

# AAUSC Issues in Language Program Direction

## Insights from Study Abroad for Language Programs

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## Chapter 4

# Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary Development in Orthographically Complex Languages during Study Abroad

Dan P. Dewey

### **Abstract**

*This paper reviews research on the acquisition of reading skills and vocabulary knowledge during study abroad, focusing specifically on findings in Japanese and other orthographically complex languages. Studies suggest that, both for alphabetic and ideographic languages, (1) learners can achieve significant growth in reading proficiency during study abroad (in particular, in Japan), (2) learners tend to become more confident in their reading skills during study abroad, (3) vocabulary development during study abroad is largely evident in the form of passive knowledge, (4) intensive domestic immersion can lead to gains equal to (and in some cases greater than) gains made through study abroad in reading and vocabulary development, and (5) individual differences are greater in study abroad than in at-home settings. Studies in Japanese indicated that the following can contribute positively to vocabulary gains: (1) amount of writing in the second language, (2) time spent speaking with native-speaker friends, and (3) various types of attention. Implications are discussed and programmatic suggestions are given.*

Study abroad is not typically considered a potent means of developing reading skills. However, even if, as Ginsberg (1992) suggests, “study abroad is not oriented toward reading” (p. 18), second language (L2) reading skills are bound to benefit from increases in speaking proficiency and overall linguistic development achieved during time abroad. In fact, L2 reading research suggests that improvements in overall linguistic competence are likely to lead to improvements in L2 reading ability (see Alderson [1984], Bernhardt & Kamil [1995], and Grabe & Stoller [2002] for discussions of factors influencing L2 reading comprehension).

The potential for study abroad to have a positive impact on reading abilities is all the more important when considering the formidable challenge that native speakers of English face when trying to acquire reading skills in an orthographically complex language such as Japanese. Japanese is written using two syllabaries (sets of 46 characters representing single morae—sound units that make up words and typically consist of a single consonant followed by a vowel). One syllabary, *katakana*, is mostly used to represent words of foreign origin (except for Chinese words) and for onomatopoeic expressions; the other, *hiragana*, is used largely for

words of Japanese origin, for various inflectional endings, and for a number of grammatical markers. *Kanji*, Chinese characters, are also utilized extensively to represent words of both Chinese and Japanese origin. The Japanese government lists 1,945 *kanji* for everyday use (*joyō kanji*), and it is estimated that knowledge of approximately 1,500 characters is necessary to read most materials typically encountered in Japan (Horodeck, 1987). Further complicating the reading of Japanese is the fact that each *kanji* can have multiple pronunciations, depending on the surrounding characters. Hence, determining how to accurately voice readings for *kanji* mixed with various *hiragana* and *katakana* requires extensive study. The challenges of learning to read Japanese have led to much debate over the best way to teach the language (Jorden & Walton, 1987; Koda, 2001; Makino, 1987; Matsunaga, 1995, 2001; Nara & Noda, 2003).

Given the issues surrounding the acquisition of reading skills in Japanese and the potential for those skills to be enhanced during study abroad, this chapter reviews current research findings on literacy gains in an overseas context. Because vocabulary knowledge is a key ingredient for reading comprehension (see Alderson, 1984, Grabe & Stoller, 2002, and Urquhart & Weir, 1998 for discussions), studies on vocabulary acquisition abroad are also included. Research on L2 reading and vocabulary development in alphabetic languages provides a backdrop for an examination of investigations of reading development in orthographically more complex languages. Following this examination, curricular implications for literacy skill development are discussed.

## Reading in Alphabetic Languages during Study Abroad

The relative lack of attention to reading in study abroad research has been noted recently (Dewey, 2004a; Kline, 1993, 1998; Taillefer, 2005). Some of the earliest evidence of the benefits of time abroad in terms of literacy can be seen in studies by Carroll (1967) and Gomes da Costa, Smith, and Whitely (1975). These projects, focusing on predictors of L2 proficiency, showed that college students who had been abroad tended to score higher on measures of reading proficiency (Modern Language Association reading tests) than learners who had not.

In a large-scale study of predictors of linguistic development during study abroad in Russia, Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1993, 1995) found that learners made significant improvement in reading proficiency while overseas. Furthermore, they noted that predeparture reading proficiency served as a predictor of gains in reading, speaking, and listening during study abroad in Russia—the better a learner was able to read prior to study abroad, the more he or she was likely to gain linguistically. Similarly, Taillefer (2005) found that predeparture L2 reading proficiency predicted academic success (grades) in courses taken in the L2 while abroad—those with higher initial L2 reading proficiency tended to get better grades in the courses they took in the target language than those with lesser proficiency.

Lapkin, Hart, and Swain (1995) also discovered that learners made significant gains in reading French during time abroad (interprovincial exchange in Canada). Furthermore, they noted that self-assessment data indicated that learners were more confident in their abilities to read French after time abroad. Similar self-assessment results were found by Meara (1994) and Oppen, Teichler, and Carlson (1990).

Gains in reading comprehension and confidence are closely related to gains in vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary knowledge has been shown to be a key factor in both first language (Adams, 1998; Beck, 1998; Perfetti, 1985) and second language reading comprehension (Alderson, 1984; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Urquhart & Weir, 1998). Study abroad research has revealed the overseas immersion setting to be superior to the at-home academic year classroom setting for lexical acquisition. In a comparison of Americans learning Spanish in Spain and comparable students at home, DeKeyser (1986) found that vocabulary development was the one factor that most distinguished the two groups (abroad learners gaining significantly more than at-home learners). Similarly, Milton and Meara (1995) discovered that learners of English as a second language in Britain (from France, Germany, Spain, and Italy) acquired English vocabulary five times as fast as their counterparts at home.

Much of the difference between at-home and abroad learning is in the gains made in vocabulary recognition rather than production. Taking a multimeasure approach to vocabulary development, Laufer and Paribakht (1998) discovered that nonnative learners of English abroad tended to show greater gaps between passive and active vocabulary than learners at home. Passive vocabulary knowledge was operationalized by these authors as the ability to match words with their correct definitions, and active vocabulary knowledge as producing words in contexts such as filling in blanks in sentences with correct words and using words in essays. Students abroad acquired passive familiarity with many words that they were unable to put to active use. Similarly, Freed, So, and Lazar (2003) found no significant differences in vocabulary use in essays between learners who studied in France for a semester and their counterparts who studied French at home.

In summary, the research involving Western countries with alphabetic languages suggests that the overseas immersion experience can improve reading skills more effectively than at-home nonimmersion instruction. Perhaps some of this advantage stems from the sharp increase in passive vocabulary among study abroad participants. Although these students may not be able to put the new words into use in writing, they are apparently able to draw on their familiarity with these new words in their reading. The question remains as to whether this same trend holds true for nonalphabetic languages.

## Reading in Orthographically Complex Languages

As with research on study abroad in European and North American contexts, investigations of reading acquisition during overseas immersion in Asian countries are also not very numerous. Nevertheless, the limited evidence suggests some similarities. Hayden's (1998) study of 21 native speakers of English during a semester in China showed significant gains in reading. Using the Computer

Adaptive Test for Reading Chinese, based on the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Chinese Proficiency Guidelines (cf. Breiner-Sanders, Lowe, Miles, & Swender, 2000), Hayden found that learners made significant gains during their experience—typically one sublevel on the ACTFL scale (e.g., from Intermediate Low to Intermediate Mid).

In a small-scale study comparing beginning learners enrolled in intensive Japanese courses at home and abroad, Huebner (1995) found that abroad learners out-gained at-home learners on measures of reading (though the number of participants was few and statistical significance was not determined). Perhaps more importantly, though, abroad learners showed greater motivation to learn to read than those at home. They felt that mastering the two syllabaries, *hiragana* and *katakana*, was an important task and complained little, whereas learners at home tended to view acquiring the two scripts as a burden.

In another comparison of learners of Japanese abroad with two groups of domestic learners (summer intensive immersion and regular academic year), Dewey (2004a)<sup>1</sup> found that the overseas group out-gained the stateside academic-year group on several measures of reading comprehension. The overseas learners were more able to comprehend and recall text, more confident in their reading abilities, and better able to define words seen as written text than their counterparts in the academic-year context in the United States. The main advantage for overseas learners over intensive domestic-immersion participants was greater confidence in reading abilities: Study abroad participants felt more capable of comprehending a variety of Japanese text types and engaging in a range of reading activities (i.e., read a broader variety of genres) than domestic-immersion participants. Finally, the study abroad group showed greater individual variation in all data. In a questionnaire designed to elicit information on language use outside of class, overseas students reported engaging in a much broader variety of activities using Japanese than did both groups of domestic participants. This greater variety coincided with a wider range of scores on virtually every measure of reading: The difference between the highest and lowest gain was larger and the standard deviations were statistically significantly greater across the board for the study abroad group than for the at-home participants. The tendency toward more homogeneity in learning gains among at-home learners has been documented in other studies as well (DeKeyser, 1986; Freed, 1998; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004).

To explore in greater depth vocabulary development and context, with a focus on written vocabulary in Japanese, Dewey (2006) compared results on various measures of vocabulary for learners in study abroad, intensive domestic-immersion, and formal academic-year settings. Dewey explored breadth of vocabulary knowledge (how many words a learner knows), depth of vocabulary knowledge (how well he or she knows these words), and knowledge of words typically seen during daily life in Japan (words on menus, train schedules, street signs, cash machines, doctor's office signs, etc.). The study abroad group out-gained the stateside academic-year group on all measures of vocabulary knowledge. Given the greater amount of in-class learning time (over three times as many hours total of Japanese language instruction) and higher levels of oral proficiency development over time for the study abroad participants, higher scores

on vocabulary measures for study abroad learners could be expected. This attainment, however, was most evident in the form of passive vocabulary knowledge. For example, on a measure of depth of vocabulary knowledge, overseas learners were able to answer that they had seen words (despite often not being able to define or use them in a sentence) more frequently than their counterparts in the two at-home settings. They did not show greater evidence of ability to define or produce words in sentences than the academic-year learners on this same test. Passive, lower-level familiarity was also evidenced in study abroad participants' ability to accurately define words more often than domestic-immersion and academic-year participants when given contextual prompts—clues telling them where the words in question might be seen.<sup>2</sup> This passive-active gap echoes Laufer and Paribakht's (1998) evidence of passive vocabulary gain among learners of English as a second language. Dewey again found evidence for greater variability for overseas learners than for their stateside counterparts.

Dewey (2006) also analyzed factors contributing to vocabulary acquisition in overseas and domestic settings. For study abroad participants, the most significant relationship was between amount of time spent writing in Japanese and gains vocabulary measures. The more time learners spent writing in Japanese, the greater their vocabulary gains. Writing ranged from reproducing individual characters and words for practice to writing lengthy essays as class assignments. Positive relationships were found between the amount of time learners spent interacting with native-speaker friends (outside of the home-stay setting) and two of the three vocabulary measures.<sup>3</sup> Those who made more Japanese friends and spoke with these friends often outside of class and outside of the home-stay setting tended to acquire more vocabulary. Related to this finding, there was a tendency for those who spent more time reading e-mail and using the Internet (both in English and in Japanese) to acquire less vocabulary than those who spent less time. This passive activity was apparently less productive than actively speaking with friends or writing in the L2. One other significant finding of this study was the importance of attention in vocabulary acquisition, in particular, acquisition of situational vocabulary seen in one's environment. Learners who paid greater attention to this vocabulary tended to acquire knowledge of situational/environmental words more than those who paid less attention. Evidence of paying attention included acts such as actively looking for new words and searching for definitions of words seen in one's environment throughout the day, setting goals to find new words in one's surroundings during the day (on walls, signs, menus, etc.), and writing down new words seen while shopping or traveling in a notebook. Those who showed less evidence of attention seldom reported engaging in such acts.

Although the topic of this chapter is study abroad, a discussion of intensive-immersion results is worthwhile for comparison. Intensive domestic-immersion students showed a clear advantage over stateside academic-year learners on nearly every measure of vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, their performance was at least equal to the study abroad participants' performance on all measures but situational vocabulary, where overseas learners made more progress. Their one distinct advantage over the study abroad group was in depth of vocabulary knowledge: They

were more able to produce words in complete and accurate sentences than the study abroad students. This finding was explained by two factors: greater writing practice in the domestic-immersion setting and more homogeneity in language contact. Classroom instruction and homework assignments were very influential in this setting.

The research reviewed here has shown the potential of study abroad to promote vocabulary and reading development not only in European languages but also in Asian languages. The importance of lexical acquisition and reading skill development during study abroad should not be underestimated. Hansen and Chantrill (1999) and Hansen and Shewell (2002) have both shown in their research with L2 learners of Chinese and Japanese that the level of literacy achieved by the end of an overseas stay can determine how well learners retain their language skills after returning home (i.e., the better they are able to read at the end of their stay, the more likely they are to maintain their Chinese and Japanese language abilities, both spoken and written). For this reason, it seems imperative to focus a degree of attention on the development of literacy skills during study abroad and to consider how lessons learned in the overseas context might be applied to the home curriculum.

## Implications and Suggestions

The research cited here suggests that study abroad is an efficacious means of increasing reading ability, particularly in orthographically challenging languages such as Japanese. What, then, are the lessons we can learn from the study abroad learning environment that can be applied to the home curriculum? How might we also improve our study abroad programs, such that learning overseas is enhanced for all participants?

1. To the extent possible, provide in language classes the contextually rich input present in the overseas setting.

The evidence reviewed in this chapter suggests that learners are able to acquire at least passive knowledge of large amounts of vocabulary seen in their environments. One explanation of greater reading gains overseas is that learners who study in Japan are more regularly exposed to Japanese print than their counterparts at home. Dewey's (2006) results indicate that learners are able to increase their vocabulary knowledge by taking advantage of everyday encounters with situational vocabulary. This regular exposure also promotes greater reading comprehension and confidence. Stateside instruction might seek to simulate some of this rich context by exposing learners to larger amounts of authentic written materials—materials supported by contextual clues.

2. Use writing as a tool to facilitate vocabulary and reading acquisition and to move vocabulary from passive to active knowledge.

Writing, ranging from practicing individual characters to producing extensive essays, was a key factor contributing to vocabulary knowledge



in Japanese. Writing was beneficial both to overseas and at-home learners (Dewey, 2006). This productive activity helped learners move vocabulary along the spectrum from vaguely familiar passive knowledge to active, productive knowledge. Writing has also been shown to be related to oral fluency development (Freed et al., 2004).

3. Promote language acquisition by encouraging regular active language use.

In the studies referred to in this chapter, the most significant productive activity in terms of language use was L2 writing. Second to writing was L2 language use with native-speaker friends (Dewey, 2006). The best vocabulary learners reported being involved in a variety of activities outside of class with native speakers, ranging from club activities to *karaoke*. At the other end of the spectrum, those who acquired less vocabulary tended to have few native-speaker friends outside of the home-stay setting and to engage in more passive activities, such as reading e-mail and the Internet (both in English and in Japanese).

Promoting social networking can facilitate language use and cultural adjustment. Whereas some learners are simply inclined to make Japanese friends on their own, others are less likely, due to personality traits and linguistic obstacles, and may need some support from programs to successfully build relationships with native speakers (Tanaka, Takai, Kohyama, Fujihara, & Minami, 1997). Pairing learners with local native students as study partners, involving learners in university clubs with native speakers, and inviting native speakers to visit study abroad center lounges are a few examples of ways that local contacts abroad might be facilitated. Native-speaker participants in such programs ought to be strongly encouraged to speak in their native language rather than English. Similarly, building into the home curriculum guided opportunities for interaction with Japanese students on the U.S. campus can also significantly increase the amount of regular, active language use in which students participate.

4. Prepare learners to cope with the linguistically rich input they will encounter overseas through strategy training.

Attention is an important factor determining vocabulary and reading acquisition during study abroad. A set of materials designed to teach language-learning strategies (i.e., promote attention) for study abroad has been developed by Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, and Lassegard (2002, 2003). These materials encourage learners to take advantage of the overseas environment by engaging in activities such as making lists of the words they expect to see most often and studying these lists in preparation for situations where they will be needed; asking native speakers for lists of vocabulary items that they think will be helpful in specific situations (at museums, in banks, at the post office, etc.); making a commitment to learn 10 or more words a day; engaging in a variety of light reading of various genres easily available abroad but less available at

home (maps, instructions on packaging, advertisements, etc.) Many of these strategies could be useful in the home setting as well.

5. Take advantage of the “need to know” as a way of motivating individual learners.

Individual differences are great in terms of language acquisition and use during study abroad. The overseas setting provides innumerable ways in which learners can spend their time, diminishing curricular control of students’ language learning experiences outside of class. Given that the “need to know” is a key factor motivating overseas learners (i.e., the more they need language to perform a desired task, the more motivated they are to learn it), learners’ individual goals related to the study abroad experience ought to be taken into account. Program directors and instructors might take advantage of learners’ goal-oriented motivation and adjust instruction to allow them to read texts and study vocabulary specific to their fields of interest. For example, students interested in pottery might visit Japanese potters and read works written for native speakers learning the art of pottery; computer scientists might enroll in local computer science classes for native speakers; *anime* fans might join an *anime* club and read and discuss magazines focusing on *anime* with native speakers in these clubs. A similar approach can be replicated in the classroom by building more individualized projects into the curriculum, allowing students to focus on their own interests. Although the results of such individualized efforts are difficult to measure, they accommodate the already prevalent individual differences and take advantage of motivation, a key factor for language acquisition (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; see also Douglass, this volume).

6. Consider intensive domestic immersion as a complement to study abroad and/or home-campus instruction.

The findings discussed here highlight the potential for intensive domestic immersion to contribute to language acquisition in ways that complement the academic-year and study abroad learning experiences. One distinct advantage of stateside immersion over study abroad is that learners in the domestic-immersion setting are more readily influenced by instructional interventions, such as writing activities and out-of-class tutoring. It may be possible to provide learners with a somewhat uniform set of language skills in this setting, in contrast with study abroad, where the variety of possible linguistic experiences is virtually limitless. Stateside immersion instructors in Dewey’s (2004a) research were able to influence learner’s reading processes in Japanese, whereas overseas instructors had no such influence. Rifkin (2005) has noted that learners in domestic immersion can benefit from intensive exposure to the target language in an environment where their attention is not diverted to negotiating the challenges of intercultural differences encountered during study abroad. Furthermore, learners interact largely with instructors, who are sympathetic listeners accustomed to negotiating meaning

with L2 learners, as opposed to the many native speakers with whom learners might engage while abroad. Native speakers in the study abroad setting may have had minimal contact with nonnative speakers and may not adjust their speech to facilitate negotiation of meaning. Dewey (2004b), Freed et al. (2004), and Rifkin (2003, 2005) have suggested that some combination of academic-year, intensive domestic-immersion, and study abroad experiences may serve to prepare learners for residence abroad and to maximize their linguistic development over time. The academic-year experience allows learners to explore languages initially and provides opportunities to strengthen language skills while still continuing other studies at home; intensive domestic immersion provides a more focused but culturally familiar environment where instructors can readily influence language acquisition; and study abroad allows individuals to engage in their own unique learning experiences outside of the classroom and provides large amounts of contextually rich linguistic input.

7. Build a reentry component into the home curriculum aimed at activating passive knowledge acquired during study abroad.

As learners are exposed to language during study abroad, they acquire an array of knowledge, ranging from simply recognizing items as familiar to being able to produce these items accurately in complete discourse. Postreturn instruction could focus on activating lower-level knowledge by helping learners recall and interpret linguistically and culturally challenging experiences they had while abroad. Simulating authentic situations that students might encounter in Japan could help learners review and process their overseas experiences, in particular when these experiences are brief. The shorter the experience, the less likely learners will be able to activate passive knowledge on their own (Laufer & Paribakht, 1998). Similar authentic situations might also be used in language and strategy instruction to prepare students for time abroad.

## Conclusion

The potential of study abroad as a means of improving one's reading abilities has often been overlooked. The research presented here has shown the possible benefits of study abroad for reading, in particular for languages with complex scripts. Given these benefits, the use of study abroad, in conjunction with at-home learning (both academic-year and intensive immersion), seems advisable for those desiring to increase their reading skills. The contextually rich input available through study abroad contributes to the acquisition of vocabulary and the development of a range of linguistic skills, which in turn promote reading comprehension. Many of the benefits of study abroad are seen in terms of passive knowledge. As learners are engaged in a variety of activities, including writing and speaking with native friends, their knowledge level moves from vaguely familiar to the ability to understand and interpret in context and then eventually to the ability to accurately produce in discourse.

Some of the characteristics that make the overseas immersion environment advantageous for reading acquisition may offer avenues of improving the home curriculum as well—namely, the availability of rich contextual input, the increase in motivation through the need to know, and the presence of greater teacher influence and curricular control in the at-home setting due to a lower degree of individual differences in language contact and acquisition.

### Notes

1. Note that academic-year data were not reported in Dewey (2004a) due to problems with data from this context. These problems were later resolved through the collection of additional supporting data, which will be reported in detail elsewhere.
2. Study abroad participants in the reading study (Dewey, 2004a) were also able to define words well when given richer contextual cues.
3. Speaking with home-stay families was not significantly correlated with Japanese vocabulary development.

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