, such as American professors and American host family.

Although the academic environment at the study center was the same for all participants, there were some differences in responses regarding the English usage, probably due to personal differences. When asked about the influence of study abroad on her future career, one of the students who gained confidence in English reported that not only interactions with American people, but also with another peer student were an important influence on her as a learning opportunity.

Through the host family program that was provided by the university, I have interactions with native English speakers, which helps me increase the chances to use English, and I think this will affect my future career. ... I've learned from the attitude of my Japanese peer who was assigned to the same host family. ... When I had trouble speaking up in English with my host family, my peer was talking to them actively. I knew that her English ability was almost same as mine, so I was encouraged by her, and I thought I have to keep trying harder. (Student #4)

When the student faced limitations in her English language ability, her observation of the courageous and active attitude of her classmate whose situation and English ability were similar to herself encourage her to practice English more for her future career.

In contrast, one student reported that she became more aware of the limitations of her own English language abilities from her interactions with others. She met other people who were able to use English better than herself in the United States, and felt that her English was not strong enough for some occupations that require a high level of English.

After I came to the U.S. and studied English, and talked to American people, I realized that it would be difficult to seek my career in these occupations with my English ability. I get stuck with greetings and small talk, and I doubt that I can earn money by using my English.... there are many people who study abroad... and others who do home stays must have improved English more than mine since we mainly use Japanese at the residence hall to communicate with other Japanese peers. So, my English will not be strength in my job search. (Student #2)

Although she remarked later in the interview that she still had not totally given up her original career goal that would require a high level of English ability, this comment demonstrates that she reexamined her English ability by contrasting it with other people who spoke English better than her while studying abroad, and she identified challenging aspects of using English. As shown in these examples, study abroad experiences helped most participants examine their own English language ability by considering English language use in work settings.

4.2 Developed awareness regarding preexisting plans or new career options

Another career-related change through studying abroad was the development of career perceptions regarding their original plans and new options. These career plans were examined through the interactions with people who met in the United States. Seven students acknowledged a shift in their perception about their career development by talking with people and observing situations in the United States during their study abroad period. These students often mentioned the flexibility of one's career in the United States, compared to Japan. Among them, four students expressed their interest in going on to a graduate school or other kinds of schools after graduation, although they originally planned to find jobs after earning a bachelor's degree. One reported the following:

After I came to the United States, I met many people older than me and many of them have continued studying or expressed that they want to start something new. This was surprising to me because most Japanese

people start working at the age of 22 right after finishing their bachelor degree. ... I was thinking like I had to do that. But after coming here, I realized this is not always the case. I thought that it was good... good for me to meet these people. (Student #5)

These students developed interest in further education as a potential option from meeting people in the United States who were older than themselves who were going to graduate schools or seeking different career. In addition, in the United States, it is more frequent for people to change jobs once one starts to work at a company. As this student remarked, the experiences of studying abroad and observing the flexibility of careers in the United States provided an opportunity for students to reexamine their original career plans by considering societal norms.

In the process of exploring career options, an opportunity that students can actually participate or observe career-related activities seems to be helpful. Among the four students who mentioned an interest in seeking graduate education, one student reported that participating in volunteer activities in the United States helped her determine her future career goal to work in the field of international cooperation and development.

Through my participation in volunteer activities in the United States, and also through my observation of American cultural situations that have more opportunities to do volunteering in the community, I was able to think about my future career further, though I have my career plan already in my mind. (Student #6)

Her interest in serving people and active personality led her to volunteer in the community while studying abroad. The involvement in volunteer opportunities assisted her not only in gaining experiences and working for the community, but also in raising awareness in her career planning in the field of international development. Individual motivation, interests, and open-mindedness to seek optional activities affected experiences and degrees of career-related development among the students who joined the same study abroad program.

Other than the interest in graduate schools, preferences to work in a specific location to pursue their future career was mentioned by some students through their exposure to American culture through interactions in social settings. By residing in the United States, three students commented that they came to prefer to find jobs in Japan. They most commonly reported that not only would it allow them to be close to their family members and friends, but also they felt that it would be more comfortable working in a familiar cul-

ture in Japan. One of them commented as follows:

At first, I desired to work in the United States, but I really like Japan and its culture, so I want to work in Japan, and then I also want to use English when needed. ... Now that I have had the chance to observe a travel agency in the U.S., I feel like the way the staff communicates and the social manner seems to be different here, and I feel like it is not comfortable. ... So, I think I would not have noticed this difference if I were in Japan, so this was good to realize, and I want to work in Japan. (Student #9)

For this student, her experience to observe a working environment in the United States helped her notice her appreciation of Japanese culture and communication style. During the interview, she also stated that she found this opportunity to observe the travel agency through her own personal connection with people who she met in the United States. Like the example of the student who participated in volunteer work, the active attitude to explore career-related experiences was also a key for this student to bring career-related awareness.

As for the location of future work, two students became more interested in working in the United States as a result of studying abroad. In contrast, three students mentioned their preference to work in Japan.

Compared to being in Japan, I would rather want to be here. ... The experience to go to language school (off campus) was huge for me. It was interesting not just for chances to communicate in English with other people. It was also fascinating to learn about other cultures and to know how people from other culture think differently. So, recently, I want to find job that have chances to see people from different countries, not just using English. (Student #3)

The student's interest in working with people from diverse cultures was developed from her experience and interactions at the language school, which was an optional activity for students at the study center. In both cases, interactions with people during study abroad provided them opportunities to examine their preferences related to their careers.

5. Discussion

5.1 Students' experiences through the ecological perspectives

The results from the interview portrayed that the changes in their career perspectives were brought on by complex intersections of factors in multiple environmental contexts and

individual characters. The students' immediate interactions at the microsystem level, which was the agent of students' changes, were formed by the broader contextual factors. Not only the culture and the social norms at the macrosystem level affect the interaction of people in the environment, but also the campus arrangement, including the availability of services and the set up of the current policy at the exosystem level, influenced the types and congruency of communications at the mesosystem level as the interplays of various microsystems. As a chronological factor, college years, especially the latter half of the second year, corresponds with the time when Japanese college students typically start thinking about their job search processes, which makes the career-related issues important for the students. Furthermore, students' developmentally instigative characteristics, such as willingness to explore off-campus opportunities and comfort level in using the English language, combined and affected students' ecological interactions differently.

As for the development of awareness of English language ability for students' career, the interview showed synergistic interactions between individual and multiple ecological systems. As individual factors for all the participants, their motivation and interest in learning English played roles as their developmentally instigative characteristics, and helped them to actively practice English in the United States, where English is used as a primary language at the macrosystem level of society. The study center - the structure of study abroad program at the exosystem level - focused on improving students' English language and communication, and also worked effectively with their other ecological systems. The increased English interactions with professors and others at the microsystem level also complemented at the mesosystem together to promote students' English learning by acting as proximal processes that helped develop their awareness regarding the use of English in their future career.

From the ecological perspective, the difference in the development in students' career specific preferences seemed to be influenced by individual students' developmentally instigative characters. In addition, the lack of exosystem level of career exploration opportunities arranged by the study center also potentially influenced the differences. In the interview, some students were exposed to the cultural differences in work and social settings at the macrosystem level through their immediate interactions at microsystems, which allowed them to consider their career options flexibly and to examine their preferences of context at work. These opportunities to reexamine their original career options were mostly gained from the interactions that occurred

outside of their academic life at the study center since the arrangement of the study center, the exosystem context, was mainly focused on learning English, and opportunities for career development were not necessarily provided. This also resulted in the lack of congruent interactions among microsystems and mesosystem for the development of career specificity at students' immediate interactions. The opportunities for the reexamination of career options appeared to be heavily dependent on the individual pursuit, and the results also varied.

5.2 Implications for future practice

This study explored the processes of changes in career planning through studying abroad among Japanese female students at the U.S. study center. The analysis of the interview showed that out of the complex interactions between the individuals and the ecological environments, students increased their awareness about their use of English language for their careers and developed career specific preferences. Even though the results were drawn from the students at a particular study center, they provide some implications for similarly focused institutions that send students abroad. Firstly, since interactions between students and their surrounding environment can affect their career plans, it is important for institutions to consider the potential ecological factors that might affect students' career development and to design study abroad programs that include formative interactions. Secondly, consideration of individual differences and characteristics is also imperative in providing study abroad programs that can effectively develop students in their career-related perspectives, especially for those who need assistance in finding these opportunities. In order to reduce the career-related obstacles for Japanese students who study abroad and to utilize their study abroad experiences for their career development, universities need to assist students effectively by considering individual and environmental factors to optimize students' learning and career development through studying abroad.

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