

## 留学から帰国後の話： 日本人の大学生のケースストーリーの調査

ラブリーエスター

本稿では、日本人の大学生にフォーカスし、留学の経験が勉強の状況、キャリアの進路に与える影響について考察する。留学の主な利益として語学力の向上、国際感覚の育成、異文化理解の促進、人脈の拡大に役に立つことが知名度を上げている。主体性や行動力も養われることも良く認めている。しかし、近年日本から留学に行く大学生の人数が減少している傾向があるため、学生の留学に行く数を確保する効果的な方法を調べる必要がある。先行研究では、コロナ禍前の大学生と比較するとコロナ禍後の大学生の留学に行くモチベーションが変化した (Nakagawa et al, 2025)。コロナ禍後の学生は留学の経験は就職活動にどのような影響を与え、どうやってその経験を活かせるかに集中している。そのため、留学の経験のある学生の勉強、就職活動、キャリア進路等について調査が求められる。本研究では2016年にアメリカで留学した経験のある日本人の大学生を2名募集し、2017年から2018年まで半構造化インタビューを4回行った。最初のインタビューの内容は留学の経験、アメリカの文化の印象、帰国した後の感覚、現時点の生活等だった。以後のインタビューでは就職活動、キャリア進路に併せて、趣味の活動と友人の関係とソーシャルメディアの利用の習慣も含め、研究参加者の話をより深く調査した。インタビューのデータをナラティブ分析 (Barkhuizen et al, 2013) を通して留学がどのような影響を残したかを表す目的としてケースストーリーの形で1名の研究参加者の経験について示す。アメリカに留学する最初の動機は英語力向上だった。しかし、アメリカで香港人留学生と交流し、帰国した後で日本にいる中国人の留学生、外国人と交流するモチベーションが高くなった。そして、中国語を勉強し始め、将来アジアの国で営業する夢を目指すようになったことも結果に出た。留学に行くことを考えている学生は本稿に示したケースストーリーから留学の後の進路の例を見ることができる。

# **Life after study abroad: case story of a Japanese university student**

By Esther Lovely

## **Introduction**

This paper analyses and discusses the experiences of a Japanese university student who participated in two study abroad programs in the U.S. during her undergraduate degree. After her return, I conducted a series of qualitative joint interviews with her and one of her classmates over the course of about six months, from November 2017 to April 2018. The interviews focused on eliciting the students' experiences of reverse culture shock and adjustment after their return to Japan, and the ways it influenced their subsequent personal and career choices. The case story I constructed from the interview data captures a detailed account of the immediate aftermath of study abroad and the variety of personal growth outcomes that resulted from study abroad for a Japanese student.

## **Background**

In an effort to promote students' development and increase their global competitiveness, among other reasons, universities worldwide are encouraging their students to participate in international exchange pro-

grams (Nowlan & Wang, 2018; Patterson et al, 2025). Students may have the opportunity to go overseas for short, intensive study tours of a few weeks, to semester-long or even year-long extended study programs. While students of a range of different fields of study may choose to study abroad, it is particularly beneficial for students studying a foreign language. Study abroad enables foreign language majors to gain experience using their target language in context, so improving language skills in an immersive linguistic and cultural environment can be a strong motivator (Nakagawa et al, 2024; Gautier & Chevrot, 2025).

The benefits of university study abroad programs for other aspects of students' personal growth have also been well-documented, with studies throughout the 2000s and 2010s identifying impacts on areas including intercultural competence, independence and self-confidence, awareness of cultural diversity, self-efficacy and cultural intelligence (Hanada, 2019; Rosenbaum et al, 2025). In addition, universities commonly have a "student testimonials" page where returned students describe and reflect on their study abroad experience, usually emphasizing the cultural knowledge they gained, their personal growth through study abroad, and the friendships they formed during their time overseas (Taniguchi et al, 2025). However, Hanada (2019) pointed out that most existing studies on study abroad explore the experiences of students from Anglosphere countries. Thus, there is a need for more studies on Japanese study abroad students, and the culturally-specific benefits they may gain from their overseas experiences.

In Japan, there have been concerns that the number of students committed to participating in study abroad programs has been declining

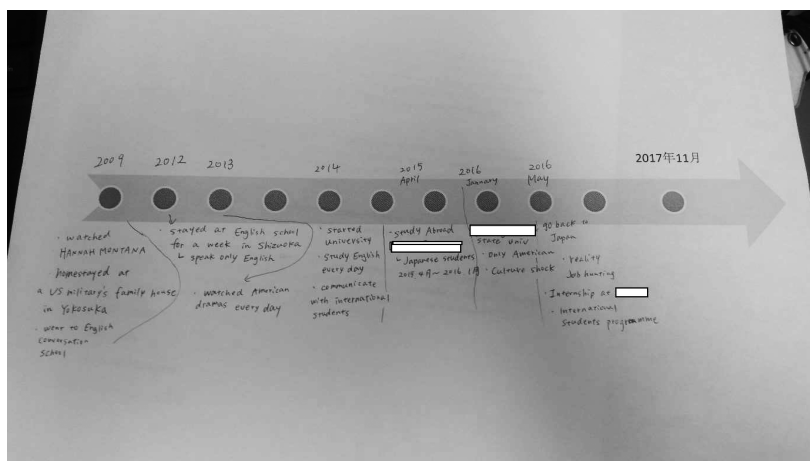
(Nowlan and Wang, 2018), despite the government's efforts to promote internationalisation of higher education. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating effect on study abroad. Not only were programs cancelled during the pandemic due to travel restrictions and safety concerns, but online study abroad and virtual exchange programs, which were introduced as an emergency solution at the time, have gained popularity as an alternative to physical travel (Nakagawa, 2023). Therefore, it is imperative that universities are aware of the specific benefits of in-person study abroad, and convey these to students in order to maintain exchange programs and enhance students' university experience.

With these aims in mind, I present a case story of a Japanese university student's study abroad and the 1.5 years (approximately) after her return. By capturing rich detail about her thoughts and feelings, her activities and relationships, the case story reveals a variety of ways her study abroad experience influenced her. The relationships she formed overseas during her studies further developed her interest in cultures and opportunities outside Japan, and inspired her to try new challenges. These also shaped her developing career goals, leading her towards a potential future outside Japan.

## Method

### Participant recruitment

In November 2017, I attended a welcome reception for English faculty students and international exchange students at T university. At this event I was given permission to introduce myself to the students as a



Above: Figure 1. Timeline of major events in Momo's life

visiting researcher on campus, and asked for volunteers for my project. During the event four students approached me and expressed their interest in being interviewed. In the end, due to changes in the focus of my project, I only held interviews with the two Japanese female students, named Momo and Akari (names have been changed for privacy).

Momo and Akari had both recently returned from study abroad in the U.S. Akari had gone abroad for one semester, about three months, while Momo had gone for about nine months. At the time of the interviews, they were finishing the 4<sup>th</sup> and final year of their undergraduate degrees.

## Participant interviews

In order to capture detailed accounts of the participants' experiences, including their thoughts and feelings, I chose to conduct qualitative

semi-structured interviews over a period of several months (Smith, 1995; Silverman, 2013). By doing this I was able to track changes that occurred in the participants' lives and gain insight into their thoughts and ideas as they developed over time. I also had the participants construct visual timelines of major events (Figure 1), which served as a memory aid and conversation starter. Visual timelines have been highlighted as a useful aid in qualitative interviewing. When talking about a participant's life events and experiences, creating a visual timeline of events helps to establish a chronological order. It also provides something concrete for the research participant to reflect on and elaborate on the information in the timeline (Olmo-Extremera et al, 2024; Sexton & Bauermeister, 2021). This was especially helpful early on as a way to build rapport with the participants and begin the interview.

The interviews were held jointly and conducted in Japanese, with occasional words and utterances in English for humour, emphasis and clarification. I met with the participants at the university campus in a students' lounge area, and on one occasion in a family restaurant. I had an initial meeting with them both, where I provided them with participant information forms and consent forms that I had designed. At this time, I also answered any questions they had about the project and the interview procedure.

I communicated with participants via a LINE chat group to arrange each interview. The interviews were audio recorded and then relevant portions transcribed and translated by myself into English. I typed out summaries for each of the interviews, then read them through, highlighting utterances that were related to the research themes of the project. I

organised the information from each interview into a table, separating Momo's responses from Akari's and then adding a third column for responses that the two shared in common. I then arranged these into chronological order and constructed case stories for each participant. This method is espoused by researchers such as Barkhuizen (2011; Barkhuizen et al, 2013), who states that the analysis is embedded in the construction of the case story.

### **Research journal**

Throughout the interviews I also kept a research journal in the form of a Word document. Miyahara (2015) has advocated for the importance and benefits of reflective journaling during qualitative research. In my research journal for this project I mainly reflected on the interview process. I described the setting and atmosphere of the interviews, the demeanour and tone of the participants during the interviews, my thoughts and impressions of the participants, and my evaluation of the "success" of the interviews. This was very helpful in providing added context to the audio recordings, and allowing me to reflect on my positionality as a researcher and how I interacted with the participants.

### **Results**

At my first pre-interview meeting with the participants (31 October, 2017) they both expressed concerns that they would not be suitable interviewees as they claimed to have forgotten much of their study abroad experience. They seemed to think that I was mainly interested in documenting cultural differences they had encountered, and culture shock

they had experienced. However, I assured them that I was interested in gaining a broader understanding of their study abroad and their experience after returning to Japan. During the meeting, Momo's enthusiasm grew noticeably and she seemed to have a lot she wanted to share. In contrast, Akari was less forthcoming and more reserved. Despite this impression, after the meeting, both students agreed to participate in the study.

## Momo's story

When she was a 2<sup>nd</sup> year university student, Momo went to A university in the U.S. north-east from April 2015 to January 2016 as an exchange student, along with a group of students from her home university. She recalled being surprised at how dirty and run-down the public transport was compared to Japan, and the number of homeless people living in the area. Before going to America Momo had loved watching American TV shows such as "Glee" and "Friends". Based on her impressions from the characters in these shows, Momo expected American people to be very expressive, bright, and outgoing (明るい) (Interview 1, 2017/11/22), but this was not the case at all, they were just normal (全然違った。普通だった。) (Interview 1, 2017/11/22). During her exchange, students were also taken on a tour bus to see various sights around the city. Momo enjoyed the chance to be able to see places that they had learned about in class.

At A university, Momo found a language exchange partner via the internet and connected with some American people with whom she did



language exchange. These language exchange partners included students and working professionals. Momo became closest with a Chinese American female student who was proficient in Japanese language. The two of them often went out together. Unfortunately, because her new friend's Japanese was so good, they communicated more in Japanese, even though Momo's intention had been to practice and improve her English.

After her study program ended at A university, Momo chose to study for an extra semester at B university, a public university in the same state. In comparison to her exchange at A university, Momo's experience at B university, where she took classes with local students all in English, was very stressful. Momo asked her professors for help occasionally, but made an effort to tackle her class assignments by herself first, based on what she was able to understand. There were times, she said, where she thought she wouldn't make it, hyperbolically claiming that she felt like she was going to die (死にそうだった。) (Interview 1, 2017/11/22). Yet this, Momo said, felt like it was a more authentic experience of the U.S. than her time at A university. Looking back on the experience, she said that ideally students should try studying at a local university in an all-English environment, away from other students from their home university (Interview 2, 2018/01/24).

Momo made friends with a Hong Kong exchange student at B university and through that friend's connections was also able to befriend local American students. Later in 2016 Momo even travelled to Hong Kong to meet up with these friends. Even though there were difficult and stressful times, Momo felt that the friends she made during her study abroad were extremely kind and very special to her. At the time

of our interview over a year later, she said that to her surprise, they still messaged her occasionally via Facebook.

Momo recalled that she cried during her flight back to Japan in May 2016 when her study abroad ended, as she was sad that she didn't know when she would be able to meet her friends again. I suggested that perhaps she also felt that upon returning to Japan she might not have another opportunity to live overseas. Momo responded that she didn't know if she would necessarily stay in Japan forever, implying that living outside Japan was a viable option for her in the future.

Upon her return, she was hit with “reality” (Timeline diagram, 2017/11/22). Momo started job hunting and also participated in activities to help support international exchange students at her home university in Japan. She said that initially she had wanted to return to the U.S., but over time this feeling faded and she felt better about being in Japan again. Her retransition to life in Japan seemed to be mostly smooth, except that she recalled negative reactions from her friends and family when she wore short sleeves and short pants in hot weather, a habit that Momo had adopted while in the U.S. that still felt normal to her.

That aside, an enduring impact of Momo's study abroad was her feelings and attitudes toward interacting with non-Japanese people. She said that before study abroad, she had thought that “foreigners” felt distant and difficult to approach (遠い存在) while after study abroad, she now felt differently. They were now easy for her to approach and talk with (話しやすい) (Interview 1, 2017/11/22).

I also asked Momo about what kinds of social media she used and the kinds of mass media she enjoyed watching or engaging with. She

said that she loved watching Asian vloggers living in America and that she found their English easy to understand. Momo shared that she used a private Twitter account viewed by four of her close Japanese friends, and the group habitually left each other comments a few times a week.

Significantly, Momo mentioned that she had started learning Chinese language. She had recently found a language partner on the internet, a Chinese female student who had only lived in Japan for six months but who was proficient at Japanese and was engaging in job-hunting activities. They met and talked regularly about once a week. This supported Momo's statement about feeling more comfortable relating to non-Japanese people. It is also likely that her positive experiences making Chinese friends during her study abroad in the U.S. motivated her to study Chinese language. As the most popular English-speaking study abroad destinations (in the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia) often have more culturally diverse populations compared to Japan, students may have the opportunity to develop knowledge of and interest in additional languages and cultures within the mainstream host society.

At our next interview, in late January 2018, Momo had completed and submitted her graduation thesis, and felt much more relaxed. I noted that she had dyed her hair a light greyish beige color, which was so different I initially had failed to recognise her (she was also wearing a face mask). When I commented on the new color Momo said she dyed it after finishing her thesis, motivated by a sense of freedom or release (解放感) (Interview 2, 2018/01/24). This, she said, was her only chance to color it, for one month before starting her first full-time job. I mentioned that I had heard of some Japanese workplaces having strict rules about

dress and appearance, and asked if her future employer was one of those. Momo revealed that she would be working for a large manufacturing company, and that she was looking forward to it, although she did not know where she would end up being located. It was possible she would be sent outside Tokyo, a possibility she seemed to welcome.

With her newfound freedom, Momo had wanted to meet some new people, and so started attending English conversation gatherings held in cafes, which she found via the Meet Up app. It wasn't the first time that Momo had participated in events like these, but it had been a year since she had gone to one. By participating in these events Momo had gotten to know a variety of English speakers including tourists, as well as longer-term residents. She found the Meet Up app easy to use and useful for finding language-based groups, many of which were popular with non-Japanese people and Japanese people interested in speaking English and making international friends.

As she shared at the previous interview, Momo had started studying Chinese language, and so she also tried participating in a Chinese language meet up event. However, her Chinese language skills were not yet developed enough to actively participate. Fortunately, Momo had another opportunity to develop her Chinese. She had befriended a Chinese student in one of her university classes, and received an invitation to visit her friend's home in Shanghai for four nights in March. It would be Momo's first time in Shanghai, and she was nervous that her inability to communicate, added to her lack of knowledge of Chinese culture, would cause problems. I assured her that she would be fine, as the stay was only for a short period, and her friend would be able to interpret for her.

In addition to making a Chinese friend, Momo was also engaging with Chinese language and culture through social media. She was using WeChat, a Chinese app, to communicate with her friend, and was watching Chinese language videos online, although she couldn't understand much of the content. Momo tried to read the Chinese subtitles at the bottom of the screen, guessing at the meaning from Chinese characters that were familiar, being also used in Japanese as *kanji*.

Momo was also engaging with English language online content in the form of stand-up comedy performances by American and British comedians. Again, through the Meet Up app she learned of and attended an all-English stand-up comedy show held in Tokyo. Momo recalled that most of the audience were non-Japanese. Although she wasn't able to understand all of the show, she said she enjoyed it. She was able to recognise the use of sarcasm by the comic, which was different to Japanese comedians she had watched. Momo also noticed a difference in the content of the material - race, politics, discrimination - all topics that she had not heard addressed by Japanese performers.

Our third interview took place about a month later, on 23 February. Akari mentioned that she was on campus to participate in tea ceremony club activities. This prompted a discussion about a common experience during study abroad: being treated as an expert on your country and culture. Akari had reacted by joining the tea ceremony club on her return to Japan in order to learn a part of Japanese culture that she could demonstrate for non-Japanese people.

Momo mentioned that during her exchange she was asked to explain why Japan bombed Pearl Harbour during World War II. She said that as

she knew little about history, she was not able to respond. She was also asked about anime and manga by non-Japanese people who were fans of various popular series. However, as she was not interested in these media she could not engage in conversation about them. At the time, the anime “One Punch Man” had become popular outside Japan, but Momo had not heard of it. She thought that Akari’s strategy of taking up tea ceremony was a good idea, as it would give her something to talk about with non-Japanese people.

Rather than becoming more invested in English language learning and Anglosphere countries, Momo confirmed that when she came back from exchange in the U.S. she gained more interest in China and wanted to learn more about other East Asian countries. This was partly inspired by the Hong Kong student she had become close friends with while studying in America. In addition, her enjoyment of YouTube videos made by Chinese and other East Asian creators reinforced her interest in China, particularly its similarities to Japan. For example, she was interested in the way that both countries’ languages used some of the same written script.

When Akari commented on how much Momo seemed to like China, Momo replied that she liked the cuisine and found Chinese people friendly and easy to talk to. Before she had gone to study abroad, her only exposure to China had been through mass media, and nothing had caught her interest. But after getting to know and befriend individual Chinese people, she reiterated that they were “very sincere and friendly” (すごい真面目だし、フレンドリーだし) and her image of them “totally changed” (イメージが全然変わった) (Interview 3, 2018/02/23). Momo and Akari

agreed that it depended on the individual person, but Momo posited that individuals who were interested in and liked Japan were easier to talk to.

When I asked her who they were easier to talk to by comparison, Momo said that they were easier to talk to than Japanese people, as they were more honest (正直), had no hidden motives (裏表がない), and had no “face” or polite facade (建前) (Interview 3, 2018/02/23). She found their direct way of communicating “fun” (面白い).

Since our last interview, Momo had travelled to Osaka to meet with a high school friend, and had taken the opportunity to visit the Chinatown there. She remarked that it was smaller than the Chinatown in Yokohama, indicating her familiarity with the location and again demonstrating her interest in Chinese culture. She also revealed she had travelled to Osaka with a Chinese friend she met via Meet Up. This friend also had some international experience, having studied at a university in Australia before moving to Japan to work. Momo said that her friend spoke Japanese very well, and they had made further plans to meet the day after the interview. They used LINE to contact each other and Momo said that they had been in frequent contact. She had also been texting another Chinese acquaintance using WeChat, with Momo replying in Japanese to messages received in Chinese.

During the interview, Akari shared about a trip to Europe she was planning with a group of friends, and Momo expressed some envy, mentioning that she didn’t have Japanese friends who were particularly interested in overseas travel or other cultures. The lack of peers with whom she could discuss or share her interests occasionally made her feel lonely. For instance, Momo enjoyed searching foreign place names on YouTube

and watching travel vlogs of those places. She wanted to travel to England, having watched videos about it on YouTube, but was reluctant to attempt the trip solo. Momo and Akari both opened up and complained a little about the culturally insular attitudes they observed among their Japanese peers, with Momo saying she had friends who asserted they would never use English, so they didn't need it (「英語は話す、使わないから別にいらないじゃ」みたいな感じの子あった) (Interview 3, 2018/02/23). This also meant that Momo could not discuss TV series she liked to watch (as mentioned in previous interviews, she enjoyed American TV series such as “Glee”), as her friends had never heard of them or watched them. I asked if it was fairly common for people to have not heard of or watched Hollywood movies, even ones being shown in Japan, and Momo replied noncommittally that probably there were people who only watched Japanese movies.

Towards the end of the interview I asked Momo about her upcoming trip to Shanghai, during which she would stay at her friend's house, and she revealed her apprehension at the prospect. Her nerves were mainly due to her lack of Chinese language skills, which she expected to cause difficulties in communicating with her friend's parents. Momo was also worried because of differences between Japanese and Chinese manners and behaviour, saying that in China you have to speak your own opinion and be direct and honest (中国だと結構自分の意見は言わないとダメみたいな) (Interview 3, 2018/11/23). She believed Japan was different from China in this respect. While previously Momo had stated that she was interested in the similarities between China and Japan, she also recognised the differences in etiquette and communication style. In this



way, she said, Chinese culture was more similar to American culture - preferring friendly, honest and direct communication (イエス・ノーはっきりしている) (Interview 3, 2018/11/23).

When asked about her social media use, Momo found it hard to decide which one she was engaging with the most. She had been using Twitter often, but recently on Instagram had also begun watching a lot of content posted by a Korean model.

At our final interview held in April 2018, Momo talked about her trip to Shanghai, her Chinese boyfriend, and the job training she was undertaking in Y prefecture.

Fortunately, her fears about communication difficulties and social faux pas during her trip were not realised, and she had an enjoyable time. Her friend interpreted for her as needed and Momo was even able to speak a little Chinese with her friend's parents, who were kind and hospitable. Akari asked if Momo had taken Japanese souvenirs to present to her hosts, and Momo replied that she had, but her friend's parents had (good-naturedly) admonished her, saying that as she was still a university student with limited finances, she need not have gone to the trouble. Momo and Akari agreed however that this was an important part of Japanese etiquette, and as a Japanese person (日本人として) you would feel bad or regret it (申し訳ない) if you didn't (Interview 4, 2018/04/28).

Momo shared some of the things that had surprised her during her trip. One of these surprises was the large size of her friend's home, which she described as being more like a hotel, with five floors, a basement, and ensuite for every bedroom. Momo said it did not feel lived-in

at all (生活感がない), which was a culture shock for her (Interview 4, 2018/04/28). When I asked her about other cultural differences she experienced, she described the crowded chaos of the highspeed railway station from which passengers could take a bullet train called *gaotie* to other cities. Chinese people could buy tickets online, but foreigners were required to bring their passport and queue for a ticket. It was very crowded and the process was conducted entirely in Chinese, so Momo was grateful for her friend's assistance. She recalled there seemed to be lots of disgruntled or agitated people (燃えてる人がいっぱいいて), in addition to people whose ID cards had expired, and economically disadvantaged people (貧しい人). She had never seen anything like it in Japan.

Having boarded the train, Momo was again surprised at how much noise the other passengers made, listening to music and watching TV without using earphones. She said the experience was very lively and interesting (すごいにぎやか、面白かった) (Interview 4, 2018/04/28). They visited her friend's grandparents, who lived in a simpler dwelling, and Momo enjoyed various dishes that she said she would not normally have had the chance to eat in Japan, including pigeon and rabbit.

While in general, Momo felt relaxed when interacting with her friend's family and friends in Shanghai, meal times seemed to be when she had to adapt her behaviour to follow local social etiquette. She was encouraged to eat a lot, and was often asked whether the food was ok, which prompted her to compliment the food quickly and often. Through this firsthand experience Momo came to realize how important food and sharing meals was in Chinese socializing and relationships compared to Japan. She also found that interactions between restaurant staff and cus-

tomers were more friendly than in Japan, with her friend's mother usually striking up conversations with wait staff when they ate out.

Momo returned from her trip and at the beginning of April began a month of work training outside Tokyo in Y prefecture. She had to live onsite in dormitory-style accommodation along with other trainees. Each day was spent going on worksite visits, participating in teamwork activities and studying job-related material. She was scheduled to complete another month of job training in June.

Momo had begun dating her boyfriend, a Chinese man, in March. They had met at a Chinese language learning event organised on Meet Up, and during her job training, talked on the phone every night for up to an hour, which drew attention and teasing from her new coworkers who were staying in the same dormitory. Her boyfriend also drew attention by visiting her in Y prefecture and again by coming to pick her up from the train station when she returned to Tokyo. These thoughtful gestures, Momo and Akari asserted, were completely outside the norm for Japanese men, who they said would never behave this way. Akari exclaimed "That's too kind!" (優しすぎる) and "That kind of thing doesn't exist anymore" (もう、そういうもない) (Interview 4, 2018/04/28). Momo's boyfriend had considerable international experience, having graduated from a university in Australia, worked in Australia for a year and then moved to study at K university in Japan for 2 years, followed by starting work in Tokyo. The friend Momo had mentioned in the previous interview, with whom she had travelled to Osaka, was in fact her boyfriend. She had made plans to meet with him after the interview.

Momo had also had a meeting with HR staff at her new job, where

she was asked about her future goals and plans. She was told that the company was putting effort into expanding their network globally, and so up to half of new employees would probably be posted overseas at some point. This aligned well with Momo's future goals as she hoped to first gain experience in trade and business domestically, then attempt the same outside Japan. Her workplace also provided the opportunity to study for and take the TOIEC test, in an effort to help equip employees for international work. Momo was interested in working elsewhere in East Asia, perhaps in China, although she would need to improve her Chinese language skills. Her daily conversations with her boyfriend via LINE voice call were one way to study Chinese, as she protested when Akari teased her about what a close couple they must be (ラブラブだね) (Interview 4, 2018/04/28).

Momo mentioned the teasing she received from her coworkers about these conversations, and I wondered if this was perhaps especially unusual in a Japanese context. Momo believed that Japanese people did not tend to voice call so much, preferring text messages. She also said that Japanese people tended to react with incredulity when she revealed that her boyfriend was Chinese, to the point where she tried to avoid mentioning it if possible. Only one of her coworkers that she knew of had dated a non-Japanese person - a Singaporean. Her parents had grown used to Momo socializing with friends who were Chinese, and so when she told them about her boyfriend, they were not unduly surprised.

As the job training took up most of her time, Momo had not been able to watch as much YouTube as before, or spend much time on Instagram. On Instagram she followed ex-coworkers from her previous part-

time job, her current coworkers at her new company, and Korean actresses she liked.

## Concluding thoughts

Momo's case provides further insight into the unpredicted benefits and outcomes that Japanese students can gain over time as a result of study abroad in an English-speaking country. Although she had long enjoyed English language media, and chose to study abroad in the U.S., it was Momo's friendships with other East Asian exchange students that evidently had a strong influence on her. She came back from study abroad, and after overcoming her initial discomfort at being back in Japan (Interview 1), pursued her newfound interest in Chinese culture and language and made use of internet-facilitated social events to connect with non-Japanese people, mainly Chinese (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4). This finding resonates with Taniguchi et al's study (2025), which found that some Japanese students, after returning from study abroad, tended to identify more with international students in Japan based on their shared international experiences. Momo's long-held interest in English language media and overseas travel occasionally made her feel lonely and different to her Japanese peers (Interview 3). On the other hand, she found satisfaction and personal enrichment through her relationships with Chinese people who had similar or even more extensive international experiences. These relationships gave her opportunities for travel, for language learning, and for seeing (and critiquing) Japanese culture from another perspective. Although Momo did not explicitly mention a change in her

identity, her story shows evidence of how her study abroad experience influenced her to develop higher intercultural engagement and a new social identity based on shared experiences.

Research on Japanese students' interest in study abroad has suggested that showing students that there are various potential advantages, and emphasising how global learning can improve their career prospects (Rosenbaum et al, 2025) could be highly motivating. As of our final interview, Momo had been told by her employer's HR division that it was likely that she would be dispatched overseas at some point. Although Momo seemed nervous, she also welcomed the prospect, and mentioned her own ambition of eventually operating a business overseas (Interview 4). She was specifically interested in living and working in a Chinese-speaking country, despite having a lower level of Chinese proficiency than English, and having studied abroad in an English-speaking country. This demonstrates how study abroad enabled her to gain intercultural awareness extending beyond acquisition of English language skills, something that is increasingly being promoted as a strong incentive for Japanese students to engage in study abroad post-COVID (Nakagawa et al, 2024). It is helpful for Japanese students to see the kinds of futures that study abroad can equip them for, especially the possible overseas career opportunities available to them in neighbouring East Asian countries.

In addition, Momo's story shows that international student communities may be the most influential factors of a university study abroad experience. Friendships made during study abroad can do as much to inspire students and broaden their horizons in the long-term as any classes

undertaken. Although Momo initially participated in study abroad in the U.S. as part of her English language studies, her relationships, and study and career choices after her return to Japan demonstrate how the benefits of a study abroad program can unfold over time in unexpected ways and unpredicted directions.

## Acknowledgements

This study was made possible by the support of the Showa Women's University Mariko Bando Fellowship which enabled me to complete a year of independent post-doctoral research in Tokyo. I would also like to express my gratitude to the research participants for sharing their stories with me.

## Bibliography

- Barkhuizen, G. (2011). Narrative Knowledging in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 45 (3), 391–414.
- Barkhuizen, Gary & Benson, Phil & Chik, Alice. (2013). Narrative Inquiry in Language Teaching and Learning Research. *Narrative Inquiry in Language Teaching and Learning Research*. 1–132. 10.4324/9780203124994.
- Gautier, R., & Chevrot, J.-P. (2025). The Influence of Social Networks During Study Abroad: Acquiring Non-Standard Varieties. *Languages*, 10 (5), 108. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages10050108>
- Hanada, S., (2019), "A Quantitative Assessment of Japanese Students' Intercultural Competence Developed through Study Abroad Programs", *Journal of International Students*, 9 (4), p1015–1037, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1234695.pdf>
- Miyahara, M., (2015), "Emerging self-identities and emotion in foreign language learning : a narrative-oriented approach", Multilingual Matters Ltd, Bristol UK
- Nakagawa, H., (2023), "Investigating the Reasons for Japanese University Students' Hesitation in Studying Abroad: Implications for Enhancing University Study Abroad Programs", *THAIT-*

- ESOL Journal*, 36 (1), p66–81, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1393245.pdf>
- Nakagawa, H., Kelland, M., Lumley, D., (2024), “Factor Analysis of Students’ Perceived Needs Prior to Studies Abroad”, *rEFLECTIONs*, 31 (1), p186–198, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1426954.pdf>
- Nowlan, A., Wang, R., (2018), “Study Abroad Self-Selection amongst First-Year Japanese University Students”, *Journal of International and Comparative Education*, 7 (2), p65–81, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1209764.pdf>
- Olmo-Extremera, M., Fernández-Terol, L., & Montes, D. A. (2024). Visual Tools for Supporting Interviews in Qualitative Research: New Approaches. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 24 (3), 283–298. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-07-2023-0113>
- Rosenbaum, C. Y., Iwaki, N., Tatsumi, Y. *et al.* What affects Japanese students’ initial interests in studying abroad? Empirical analysis on the complex nature of determinants. *Discov Educ* 4, 90 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-025-00467-w>
- Sexton, T. P., & Bauermeister, J. A. (2021). Relationship Timelines, Dyadic Interviews, and Visual Representations: Implementation of an Adapted Visual Qualitative Technique. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20 <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211016708>
- Silverman, D. (2013). *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. Sage Publications.
- Smith, J. (1995). Semi-structured interviewing and qualitative analysis. In J. A. Smith, R. Harré, L. V. Langenhove (Eds.) *Semi-structured interviewing and qualitative analysis* (pp. 10–26). SAGE Publications Ltd, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221792.n2>
- Taniguchi, N., Takai J., Iwaki N., (2025), “The impact of study abroad social interactions on post-return relationships with international students: Japanese students’ perceptions of recategorization”, *Frontiers in Education*, 10, <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/education/article/s/10.3389/educ.2025.1550969>