

# Study abroad during a pandemic: The impact of remote learning and social distancing on student experiences

パンデミック時の海外留学：  
遠隔学習とソーシャルディスタンスが学生の経験に与える影響

Todd J. Allen                      Kris Ramonda  
トッド・ジェームス・アレン      クリス・ラモンダ

長期留学を経験した学生は、社会語用論的能力（例：Ren, 2013）、語彙の発達（例：Du, 2022）、第二言語でのライティング能力（例：Sasaki, 2011）において著しい向上を示すことが多い。しかし、パンデミックは留学プログラムに悪影響を及ぼした。特に、パンデミック時のソーシャルディスタンスの必要性で、教室の内外における対面での交流に制限が課せられたため、海外での学生生活全般が悪影響を受けた。

本研究は、2020年のパンデミック禍において、世界のいくつかの場所に留学した9名の日本人大学生へのインタビュー結果について報告する。参加者のインタビューデータは、共通するテーマに従ってコード化され分類・分析された。その結果、オンラインの学習形式と生活環境のあり方が、学生の経験に最も大きな影響を与えることが分かった。例えば、インタラクティブなオンラインのクラスは、より楽しいものとして認識された。同様に、他の人々と一緒に暮らし、毎日交流できた人は、より良い経験を報告した。

キーワード

study abroad; student experiences; remote learning; COVID-19; social distancing

## 1 Introduction

Studying abroad is an adventure where students challenge themselves in positive ways. Studying abroad is also a time of personal and academic growth, and experiencing new languages and cultures. Previous researchers have defined study abroad as “a temporary, pre-scheduled educational stay in a country where the target language is spoken among community

members” (Taguchi, 2018, p. 127). Students may use this time to acquire language skills, develop interpersonal and intercultural abilities, and engage in academic pursuits.

In the literature, scholars have outlined many different forms of study abroad programs. For example, students may undertake short courses or specially arranged modes of study, integrated or reciprocal exchange, faculty-led study abroad, and long-term and short-term programs (Whalen, 2008). However, the program investigated in this study is one that is fully coordinated and integrated into the home university’s curriculum. Specifically, this is a program that is a compulsory and incorporated component of the undergraduate degree, where students undertake study in language skills and university content courses abroad (focusing on areas relevant to the home faculty).

For many second language learners, participation in study abroad presents a unique opportunity for both cultural immersion and language development. Given the growing importance of international experience and second language communicative competence in an increasingly globalized world, it should come as no surprise that study abroad is an attractive option for many students around the world. However, in January 2020, a pandemic was declared, and countries began to shut down in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (WHO, 2020; Allen, 2021). This shutdown has had major economic, social, and education effects around the world (Feyisa, 2020; Liu & Shirley, 2021; Marinoni et al., 2020). For example, in the study abroad education space, as borders closed, programs were cancelled or transformed, and students needed to make the difficult decision to return home or remain in their host country. Both students who remained in their host country and those who chose to return home had to shift their studies to an emergency remote learning mode, which was a new experience for most people, and possibly entailed some undesirable learning conditions for study abroad.

In particular, the need to socially distance (that is, maintain physical distance between individuals in social contexts) runs counter to many of the fundamental cornerstones of what is considered a successful study abroad experience—both inside and outside of the classroom (Karasmanaki & Tsantopoulos, 2022). In terms of formal language study within the host country, many L2 learners have been forced to attend class remotely, using widely available software such as Zoom, which could contribute to limiting their opportunities for meaningful face-to-face interactions with their classmates (Hodges et al., 2020). While skeptics might argue that such remote learning can produce learner outcomes rivaling that of in-class learning, it is at least questionable the degree to which remote learning can optimally substitute for the real-time interaction and spontaneity an in-class language-focused learning environment can provide (Allen, 2021; Kim, 2021). Moreover, the notion of investing a substantial amount of time and

resources to relocate overseas only to access one's class from the confines of one's dormitory or homestay accommodation can be understandably demoralizing for many L2 learners in a study abroad context.

Previous literature has documented students' academic and interpersonal development in various ways during study abroad (Doyle, 2009). However, this pandemic has created a situation where students have needed to adjust to emergency remote teaching and learning as well as deal with the challenges of study abroad (e.g., culture shock). Limited research has detailed how teachers and students have managed this issue. In the next section, we discuss the literature surrounding study abroad, including the benefits and challenges, as well as the impact of the pandemic on such programs.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Study abroad benefits and challenges

Previous researchers have documented the various challenges and benefits of study abroad across a number of key areas such as personal growth, linguistic and intercultural development, and academic enculturation (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Gong et al., 2020; Paige et al., 2009). Table 1 outlines the general benefits and challenges of study abroad.

Table 1 *Key Benefits and Challenges of Study Abroad*

Benefits	Challenges
Improve language skills	Feeling like an outsider
Experience different styles of teaching	Difficulties with language and cultural barriers
Expand social networks	Homesickness and loss of usual support network
Learn new cultures and perspectives	Feeling lonely, anxious, and depressed
Develop confidence and other interpersonal skills	Fear of missing out
Gain experience in another cultural context	Culture shock

Scholars have found that students report both positive and negative experiences during their study abroad (e.g., Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011). While some students report difficulties with adjusting to a new cultural and linguistic context (e.g., Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016), students also noted that these experiences are "life changing" in many positive ways (e.g., making lifelong friends, interpersonal growth, career opportunities). Many of these experiences remain with the sojourner for many years after their study abroad has ended. Students have reported that they grow and mature through their experiences (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012).

While students develop tangible skills through academic study, it is through socialising in the local context that they develop more advanced intercultural communicative competence and interpersonal skills as well (Nguyen, 2017).

## 2.2 Impact of the pandemic on study abroad

Previous scholars have also explored how study abroad programs have experienced and managed crisis situations in the past. For example, scholars have shown how study abroad has responded to crises such as natural disasters, security incidents, and other dangerous situations (e.g., Coryell et al., 2016; Omari et al., 2022). These studies have shown how preparedness and flexibility are vital during these times. More recently, scholars have begun examining the effects of the pandemic across various educational contexts (e.g., Allen, 2021) and have found similar findings.

Specific to study abroad, however, researchers are now beginning to document how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected various elements of student mobility and education. Broadly, the pandemic has impacted physical mobility, caused a downturn in revenue, and thus forced cuts to programs, and has negatively affected internationalization (Mok et al., 2021). More specifically, previous studies have examined how the pandemic has impacted upon the management of programs, students undertaking various forms of international education, online learning and language acquisition, and intercultural skill development (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Ando, 2020; Liu & Shirley, 2021; Ohito et al., 2021).

From a negative perspective, Pedersen et al. (2021) qualitatively examined U.S. students' experiences of study abroad during the pandemic. Using surveys, 593 participants reported on the various challenges they faced during the pandemic while studying abroad. The participants reported that they were unable to experience study abroad in a traditional sense, and therefore missed a valuable learning opportunity. Furthermore, the participants also reported that they suffered financial loss, experienced issues traveling (in-country and attempting to return home), and of course felt academic pressures. The authors noted that participants reported that they experienced emotional trauma. Specifically, students experienced "emotional trauma... being abroad when the pandemic broke and the need to scramble and return home as soon as possible without much time to plan" (p. 78). While the participants experienced this while abroad, the authors noted that some participants may suffer longer term mental health issues even after they have returned to the U.S.

While studies have examined the negative impacts of study abroad experiences during the pandemic, others have offered more positive insights. Using interviews and questionnaires, Liu

and Shirley (2021) examined the impact of COVID-19 on U.S. students' intercultural competency through online study abroad. They found that if online study abroad programs were redesigned to include more interactivity (e.g., incorporation of VR technology), such programs could be highly successful. Furthermore, they found that online intercultural programs could be successful if they were fully transformed into Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), where curriculum development focuses on effective pedagogy, intercultural learning, and technology. Overall, the study supports previous research which suggests that, "successful technology integration can promote intercultural learning during study abroad" (p. 183), making such programs worthwhile for students.

Scholars have also suggested that the pandemic will continue to impact study abroad programs into the future. Mok et al. (2021) noted that students pursuing study abroad will look to countries that have managed the pandemic in positive and safe ways and will prefer destinations that are closer to their home countries as uncertainty remains. In the case of their study, Mok et al. (2021) claimed that:

Compared with the traditional pull-push factors for international student mobility, the COVID-19 pandemic has re-ordered the factors that students are considering to study abroad. As health and safety become the primary concerns for Mainland China and Hong Kong students under the pandemic, the neighbouring East Asian countries and regions, such as Hong Kong (for Mainland students), Japan and Taiwan, become their first few options due to their expected better management of the pandemic and post-pandemic crisis, apart from their close proximity to Mainland China and Hong Kong. (p. 9)

This section has described some of the studies that have examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on study abroad students and programs. As few studies have examined how Japanese students perceived the pandemic during their study abroad experience, in this study<sup>1</sup>, we aim to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What pandemic-related negative effects do participants perceive to impact their study abroad experience?
- 2) What pandemic-related positive effects do participants perceive to impact their study abroad experience?

In the next section, we describe the methodology adopted in the current study.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants and Study Context

Nine undergraduate (six females and three males) students based at a Japanese university participated in this study<sup>ii</sup>. These participants were English majors in a foreign language faculty whose program requires a one-year study abroad during the participants' second year of study at a designated partner university. In this highly structured program, students in their first year of study focus on honing their English skills and prepare to study abroad by attending related workshops and familiarizing themselves with the various overseas programs available to them. In their second year of study, students study abroad in programs at one of over a dozen partner universities, each of which has an appointed coordinator in charge of overseeing the daily and academic needs of the students. The study abroad program is a mandatory component of their undergraduate program, where they must complete study for one academic year. During their study abroad program, students complete language courses and academic studies across five areas of focus: (1) language analysis, (2) intercultural communication, (3) language education, (4) interpreting and translation, and (5) area studies. Pre-pandemic, students also typically undertake various extracurricular activities such as volunteering, internships, and other integration-based activities. These programs are offered in various countries and regions such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and Asia. Upon reentry to their home university in Japan for their third and fourth year of study, students begin to specialize in more linguistics-related content courses (chosen from the five areas of focus listed above). The participants in this study had recently returned from abroad and were beginning their third year of study.

#### 3.2 Semi-structured Interviews and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all nine participants. Semi-structured interviews are a qualitative data collection method that asks questions within a prearranged thematic framework (Bearman, 2019; Brown & Danaher, 2019). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted using Zoom and were 30-45 minutes in duration.

Interview questions were developed to elicit wide-ranging perspectives on participants' study abroad experiences (Kallio et al., 2016). Themes of questions included noticing cultural differences, perspectives on culture shock and intercultural conflict, feelings about cultural activities and interaction with local residents, and their perceptions about study abroad during the pandemic. However, in this study, specific questions posed to participants included:

- How has COVID-19 affected your interaction?
- How has COVID-19 affected your study abroad experience in general?
- Were there any unexpected positive aspects of your study abroad experience as a result of COVID-19? If yes, what were they?
- What strategies have you taken to get the most out of your study abroad experience despite COVID-19?
- What could your host university do better to provide you with the kind of study abroad experience that you expected?

Participants were encouraged to respond openly and were given ample opportunity to answer in their own time. The interviews were conducted in English, but at times where participants could not understand the questions, a mix of Japanese and English was used. After transcribing participant interviews, they were imported into NVivo (software ideal for managing and organizing qualitative data) (version 1.6.2). The data were then coded to facilitate analysis, which are explored in the next section.

## 4 Results

The analysis of the data revealed numerous perceived negative and positive effects the coronavirus had on the participants' overseas experience, as well as a variety of strategies participants employed to cope with studying abroad under the restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

Participants reported a wide range of perceived negative effects as a result of studying abroad during a pandemic. Table 2 broadly summarizes these data into basic categories.

*Table 2 Overview of Perceived Negative Effects*

<b>Limitations</b>	<b>Difficulties</b>
Many Travel Restrictions	Lack of Motivation
Fewer Casual Interactions	Unfamiliarity with Online Learning
Lack of Cultural Immersion	Diminished Personal Connection (Online)

In terms of the limitations participants reported perceiving, the three most frequent were the inability to travel freely, the limited quantity of interactions with new people, and the lack of cultural immersion opportunities. Participants also reported some difficulties associated with their study abroad experience during a pandemic, including a decreased motivation to learn, as well as trouble adapting to learning in a virtual setting and problems with using various tech-

nological platforms, such as Zoom. Furthermore, some participants perceived feeling a diminished personal connection with others when interacting in an online environment.

Limitations on travel, while not surprising, went beyond simply taking a trip somewhere. Participants reported frustration at not being able to take part in everyday activities, such as going shopping or commuting to the grocery store. Such travel limitations also help account for the perceived limitations on social interactions and cultural immersion, as there were fewer opportunities to interact with new people or experience everyday life in the culture. It is important to note that interactions here refer to the number of social interactions with new people. Under certain circumstances, such as those in a homestay program, some participants reported that the pandemic had a positive effect on the quality of their interactions among a smaller network of close relationships (see the Discussion section for further discussion).

While the impact of the pandemic overall appeared to produce more negative than positive effects, participants surprisingly reported on a number of positive aspects, which are summarized below in Table 3.

*Table 3 Overview of Perceived Positive Effects*

<b>Learning</b>	<b>Relationships</b>
Increased Study Time	Enhanced Homestay Experience
Increased Proficiency with Online Tools	Higher Quality Interactions
More Opportunities to Ask Questions	Improved Text-Based Communication

The positive effects the pandemic had on the participants' study abroad experience fell broadly into two categories: learning and relationships. As a result of both social distancing and travel restrictions, most participants reported having increased time to focus on study, as well as increased proficiency using online tools, especially those relating to online learning, such as developing familiarity with the functions of Zoom and other classroom-related online platforms and learning management systems. Interestingly, one student reported that it was easier to "speak up" in class and ask questions via Zoom, which has potential pedagogical implications for teaching students who feel unease or anxiety asking questions in front of their peers in class.

Surprisingly, and in contrast with participants having fewer opportunities for novel interactions, participants who took part in a homestay program tended to report, or at least imply that the pandemic led to a more meaningful and deeper relationship with their host family. The primary reason for this perception was that due to travel restrictions, they would spend far more time than otherwise with their host family, and an unintended consequence was greater overall perceived bonding between the participants and their host family members. It should be



noted that these higher quality interactions did not seem to extend to those staying in a dormitory without shared living quarters. Aside from in-person relationships, some students also perceived their text-based communication improved significantly as a result of having to conduct so much of their correspondence through email, messaging applications, and other online tools.

## 5 Discussion

An analysis of the results revealed that studying abroad during a pandemic tends to lead to both positive and negative effects, as perceived by the participants. While numerous negative effects were expected, there was a surprising number of positive effects as well. Though this study involved only a small number of participants, the initial data seem to suggest that there might be two primary determinants of this divide between positive and negative effects: the format of online learning and the kind of housing (shared living quarters or not). In the case of the former determinant, while generally speaking, face-to-face lessons provide learners with an optimal learning environment that most students likely prefer (see Cheng & Agyeiwaah, 2022), an online learning platform could potentially encourage communication and facilitate learning under certain circumstances for a particular kind of learner. Concerning the participants' housing situation, a homestay-based experience appears to produce more positive effects than a dormitory-based one, and this seems to be related to the number of people the sojourner lived in close quarters with. Both of these determinants have important implications for study abroad during a pandemic and merit close examination.

### 5.1 Online Learning Format

One pattern that emerged from the data concerning online instruction was a general dissatisfaction with the quality of the lessons. However, close analysis revealed that some of the reasons for this dissatisfaction stemmed from avoidable conditions. For example, a complaint echoed by multiple participants was that it was difficult to feel connected to the other students, and one reason for this was that most would leave their video turned off and not actively engage in communication. As one participant said,

I think motivation towards English decreased a little bit when the face-to-face class turns to online class because some people, some classmates didn't show their face in the Zoom. Most people hide their face and then mute their voice.

While this might not necessarily be a problem in a lecture or content-based course, it is understandable that students might feel demoralized or discontented in a language learning environment in which active participation and communication between the students in the class are essential elements driving language acquisition and fostering rapport among classmates. Intentionally leaving one's video turned off might also signal to others a disinterest in the course content and dissuade communication from their interlocutors. One potential solution would be to require all students to keep their videos turned on, both in plenary and in smaller groups (e.g., so-called "breakout rooms" on Zoom). This might be somewhat difficult to enforce when students are separated into small virtual rooms for groupwork and group discussion, but clearly stating this as a matter of classroom policy and making a conscious effort, on part of the course instructor, would help address this issue with no discernible downsides.

This issue of enforcement of certain classroom policies connects broadly to a potentially more intractable problem of lack of student monitoring in an online learning environment. While in a face-to-face classroom environment the instructor can survey and monitor multiple groups simultaneously, this is not possible in practice via popular online learning platforms such as Zoom. Due to the nature of virtual "breakout rooms," the instructor can only enter these rooms one at a time, and if the class has many students, it is likely difficult to ensure that the students in each room are actively engaged and working through their assigned activities and tasks as intended. This sentiment was expressed by one participant who noted,

Because of the Zoom, the teacher cannot monitor every group at the same time.

While this issue will be challenging to overcome completely, reducing the number of students per class should allow instructors to make better use of discussion in plenary where the instructor can monitor and facilitate as necessary, as well as allocate more time monitoring each group when students go into their respective breakout rooms.

Aside from these addressable problems, there was also some indication that an online learning environment might be superior to face-to-face instruction for certain students under specific conditions. One participant commented that she was always reluctant to speak up in her regular face-to-face classes due to feeling embarrassed. She indicated she was somewhat shy and would normally speak in a soft voice in class making it difficult for the instructor to hear her clearly, and this was the source of her chagrin. On Zoom, on the other hand, she said it was far easier for the teacher to hear her while speaking directly into her microphone, and this gave her additional confidence to talk in class and ask questions. Although anecdotal, this

insight may be useful for future research investigating the degree to which online classroom environments are suitable for students who suffer from anxiety or shyness. Given that shyness and silence in the classroom in Japan is a well-documented phenomenon (see Harumi, 2011; see also Humphries et al., 2020), such investigations might prove especially fruitful.

## 5.2 Homestay and Dormitory

The second major finding in this study was that some participants who lived with a host family attributed the pandemic to having increased the quality of their interactions with their host family members. The primary reason given was that due to travel limitations, participants and host family members alike were forced to spend far more time than they otherwise would at home. An unintended consequence of this, as perceived by these participants, was an increase in the overall bonding they felt they formed with the host family members. Participants also perceived that these deeper and more meaningful relationships with host family members led to enhancing their L2 language ability due to the greater number of interactions. One participant remarked,

The time to communicate with my host family has increased—not increased, how can I say—we have more time to talk with the host family. I realized that education is really important and I realized the value because of the COVID-19.

While homestay study abroad participants seemed to benefit from the quarantine imposed by the pandemic in terms of their at-home interactions, this did not appear to be the case for most of the dormitory-based participants. The primary reason was because the majority of these participants lived in private or semi-private living quarters, so there were few opportunities to communicate with others during the lockdown. It should be noted that a participant who shared a room with others reported that,

Thanks for COVID, I could talk with a lot of my roommate. I could make deep, deep relationship with them.

This suggests that if one does not have a homestay option, choosing a dormitory with shared accommodation might provide a means to alleviate some of the major drawbacks the pandemic and its associated lockdown have on participants' study abroad experience.

Though the evidence in this study is preliminary and limited, it appears that shared living

quarters, be it in a homestay or dormitory, might be an important variable for increasing the satisfaction of participants who study abroad during a pandemic. These findings are also consistent with study abroad related research on interpersonal relationships during the pandemic (Thorson et al., 2022). In particular, homestay participants consistently reported the positive effects the lockdown had on their interactions with their host family. Also, despite travel restrictions, some participants reported an increased sense of connection with others when opportunities for interactions presented themselves. As one participant noted,

I can feel connection between people more – like more sensitively.

In a similar vein, another participant said,

The positive things is that I feel like people's relationships is bond after the lockdown because I walk in the street, many neighbors greet me, like hello or something like that, even though they are stranger. Also, I often have some board game with my host family, but before the lockdown, we've never done it.

Further research with a targeted focus on measuring the quality and depths of interactions among study abroad students should shed more light on the degree to which this applies to participants in different contexts.

### 5.3 Limitations

This study was limited by its small number of participants and convenience sampling, and thus the resulting data should be viewed as a preliminary step in identifying these areas of concern. The participants were English majors and primarily female, so future research in this area could benefit from specifically examining in depth the determinants identified here to better ascertain whether these findings can be supported with a larger and more balanced pool of study abroad returnees.

## 6 Conclusion

In spite of the many benefits offered by study abroad, it can be a sizable investment of time, money, and resources. Because of this, it is imperative that potential sojourners carefully consider the options and conditions of the various study abroad programs available to them so

that they maximize their opportunities for a successful and rewarding experience while overseas. This is especially true of study abroad during a pandemic, as variables such as the online learning format and housing options during a socially distanced lockdown seem to substantially impact the quality of one's study abroad experience. This study, while small and exploratory in design, discovered that among the participants these two variables appeared to matter the most. Based on these findings, we tentatively recommend that administrators and educators involved in study abroad consider taking steps to minimize the potential negative effects associated with study abroad during a pandemic.

Firstly, in order to allow for a greater sense of personal connection via online learning platforms, instructors could actively encourage students to keep their web cameras turned on during online lessons, both in plenary discussion and in smaller virtual rooms (e.g., "breakout rooms" on Zoom). Aside from the potential to reduce the emotional distance felt between the interlocutors, this might also lead to increased participation and comprehension, as students can observe visual cues and gestures that could help them understand the L2 input and engage more with their group members. While this may seem like a sensible and somewhat obvious recommendation to some, it is clear from the data that the problem of students keeping their cameras turned off is not uncommon, so explicit attention to this issue is warranted.

Secondly, to the extent that shared living quarters are safe during a pandemic, sojourners should be provided with the choice of a homestay or, at minimum, a dormitory with roommate options. While in normal times, sojourners are free to seek out opportunities to develop their language proficiency and form relationships with others, a socially distanced lockdown can greatly limit these opportunities. It therefore becomes far more important that the sojourners can arrange a housing situation that supports their language development and fosters relationship building, as these are two important aspects of a study abroad experience. Taking adequate measures in light of these recommendations could lead to greater satisfaction among study abroad participants when the next pandemic occurs.

#### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the participants for volunteering for our study.

This research was supported by Grants-in-Aid for Early Career Scientists (19K13307 and 19K13279).

### Notes

- i This study was first presented at JALT 2021, and we would like to thank the attendees for their thoughtful questions and recommendations.
- ii Kansai University Faculty of Foreign Language Studies/Graduate School of Foreign Language Education Ethical Committee approved this study (Examination Number: 19-24). Both researchers completed ethics training (eLCoRE) provided by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science.

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