

# RESEARCH REPORT

## The impact of the year abroad on Japanese vocabulary and cultural typifications —the effects of the *timing* of the study abroad in a language degree curriculum—

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### I Abstract

This study reports on the findings of a survey on the effects of the year abroad on the vocabulary and cultural typifications of learners of Japanese at SOAS, University of London. It is one of only a handful of studies on Japanese study abroad, and it investigates in particular the effects of the timing of the year abroad in a four year degree language curriculum, by comparing two cohorts of students, one of which carried out study abroad in year 2 and the other in year 3 of the degree.

The results suggest that the timing of study abroad has a measurable effect only when viewed in relation to the intensity of the pre-study abroad programme, but that the trajectories of the two groups (both with regards to the potential growth of vocabulary and to the evolution of cultural typifications) are otherwise very similar.

This report describes the profile of the students surveyed in relation to other studies of UK learners of European languages, compares its findings with those studies, and also offers a number of suggestions on specific analytical and methodological issues, which may be relevant to future studies.

### 2 Introduction

Study abroad (SA) programmes are nowadays a feature of most language degrees, including those of the languages of Asia and Africa (often in the form of exchange programmes), and are considerably popular with teachers and students alike. Teachers view them as a crucial component of degree curricula not only because they provide an authentic context for students to apply whatever they have learned through the formal instruction contexts of foreign language learning, but also in their providing the enriched environment that can promote the achievement of advanced proficiency, essential for advanced academic study. Teachers also note that the period of SA (commonly one full academic year in our degrees) seems to promote students' personal growth and enrich their social skills. SA programmes are also highly appealing to students, who are increasingly attracted by the social context and cultural life in the target community, rather than by the mere products of culture, be that in the sense of 'high' or 'popular' culture (literature, music, *manga* and so on). There is also widespread consensus, among teachers and students alike, that they constitute a valuable asset for employment prospects.

Universal as this enthusiastic support for SA programme may be, empirical research into their impact on second language acquisition has not started until relatively recently, and, typically, it is still very scarce in the field of oriental and African languages.

## **2.1 Previous studies on study abroad programmes**

A first wave of research appeared in the mid-1990s (Coleman 1996, Milton and Meara 1995), targeting European languages, Russian, Japanese (Freed 1995) and Chinese (Hayden 1998). Most of these tried to take stock of a number of small-scale, localized studies that had emerged in the preceding years (see Freed 1995a for a summary), and called for more extensive investigations to justify the widely shared, but not empirically validated assumptions about the benefits of periods of study abroad. More investigations appeared since (see for a more recent review Collentine and Freed 2004, Dewey 2008), but extensive studies into Asian and African languages (in particular with regards to second language acquisition rather than general political, educational and organizational issues) are, to this day, still thin on the ground.

In general terms, the results of most studies available today point to evidence that the SA is indeed beneficial, although this conclusion often needs a great deal of qualification. For example, there is support for language teachers' impressionistic perception that students improve in overall communicative ability and sociolinguistic sophistication, but while measures of fluency and narrative skills seem to benefit from exposure to naturalistic input and communicative contexts, study at home institutions seems to be the best environment to develop morphosyntactic control (Collentine and Freed, 2004:159 ff., 164, Collentine 2004). Could this suggest that there is an 'optimal period' (if not a 'critical' one) during which the particular environment of study in the target linguaculture is maximally beneficial, as opposed to others in which its effects may be ineffective or even counterproductive?

Milton and Meara (1995)'s study of the vocabulary development of German, French, Spanish and Italian learners in a British institution found that although on the whole the rate of vocabulary growth during the period of SA seems to be much faster than that during periods of study at home, there was also considerable individual variation: advanced level students (native or native-like) seemed to gain much less than beginner or intermediate level students. Their finding lead them to suggest that SA is virtually ineffective at advanced levels of proficiency and should be encouraged in the early years of learning. The status of English and Japanese are quite different in pre-university school curricula and students in the study presented here fall mostly in the categories of beginner/intermediate, but this finding has implications for relative levels of proficiency which apply in our case as well.

Coleman (1996:47) reports on several studies, which suggest that growth ratio correlates inversely with year of study, or in other words, that students at low levels of proficiency improve more—over a year of study—than students at high levels of proficiency. If the learning curve is indeed steeper at beginner level and tends to plateau at higher levels, regardless of the learning context—at home or abroad— we should arguably not be surprised if students going abroad in the later years of their degree programmes do not seem to progress at the same rate that teachers have observed in their first years. One should however consider carefully the nature of the testing instrument, and strive to design a variety of reliable measures of progress, which do not

fail to pick up all aspects potentially subject to improvement. In other words, tests may be biased toward indicators of proficiency geared to specific academic requirements, rather than other measures of proficiency (e.g. communicative proficiency, fluency).

Finally, Coleman (1996:45, 48) calls attention to the concerning finding, in several studies, that following the period of study abroad students seem to make no progress at all. If this is confirmed, it poses the hugely challenging question of what teachers in home institutions should do to maintain and improve the gains the students have made during the year abroad.

Coleman's study also provided some other intriguing findings with regards to how national stereotypes are affected by periods of residence abroad, an area on which there is still rather little empirical research. If it is true that attitudes to the target language and target culture impact on learners' performance (as in Schumann's acculturation theory, for example, but also consistently with most teachers' commonsense), then this is an aspect of learning that needs to be explored.

## **2.2 Background to the SOAS study**

As we have seen, a few previous studies prompted the question of whether the *timing* of the SA has a bearing on the benefits of studying in the target community. This is often difficult to test, as university degree curricula are structured in a way that does not necessarily allow a choice on when to carry out the SA. Moreover, an inherent challenge for any study of linguistic gains during the SA is the difficulty of providing control groups, i.e. a comparable cohort of students who do not carry out a period of study abroad. When the programme is a compulsory component of a degree, this is not feasible, but the implication is that testing of SA results in the absence of a control group cannot demonstrate that the study context is indeed the factor responsible for the effects detected – whether gains or losses. The study that I shall report about here does not include a control group as such, but instead investigates the variable of timing – SA in year 2 or 3 of the BA Japanese degree – on the effects of SA. This became possible because of a curricular change that took place in the year 2003, and which triggered this investigation. The comparison of two groups leaving for Japan at different proficiency levels (late beginner/early intermediate vs. late intermediate) promised to shed some light on the questions I mentioned earlier: whether indeed pre-SA proficiency levels make a difference, and if so, in what ways. In addition to this, the study also investigated the students' performance in the year following the study abroad.

The circumstances in which the study was carried out (see below, section 3) meant that investigation had to be limited to a selected number of aspects: I therefore chose to investigate the two areas of vocabulary and cultural typifications. Milton and Meara's 1995 paper and Coleman's 1996 volume (the latter not a longitudinal but a cross-sectional study) on European SA programmes had provided an intriguing set of conclusions that I wished to test on Japanese.

## **3 Description of the study**

The following sections will describe the nature of the study, and also highlight features of and problems in various aspects of its organization and administration that may be relevant to future investigations in this area. Replications of this and other studies are badly needed for other languages in which research is still unavailable or very scarce: like

in any other second language acquisition topic, we should not take the outcomes of research on English or even other widely taught languages such as Japanese as necessarily representative of trends in other languages. On the contrary, the different conditions of SA in geographical, educational and cultural areas far more remote from the home culture than the contained European neighbourhood are likely to highlight unique and important issues that may impact on the success of the SA.

### **3.1 Timing of SA – the two groups compared**

A year of SA became a compulsory component of the BA in Japanese degree in the year 1996. This was to be carried out in year 2 of the degree. In the year 2003, the Japan section at SOAS, University of London, decided to modify the structure of the BA Japanese and move the period of SA to year 3 of the degree, on the basis of several considerations, some pedagogical and educational (the pre-SA programme was intensive and very demanding on the students, who in some cases had no previous experience of language learning) others administrative (rather complex enrolment procedures at one of then nine partner institutions had to begin only a few months into the students' first year of study). We assumed that an extra year of study at SOAS could be conducive to better levels of linguistic, cultural and psychological preparedness (the curricular revision entailed, among other things, replacing one of the language-based compulsory units with a Japanese culture-based compulsory unit), and decided to use this opportunity to obtain an empirical measure of how this change effectively impacted on their performance.

The change was approved and implemented relatively quickly, and therefore only one cohort of students could be tested before regulations changed, which is the reason behind the relatively small sample population.

**This study compares the last cohort under the old regulations (SA in year 2) and the first cohort under the new regulations (SA in year 3) (cf.**

Table 1). Students enrolled under the old system attended a first intensive year of Japanese language instruction at SOAS covering the whole of the beginner syllabus, went to Japan in year 2, and returned to complete two more years at SOAS. Those in the new system did two years of Japanese language study at SOAS covering the whole of the beginner syllabus plus part of the intermediate syllabus, spent the third year in Japan, and returned to SOAS for their final year.

DEGREE TYPE	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4
<i>First cohort (2002/3)</i>  (Old curriculum: 1996/7-2002/3)	EJ: 14 h/w AJ: 10 h/w  (SFJ vol 1,2,3)	<i>study abroad</i>	J3B: 3h/w(comp) J3Ci: 3h/w (opt) J3Cii: 3h/w (opt)	J4C: 3 h/w
<i>Second cohort (2003/4)</i>  (New curriculum: 2003/4- Present)	EJ: 10 h/w AJ: 7 h/w  (MN vol 1, 2)	EJ: 8 h/w AJ: 7 h/w  (CN, NACN)	<i>study abroad</i>	J4C: 3 h/w
LEGENDA: <i>Textbooks:</i> SFJ= Situational Functional Japanese; MN = <i>Minna no Nihongo</i> ; CN = <i>Chuukyuu Nihongo</i> (Times); NACN = New Approach <i>Chuukyuu Nihongo</i> (Nihon Kenkyuusha) <i>Course types:</i> EJ = Elementary Japanese (absolute beginners' course); AJ = Accelerated Japanese (false beginners' course), J3B= reading course; J3Ci and ii: aural and composition courses; J4C: advanced language use course (essays, summaries, oral presentations); comp=compulsory; opt: optional				

**Table 1: Textbooks, contact hours, degree requirements and study abroad position in the 'old' and 'new' systems in the SOAS BA Japanese degree (only language courses are listed).**

The availability of Japanese language instruction at A-levels, the increasing mobility of our student body, and increasing numbers of heritage learners means that together with absolute beginners, many students have had some form of exposure to Japanese before enrolling in a university degree. Our degree offers different pathways depending on the student's proficiency (e.g. Elementary or Accelerated Elementary in year 1, or entry at year 2), but end-of-year examinations constitute a common benchmark for such different constituencies. However, differences in proficiency do not entirely level out during the study at SOAS, and the groups are by no means homogenous: this requires monitoring individual variation within group behaviour.

The most relevant difference in terms of instruction under the old and the new system is the amount of time spent in formal instruction (one intensive year with 10+ weekly contact hours vs. two years with a maximum of 10 contact hours), and the amount of syllabus covered (beginner vs. intermediate). Our groups can therefore be characterized as a lower pre-SA proficiency level in the old system (SA2), and a slightly higher level in the new system (SA3).

### 3.2 Conditions abroad

Students in the old system (SA2) spent the year abroad in nine different institutions in Japan. These had expanded to sixteen destinations by the time the new system (SA3) was in place (see Pizziconi 2008 for a more detailed illustration of the programme). Although all students receive placement tests on arrival to the host university, and are required to attend language classes as well as discipline-based classes, the provision across institutions is largely variable in terms of number of choices, contact hours, study environment, facilities and opportunities for extracurricular socialization, etc. The question of curricula coordination between Japanese and other partner institutions across the world has recently begun to receive some attention (see Kondo et al., 2008) and appears to be rather challenging, in particular with regards to the resources necessary to its implementation.

This study focuses on learners' performance in and variation across pre- and post-SA tests, but students were also invited to keep a diary and, whenever possible, provide e-mailed reports on several aspects of their social and academic activities in Japan. This proved to be wishful thinking on the part of the investigator: students led very active and busy lives and only a handful found the time to provide such information. These data were therefore not included in the analysis presented here. However, what students actually *do* during the year abroad is likely to be as important as what they have done before getting there, and an informed analysis of curricular as well as extracurricular activities is crucial in exploring potential causes of performance variability (Dewey 2008). Information on the amount of tutored instruction vs. untutored exposure, the specific type of instruction (e.g. Japanese as a Second Language classes vs. discipline-based or content based classes in Japanese), the type of interaction with native speakers—home stay family members, peers, teachers—, passive or interactive participation patterns in the target language, etc., has shown to discriminate degrees of performance. Again, this kind of information is also of fundamental importance considering the huge differences not only in life style but also in educational culture (see studies reported in Freed 1995a:15) that students of Asian and African languages are likely to experience and must learn to adapt to in order to make the most of the study environment.

### **3.3 Hypotheses**

With regards to the linguistic measure of the effects of SA, I expected that all our students, regardless of the timing of the SA (year 2 or 3) would improve during the year abroad. I did not however have specific hypotheses as to which group would improve more, since several factors competed in this regard: students in the first cohort, which started at lower proficiency levels, could be expected to improve more simply because they had more to learn, and because the learning curve is (as mentioned earlier) steeper at lower than at higher levels. On the other hand, students in the second cohort would start at a higher level of proficiency, would in principle be able to engage more with various academic tasks, and would be generally better prepared psychologically. As for the results of the tests one year after return, we expected students to have progressed further, albeit perhaps to a lesser degree than immediately after the SA, as previous studies had noted.

With regards to the non-linguistic measure of the effects of the SA (the typification of the target culture) I did not have strong hypotheses, although I expected SA2 to show perhaps slightly more stereotypical beliefs than SA3 in view of the greater amount of culture-based instruction available to the latter, and the study was largely exploratory.

### **3.4 Method**

The next sections describe the participants, research instrument and procedure of analysis.

### **3.5 Participants' profile**

A total of 48 students participated in the first tests pre-SA (see Table 2), but less students in both cohorts sat the post-SA test (a total of 27), due to a variety of circumstances: some extended their stay in Japan, some interrupted or changed degree,

some had work commitments, and timetabling issues were a problem for all. Several questionnaires had to be invalidated, due to incomplete or incoherent answers in some of the questions. Still fewer students agreed to be tested again one year after return, again because of circumstances like those described above. The almost halved participation rate after the SA, and the further reduced numbers in the test one year after return are a limitation of this study.

Cohort ↓	Timing→	<i>Before SA</i>	<i>After SA</i>	Total valid	<i>1 year after return</i>
<i>SA in year 2</i> (enrolled 2002/3)		30 (end of year 1)	17 (beginning of year 3)	17	8
<i>SA in year 3</i> (enrolled 2003/4)		18 (end of year 2)	10 (beginning of year 4)	10	7
total SA2 and SA3		48	36	27	15

**Table 2: cohort types, test timing, number of students tested**

This group approximately compares with Coleman’s study of UK learners of European languages with regards to sex- and age-based composition. However, we do not see the trend away from Single subject degrees mentioned in Coleman – in fact the contrary: roughly half the group are enrolled in the single subject degree (one quarter in Coleman’s study), of which percentually more are in the group enrolled later.

The language background of our students is not homogeneous: most of these students (60% vs. one quarter or more in Coleman’s sample) are not native speakers (NS) of English. Of these, half are NS of another European language, half of a logographic language. 15% have been raised as bi- or tri-lingual. This distribution is no doubt affected by SOAS’s unique role in the international academic map of Japanese studies, moreover located in a global city, and perhaps, by historically increasing student mobility.

With regards to the students’ background, 56% of our students have a history of Japanese study prior to enrolment. This refers to a big variety of learning contexts ranging from private tuition, evening classes, high school level language classes in England or other countries; in Japan, on short home-stay programmes or school exchanges, or enrolled in Japanese schools. The mean in months is 16.7 (ranging from 5 months to more than 10 years, which is twice to 4.5 times higher than in Coleman’s study), the median is 5. As for their level at enrolment, a placement test rated 71% as absolute beginners, with the remaining ones being allocated to two successive levels (false beginners and intermediate) in their first year at SOAS.

67% of students have also visited Japan prior to the SA, most of whom on holiday (this compares only with students of French and German in Coleman’s study, not with Spanish and Russian).

As for the reasons for studying Japanese, the three top answers are a mix of an instrumental reason (future career) and an interest in Japanese language and culture (to understand the Japanese way of life; because I like the language). Given the relative peculiarity of their choice of major (but numerous studies demonstrate that Japanese culture is now part of global youth culture), it may seem unsurprising that our students are more motivated by a specific interest in the culture of Japan than by a generic interest in foreign languages, but this result is remarkably consistent with Coleman’s

population of learners of European languages. None of our students chooses this course because of friends already studying Japanese, and although we note a few hits under 'people respect you more if you speak other languages' or 'my parents wanted me to', most seem to be intrinsically/internally motivated. 'Other' reasons include interest for Japanese fashion, being in a relationship with a Japanese person, or the wish to promote better economic and trading relationships with Japan.

On return from the period of SA, the vast majority of our students (93%) declare to have made 'some progress' during the year in Japan, and roughly half of the group declares that have made 'considerable progress'. This perception does not change in SA2 or SA3.

With regards to how they have coped, the great majority (74%) declares to have coped 'very well', and all the remaining students say they have coped 'sufficiently well', with comparatively more positive responses in SA3. This answer however needs to take into consideration that these subjects are those that accepted to be retested after the SA, which possibly eliminated those who had not had a positive experience.

The positive feelings developed during the SA are corroborated by another item in the questionnaire, according to which roughly 60% of the students declares that at the end of the SA they wished they could stay longer, with only 7% looking forward to return (again with SA3 being comparatively more oriented toward staying).

Students' feelings on return are commensurate to the relatively long period (one year) of residence, with more than half experiencing a sense of displacement, and another 30% declaring to have mixed feelings about it.

Study at home and SA compare in different ways for different students, with 30% agreeing that it is as motivating as studying at home, 44% agreeing to some extent and a 26% in disagreement. But the SA seems to be an intrinsically motivating factor perceived as having provided further motivation to study for 40% of the group, with another 52% agreeing to some extent (with SA3 again feeling more motivated). These results also confirms teachers' impression that, by and large, students see the period of SA as a rewarding experience and an organic component of the student's degree curriculum, with positive effects on future studies as well as a positive retrospective evaluation.

Interestingly, only 25.9% of the students do not agree that it is possible to improve in the home institution in the year following the SA to the same extent as they have during the SA (again, with proportionally more positive beliefs in the new system cohort).

### **3.5.1 Research instrument**

Because of the circumstances I described above and in order to avoid excessively burdening the students with yet another test on top of the many they had to sit as part of their degree requirements, it was important to design a test as economical as possible. Even though the test targeted only two main areas (vocabulary and cultural typifications) its administration required an hour, which was difficult for many.

The survey contains three sections: the first is dedicated to demographic information (illustrated above and replicating some of the questions in Coleman's 1996 survey of UK students), the second one to a vocabulary test, and the third to cultural perceptions.



The vocabulary test is based on the vocabulary section of the *Japanese Language Proficiency Test*, a standardized test administered by Japan's ministry of Education, designed to evaluate and certify the language proficiency of learners of Japanese, and offered annually to applicants throughout the world (SOAS is the institution hosting the test in the UK). 46 questions were selected from past tests that ranged from level 4 (beginner) to level 1 (advanced). The breakdown of the four levels, and the number of questions selected from each level, is as follows:

- 1 1926 *kanji* (or Sino-Japanese characters) and 8009 words (assumed to require at least 900 hours of study, but arguably more for English native speakers) – nine questions were selected from this level.
- 2 1023 *kanji* and 5035 words (assumed to require for around 600 hours and after completion of an intermediate course) – eighteen questions were selected from this level.
- 3 284 *kanji* and 1409 words (normally reached after studying Japanese for around 300 hours and after completion of an elementary course) – twelve questions were selected from this level.
- 4 103 *kanji* and 728 words (this level is normally reached after studying Japanese for around 150 hours and after completion of the first half of an elementary course) – seven questions were selected from this level.

The amount of questions from each level was designed to cover the proficiency level at which most students were likely to find themselves before and after the SA. Only about a third of these items were covered in the textbooks that the students would have used pre-SA, and hence the test was considered to be reliable in its measuring learning from other sources. None of the students, in any of the three administrations of the test, successfully completed all questions. This indicates that this test does not suffer from the ceiling effects mentioned in several other studies on vocabulary.

This multiple-choice test measures vocabulary knowledge through a range of tasks such as filling in gaps in sentences with a word selected from a multiple choice, matching synonyms, making judgments of morphosyntactic accuracy, matching definitions, and matching specific senses of a word.

The cultural typifications questionnaire tested students' perceptions of speakers of the students' L1, speakers of English when L1 was another language, and speakers of Japanese. Students were expected to rate, on a five-point Lickert scale, the two/three types of speakers on the basis of 24 evaluative adjectives, some of which replicated those used in Coleman's 1996 survey, and some which were derived from terms often found in ethnographic (and possibly stereotypical) descriptions of Japan (or their opposite, to minimize priming). The qualifications added were: modest, independent, individualist, caring.

### **3.5.2 Procedure**

The same test was administered three times (though the students were not informed in advance about the nature of the test) pre-SA, post-SA and one year after return, as shown in Table 2). In order to minimize the time demand on the (reduced) number of students who agreed to take the third test, it was decided to reduce its length by excluding the cultural typifications section of the questionnaire, and the time allocated

was correspondingly reduced. Various analyses were performed to find links between demographic data and performance data in the vocabulary and cultural typification tests.

The vocabulary test was used to measure vocabulary performance in two ways: changes in raw scores, and changes out of potential gain. The latter was calculated by subtracting each participant's pre-SA vocabulary score from the maximum possible number of scores (46, i.e. 46 minus pre-SA score). This provides a measure of the maximum number of words the participants could have learned during the SA period, and gain was measured against this.

The test on cultural typifications measured mean ratings of speakers of the student's LI, speakers of English when English was not the students' LI, and Japanese speakers, and how these ratings changed in the pre- and post-SA.

## **4 Results**

### **4.1 Vocabulary**

#### **4.1.1 Lexical gain**

The results of lexical gain for the two cohorts show significant differences in terms of absolute gains: SA2, which starts at a lower proficiency level, improves more than SA3. The lower proficiency group (late beginner level) therefore appears to benefit more than the higher proficiency group (intermediate level) from the period of SA. Previous studies have noted that this can be explained by a ceiling effect of the test. Although none of the students tested completed 100% of the questions, it may be that the higher the level, the less representative words in the sample became of the students' overall vocabulary competence, with uncommon words being more subject to random learning than common words.

However, when the comparison is made on the potential vocabulary growth (i.e. growth in relation to the range that could be gained) both groups behave quite similarly. In other words, in terms of percentage increase, regardless of the timing of the SA, both groups improve in the same way.

The group results mask considerable individual variation. As explained in 3.5 above, the students' backgrounds—and with that their proficiency levels pre-SA—are quite heterogeneous (hence the notional label of “year 1”, “year 2” are of relative significance) but such variation in performance tends to narrow in the course of the SA. In other words, lower scoring students gain proportionally more than higher scoring students, and differences tend to level out, a result consistent with previous studies on learners of European languages (cf Coleman 1996:45).

Incidentally, it could be noted that, after the first two years of study, the scores of the group that spends two years at a home institution are considerably lower than those who spend one year at home followed by a year in Japan (comparing SA2 post-SA results and SA3 pre-SA results). This is unsurprising if we think that, as described above (cf. paragraph 3.1), the new system of SA3 was devised to provide less intensive instruction (in the language) over the first year (albeit covering comparatively more ground over the overall pre-SA period) than the old system, but it can also be speculated that the SA indeed provides an ‘acceleration’ of the normal learning curve,

which tends to be even more dramatic when it takes place at lower proficiency levels. It should be noted however that the curriculum followed in the first year, not just that covered during SA (which we could not control), is partially different, hence SA3 cannot be considered an orthodox control group.

The performance of students in the year following return from the SA shows very marked within-group variation. Roughly a quarter of the students makes no progress, a fifth shows some regress, and slightly more than half the group make progress, but within a broad range of scores (from 9% to 55%). This is in stark contrast with the learning pattern during the period abroad, in which only one student showed no progress at all, and the groups' performance tended to become more homogeneous. Such variation is more marked in SA2 than in SA3, a result which could suggest that there may be some benefits in a delayed SA, but given the small sample size does not allow strong conclusions.

#### **4.1.2 Vocabulary gain predictors**

It appears that initial vocabulary knowledge is the main factor determining absolute vocabulary gain. Those with lower initial scores gain more, across both groups. In Milton and Meara's study, the highest scoring subjects seem to be more liable to show no progress or even decline (1995:25). In my study, only one student across both groups did not show any progress during the SA (and s/he is indeed a high scoring individual), while all of the others improve. This may well be a limitation of the sample size, but moreover, when the results of the third test, one year after return, are included, we found that students who show sign of no progress or even regress are not invariably the highest scoring ones.

Initial score does not, however, predict potential vocabulary gain, as similar percentages of improvement can be achieved from different initial scores.

#### **4.1.3 Mother tongue**

The students' LI seems to have an effect: non-native speakers of English improve more than native speakers out of potential gain. The questionnaire does not provide sufficient information about the students' previous experiences of language learning for us to interpret this result, but it would suggest that early acquisition of two or more languages accrues some advantages in learning additional languages. Whether this is to be interpreted as better cognitive skills (perhaps these students have better metalinguistic awareness, perhaps they are more skilled at learning and communications strategies) or better socio-affective skills (e.g. reduced anxiety in a foreign environment which facilitates further exposure and interactive participation) cannot be determined here, but it is clearly worthy of more focused research.

Somewhat surprisingly, native users of character-based writing systems did not show any advantage in either vocabulary scores, or gains.

#### **4.1.4 Age**

Age correlates to scores in pre-SA tests: an increase in age correlates to lower scores. This possibly accounts for the particular histories of so-called 'mature' students. However, age is not invariably a drawback (at least with regards to vocabulary growth), as it does not correlate to any other score or to gain, raw or potential.

#### **4.1.5 Previous visits to Japan**

Students who have visited Japan before do not perform differently from those who have not. This does not necessarily indicate that previous experience in the target culture does not have any effect on the students' performance, but rather that this effect is not noticeable with regards to vocabulary. 44% of the students declare to have been to Japan on holiday, and only 28% stayed with friends or family, arguably two rather 'shielded' settings, which perhaps do not necessarily require a strong degree of integration or engagement at a linguistic level.

#### **4.1.6 Previous study of Japanese**

Length of study of Japanese language prior to the SA correlates only with initial vocabulary score. This is a reassuring result in that it confirms the test's validity, yet it fails to prove previous knowledge an advantageous factor during the period of study abroad (a similar lack of evidence for the role of time spent in learning English prior to the SA was found in Milton and Meara's 1995:27). This is true both in terms of absolute gains, or out of potential gain. Other factors need to be considered in accounting for this result.

#### **4.1.7 Motivation: reasons for studying Japanese**

Unlike Coleman's study on European languages, motivation did not emerge as a discriminating factor in this research. Motivation was measured in two different ways. A first categorization grouped individual types of motivation into: integrative, instrumental and mixed, a second categorization into: cognitive vs. affective. Neither seemed to show any advantages of one type of motivation over another, with regards to vocabulary scores or gains. Unfortunately, the same questions about reasons for studying Japanese were not put to the students on return from the SA, and it has not been possible to investigate whether, and if so how, the SA does (as it has been suggested) change students' reasons for studying Japanese.

#### **4.1.8 Self-rating of linguistic progress**

Students' self-rating of linguistic progress after the SA appears to correlate to both potential vocabulary increase and raw scores. In other words, students' perception of their progress during the SA seems to be rather accurate (in line with Milton and Meara 1995's finding, p. 30).

As the question was put to the students in general terms and not in relation to vocabulary, their perception of an improvement in terms of general proficiency and the fact that it appears to be accurate could suggest support for the view that vocabulary improvement is perceived by learners as indicative of overall proficiency.

### **4.2 Cultural typifications**

#### **4.2.1 Group perceptions**

The two groups did not differ in overall perception of LI speakers and speakers of Japanese. The groups were homogeneous in terms of the percentage of British vs. non-British students and age, though not so for gender.

Moreover, due to the staggering of the SA period over two cohorts enrolled in subsequent years, the pre-SA tests actually took place two years apart from each other: this result shows that not only the timing of the SA within the curriculum, but also the absolute time of testing did not affect cultural images. These were the same across the two-year period.

Also, neither the students' motivation (cognitive, affective, mixed), nor their assessment of their response to the year abroad (have made/have not made progress) could be related to patterns of perception of LI and Japanese speakers.

#### **4.2.2 Perception changes pre- and post-SA**

The SA did not significantly change the students' perception of members of their own linguaculture. This result is somewhat at odd with the experience of many language teachers and academics who have spent long periods of time living and working in the target community. Many report a sense of 'reversed-culture shock' upon return to their home countries, as the experience abroad has given them new 'interpretive keys' to their native cultures, and are likely to alter their original representations. It is possible that the particular evaluative qualifiers utilized in the test are not sensitive to the specific aspects whose perception may have changed. But is of course possible that no 'restructuring' took place in the perception of fellow members of the speakers' native culture and that more time is necessary for this kind of reanalysis to take place. Images of the native culture would be naturally more rooted and stable than those of a culture one has been exposed to and has familiarized with for a much shorter time.

However, a change was found in the perception of speakers of Japanese, in a negative direction. Evaluative qualifiers were measured in terms of their valence (some were positive, some were negative and some neutral), and while positive qualities were rated less positively, negative ones were rated more negatively. This result is consistent with Coleman's findings on a much larger population, and it is similarly disconcerting.

However, my view is that this result should be interpreted with caution. Stereotyping has a 'facilitative' function when a learner must deal with the 'foreign' and the uninterpretable, and are invoked by learners (as 'assumed traditional values') when 'justifying' their new findings (Itakura 2004). Forming solid stereotypes can be seen as a kind of strategy to deal with the less-known, a strategy than is consequently less necessary when assessing one's own linguaculture, and a strategy that becomes less necessary with increased and successive contact. The 'worsening' perception of the target linguaculture does not invariably seem to equate to ethnocentrism, if, as this study revealed, overall, students rated Japanese speakers more positively than they rated speakers of their LI.

## **5 Summary**

This study confirms the hypothesis that all students improve as a result of studying in Japan. It bears out findings in previous studies that lower proficiency students are the ones that improve most during the SA. With regards to the two cohorts compared, SA in year 2 or 3 of a language degree curriculum, it found that the new system implemented at SOAS (SA3) did not give students a particular advantage with regards to vocabulary gains, both in terms of the scope of their improvement during the SA

(absolute scores), and in terms of the time it took to reach a certain level of proficiency (with the SA2 reaching a point x of proficiency in a shorter time, and having one more year of study at SOAS at their disposal after the SA). This however must be seen in line with the previous finding: SA3 is the higher proficiency group and predictably has less scope for improvement during the period abroad, and moreover it has a less intensive pre-SA linguistic curriculum which allows them to cover more culture-related studies than their counterparts. This, in conjunction with the consistently more positive responses obtained from the SA3 on self-rating (how they coped during the SA, their wish to remain in Japan had they had the opportunity, the sense that SA has provided further motivation to study at home), would seem to be a trade-off of smaller gains in vocabulary.

Moreover, although it is true that students in SA3 learn comparatively fewer words during the SA (they have less to learn), both groups in this study were found to behave similarly when the potential gain was taken into account. In this sense, it can be said that the SA was equally beneficial to both groups.

The study highlighted considerable variability in within-group performance, which however gets smaller during the SA. All students bar one improved during the SA, but their performance is again extremely variable in the year following the SA, with some students progressing, some staying at the same level, and some even regressing. Given that upon embarking in the post-SA year of study at SOAS students declared to feel overall fairly motivated and to entertain quite optimistic expectations about their ability to continue to improve at the same rate, the question arises as to what may be responsible for this decline. The academic demands of the post-SA SOAS language classes being generally rated quite high by the students themselves, it could be speculated that the assessment tool was not suited to measure the relevant lexical areas: vocabulary may develop in academic domains not captured by this test. Alternatively, other factors linked to the amount of exposure (in the years following SA ranging from 3 to 9 weekly hours depending on the students choice) would need to be further explored.

The timing of the year abroad did not have a bearing on the way cultural stereotypes were handled by the students. It seems that one additional year of instruction does not affect typifications in any significant way. Also in this regard, more detailed investigative tools may be required.

The study prompts the question of how best to support student's linguistic development and cultural awareness, both before and after the SA. The answer is not easy, as it has implications not only for course contents but also for programme structures - and probably generalizations are difficult when language specific resources and infrastructures are taken into consideration.

Further research on the less taught and less investigated languages of Asia and Africa will no doubt be beneficial to the field as a whole. Degrees that have comparable linguistic programmes but allow students a choice over whether to study abroad or not can provide particularly important results, given the dearth of studies including control groups. Likewise, detailed investigations of the specific conditions of SA, and the academic, social and cultural factors which have an impact on students' experience and performance are also hugely important to provide a more fine-grained picture of what makes a difference.

## Acknowledgments

This study was partially funded by a SOAS-UCL CETL grant. A huge thanks goes to Nozomi Yamaguchi and Kyoko Yoo for assisting with data input, and to Jean Marc Dewaele and Benedetta Bassetti for the statistical analyses. I also wish to thank Kazumi Tanaka, Miwako Kashiwagi and Misako Kanehisa for their precious assistance in administering the test and their comments on the student's experience. The biggest thank you goes to all the generous students who patiently endured yet another battery of tests on top of all the other gruelling examinations at SOAS.

## Contact

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**Appendix I: summary of demographic data**

	G1	G2	TOT (%)
<b>gender</b>			
female	11	4	15 (56%)
male	6	6	12 (44%)
<b>age</b>			
19-25	15	8	23 (85%)
26-35	1	2	3 (11%)
36-45	1	0	1 (4%)
<b>degree type</b>			
single subject	8	6	14 (54%)
joint subject	9	4	13 (46%)
<b>mother tongue</b>			
English	7	4	11 (41%)
other European	4	4	8 (30%)
other non-European	6	2	8 (30%)
bi/trilingual	4	0	4 (15%)
logographic L1	6	2	8 (30%)
<b>previous study of Japanese and length of study</b>			
not studied previously	5	7	12 (44%)
studied previously	12	3	15 (56%)
up to 1 year	5	2	7 (47%)
up to 2 years	3	1	4 (27%)
up to 3 years	2	0	2 (13%)
3 to 5 years	1	0	1 (7%)
more than 5 years	1	0	1 (7%)
<b>previous visits to Japan and reasons for visit</b>			
no	4	5	9 (33%)
yes	13	5	18 (67%)
holiday	6	2	8 (44%)
friends/relations	3	2	5 (28%)
other	3	2	5 (28%)
work	2	0	2 (11%)
language course	1	0	1 (6%)
<b>reasons for studying Japanese</b>			
future career	10	7	17 (63%)
to understand Japanese way of life	12	5	17 (63%)
like the language	12	5	17 (63%)
make Japanese friends	8	5	17 (48%)

wish to live in Japan	7	4	11 (41%)
travel	8	2	10 (37%)
meet various people	7	3	10 (37%)
other	6	1	7 (26%)
good at languages	2	4	6 (22%)
family ties	4	1	5 (19%)
international language	3	0	4 (11%)
people's respect	0	2	2 (7%)
necessary to own academic choice	1	1	2 (7%)
parents' wish	1	0	1 (4%)
friends were doing it	0	0	0 (0%)
<b>perception of progress post-SA</b>			
considerable progress	9	5	14 (52%)
some progress	7	4	11 (41%)
no progress	1	1	2 (7%)
<b>personal response</b>			
coped very well	11	9	20 (74%)
coped sufficiently	6	1	7 (26%)
did not cope well	0	0	0 (0%)
<b>at the end of the SA...</b>			
I wished I could stay longer	9	7	16 (59%)
had mixed feelings	6	3	9 (33%)
looked forward to returning	2	0	2 (7%)
<b>on return to the UK I..</b>			
am happy to be back	2	2	4 (15%)
am feeling displaced	10	5	15 (56%)
have mixed feelings	5	3	8 (30%)
<b>Studying at SOAS is as motivating as SA</b>			
agree completely	5	3	8 (30%)
agree to some extent	7	5	12 (44%)
do not agree	5	2	7 (26%)
<b>SA has motivated me to study further</b>			
agree completely	8	3	11 (40%)
agree to some extent	7	7	14 (52%)
do not agree	2	0	2 (7%)
<b>In the next year I expect to improve as much as during SA</b>			
agree completely	3	2	5 (19%)
agree to some extent	9	6	15 (56%)
do not agree	5	2	7 (26%)