The use of social skills by Japanese students while studying in the United States:
An article based on a case study conducted on their return from study abroad
Ai Takahama & Tomoko Tanaka
(Shizuoka University) (Okayama University)
[Key Words] Japanese students, social skills, American social skills learning session, social support, social support network

I. Introduction

The authors of this paper have been attempting to provide Japanese university students planning on studying in the U.S. with an educational session in order to promote their intercultural adaptation. 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. It was noted that the students’ confidence and skills improved during the session (Tanaka & Takahama, 2009a). According to the follow-up field survey in the U.S., it was found that at the beginning of their study in the U.S., the students were actually using some of the beginner’s and intermediate skills learned in the session (Tanaka & Takahama, 2009b).

This study aims to report the last part of a longitudinal case study of Japanese students who studied American social skills before their study in the U.S. The research questions are as follows: As a whole, how did they 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 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 the experiences of their study abroad, as a whole.

II. Method
Participants

Seven Japanese university students participated in our research. All of them were short-term exchange students who had obtained the required English test scores of the American universities. They were classified into the following three groups:
1. Group S: Three among the seven students who joined the session studied social skills in the
session before their study in the U.S.; they learned eight social skills in the session (S2, S3, and S6).

2. Group N: Two among seven students, belonging to the same Japanese university as those in Group S do, did not learn social skills in the session (N2, N3). In other words, they had acquired social skills naturally, by themselves.

3. Group U: Two among the seven students, belonging to a different university, did not learn social skills in the session (U1, U2). In other words, like Group N, they also had obtained social skills naturally, by themselves.

Procedure

All the students participated in both the interview and the questionnaire survey conducted in Japan in 2008 after their return from the U.S. For example, they were interviewed about using their social skills, their experiences while studying abroad, and the social support that they received from their social support network. It took approximately one hour each to complete the interview and questionnaire. All the interviews were tape-recorded and made into transcripts with their consent.

III. Results

On the basis of their responses, it was inferred that all the groups actively used not only easy but also advanced social skills in the last stage of their study abroad. As regards the use of social skills, no significant difference was found among the three groups.

With respect to the social support network, Groups N and U regarded it important to make individual endeavors while studying abroad. On the other hand, Group S tended to regard it 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. Moreover, when asked about the five important people during their study abroad, Group S was found to have more American friends/acquaintances than the other two groups.

Lastly, Group S tended to regard their study abroad experiences as an opportunity to networking with and meeting people, whereas lesser number of students of Groups N and U did so. Thus, Group S seemed to be more people-oriented than the other two groups. Additionally, the results showed that all the groups regarded their study abroad experiences positively, and they
enjoyed their study period abroad.

IV. Discussion

The purpose of the study is to investigate the use of social skills and conditions of social support by Japanese students during their study in the U.S. To achieve this goal, the authors made comparisons by interviewing the three groups of students who had and had not joined the American social skills learning session before their study in the U.S.

According to the interview and questionnaire, all the groups were found to actively use their social skills in the last stage of their study abroad. Although the other two groups did not have the opportunity of joining the session, they seemed to have learned the skills naturally, by themselves. It was, however, noted that Group S was more people-oriented than the other two groups. That is, as compared to the other groups, Group S tended to attach greater importance to making friends during their study abroad. This might have been so 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.

Because only seven students participated in this survey, it is necessary for us to increase the number of students to generalize these results. Therefore, our next task is to consider together the number of those who participate in the session and to continue to do the follow-up study on them. This will contribute in improving the quality and quantity of the pre-departure session in order to promote their intercultural adaptation while studying abroad.

References


Takahama, A. & Tanaka, T. (2009b). The use of social skills by Japanese students during their study in the U.S.: The case of students who have joined social skills learning session and who have not prior to their study abroad. *Journal of International Student Advisors and Educators, 11*, 107-117.
Acknowledgement

Part of this work was supported by KAKENHI (Grant-in-Aid for Exploratory Research 19653099).