神戸市外国語大学 学術情報リポジトリ

Negotiating the challenges of studying abroad

メタデータ	言語: English 出版者: 公開日: 2019-03-18 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): Study Abroad, Negotiation, Conflict, Resolution, Japanese 作成者: TORBERT, Anthony C., NAKANISHI, Noriko, TORBERT, Anthony C. メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://kobe-cufs.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/2447

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Negotiating the Challenges of Studying Abroad

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ABSTRACT

With Study Abroad being encouraged by the Japanese government, we thought it useful to consider what challenges students face in programs and how they overcome difficulties. While study abroad can refer to a wide range of experiences, in this study we focused on students who had just returned from four-month study abroad program. We initiated a simple online survey of 75 students, and then followed that up with semi-structured interviews with a select group. While the quantitative data did not reveal significant findings, the in-depth interviews provided a wealth of information regarding how students overcame the challenges they faced, and led the authors to consider what preparation and negotiation strategies to take in order to prepare students for future study abroad programs.

Keywords: Study Abroad Negotiation Conflict Resolution Japanese

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1. Introduction

Study abroad in the most basic sense means learning in a country different from ones' own. That said, definitions of what consists of "study" vary greatly. Any experience can result in learning, but most people consider the term "study abroad" to refer to some type of defined program that includes formal classes. Even the definition of "abroad" can be stretched, and some organizations in Japan offer immersion programs that are labeled as "domestic study abroad."

Study abroad programs can be roughly categorized into the following: Short "study tours" of a week or so that often have a full-time escort and include some language instruction and cultural experiences; slightly longer "study tours" of up to a month that may require students to negotiate their way around a city and learn how to deal with unstructured use of the local language on a daily basis; and more serious middle-length programs of a semester or full year program where students become more integrated into a given community.

All of these programs have merit, and all have challenges. Generally, the longer the experience the more risk and reward it brings (Dwyer 2004, Dewey 2007). With more time in a country, most students will graduate from being an observer to a participant in a given culture and society. Of course, a lot depends on the personality of the individual, with outgoing people having an advantage at finding their niche faster than introverts.

Unfortunately, there has been a steady decrease in the number of Japanese students studying at overseas universities, over the recent years, and more than 60% of those that do go overseas do so for less than one month (McCrostie, 2017). Part of this may be due to a lack of risk-taking behavior, for studying overseas and breaking out of the

typical career pattern may raise red flags for some Japanese companies (Hassett, 2018).

Studying abroad can be a highly motivating factor when students are learning a language, however, there are many specific challenges that arise pre-departure, during, and post-program. Pre-departure issues may include qualifying for a program, finding funding, applying and writing self-introductions, getting passports and visas, and making sure credits will transfer (if necessary). These tasks alone can dissuade many students, in particular qualifying and funding.

1.1 Preparation and Expectations

Leis (2015) notes that many families, students and teachers think an overseas experience will be life-changing, but of course this is not always the case. Leis found, not unsurprisingly perhaps, that a short, 10-day study tour did not do much to improve language skills. On the other hand, the students did have reduced anxiety in regards to speaking English, and this helped bolster their willingness to communicate. Nutt (2017) also surveyed students after a short program, finding they too had more positive attitudes toward English and a changed worldview.

Shrader and Edwards (2016) looked at what students expected before then left on a longer-term study abroad program, and how those expectations matched up to reality. They found that while the students had some knowledge of what would be required of them in an American university, the reality was that they underestimated the amount of lecture comprehension and reading required, and overestimated the amount of pair work and formal debates that would occur. The authors suggested that students need to have what they call adequate "Study Abroad Intelligence" in order to reduce the "shock" students have when participating in a program different from their expectations (p. 101).

Of course, there are many barriers to studying abroad, both internal and external. Internal factors such as confidence and motivation are important, and forcing students into programs they are not ready for will likely lead to difficulties. The most significant external factors include language ability, perceived benefits and cost. Language ability is not necessarily a major impediment, as there are programs for all level students. The cost, especially of doing a degree overseas, is significant though,

and even highly qualified students choose to pursue degrees in Japan rather than overseas because of this (Hassett, 2018).

Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide and Shimizu (2004) found that Japanese students have dual goals, some practical and measurable, and some more internal. They expected to have short-term improvement of English skills to help pass tests, however thought they would have longer term improvement with intercultural communication skills.

Research by Williams (2005) showed that when comparing groups of students, those who studied overseas for extended periods had greater gains on an intercultural skills assessment tool than those who remained on campus. However, it was noted that exposure to various cultures, either domestically or overseas, was the greatest predictor of intercultural communication skills. Hopkins (1999) noted that experiential learning is an integral part of all study abroad programs, and Newfields (2011) concluded that the 'critical incidents' that participants encounter are what are most important.

Mirroring Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, most programs are designed to provide for a student's basic physiological and safety needs, and many will make efforts to provide social opportunities to give the students a sense of belonging or inclusion. Shorter programs may take additional steps to keep students busy and satisfied, but longer programs require students to take the initiative and find ways to fulfill their need for esteem and gain a self of accomplishment, for the end-goals of such programs often include choosing a career path or making a decision on where to live in the future.

1.2 Study Abroad Program in Kobe Gakuin University

The current study focuses on 79 returnee students who joined semester-length study abroad programs in the spring in 2017. All of them were required to take courses in one of the overseas affiliate institutions when they reached the third year of university. For the 2017 programs, six overseas affiliate institutions offered programs, which the students could apply for half a year in advance.

After the application, students were allotted to each institution according to their GPA, TOEIC® results, and ex-curricular activities, such as volunteer work and

participation in contests. Table 1 shows the list of the institutions that offered the programs, and the number of the students who took the courses in each institution.

Table 1

List of Institutions and Number of Students

Institution	Type	Country	Program period	Stay type	*n*
Exeter	University	England	Apr. 2nd – July 29th	Dormitory	9
Cambridge	University	England	Apr. 8th – July 24th	Homestay	24
Hope	College	America	Apr. 2nd – July 29th	Dormitory	11
York	University	Canada	Apr. 2nd – July 23rd	Homestay	13
Victoria	University	Australia	Mar. 25th – July 9th	Homestay	12
Waikato	University	New Zealand	Apr. 8th – July 29th	Homestay	10

The students took the TOEIC® in December, 2016, and then again in October 2017 (two to three months after they had returned from their study abroad program). Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2

Mean Scores of the TOEIC® before and after Program

	n	Total		Listening		Reading	
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Pre	77	439.8	110.0	254.5	63.7	185.3	58.1
Post	73	510.5	112.0	299.5	66.8	211.0	56.6

1.3 Purpose of the Current Study

In order to make the study abroad program more successful, it was desirable to understand in detail what the students found most rewarding, and what difficulties they encountered. Further to that, we wanted to know how they managed to overcome these obstacles, and what advice they might give to future participants in the program.

2. Method

In order to get a better sense of the students' experiences, first they completed a short online survey, and then follow-up interviews were conducted.

2.1 Online Survey

The "Study Abroad Survey" was conducted on September 25, 2017. The survey questions (Table 3) were prepared to cover two key areas. The first area consisted of academic issues, such as language barriers (Q3), difficulty (Q7), class structure (Q2), and homework load (Q6). The second area was the social and daily life issues, such as communication (Q5), homesickness (Q4), and food (Q1).

Table 3

Survey Questions and Answer Choices

Q	Item	Answer Choices
1	I was satisfied with the food at home / dormitory ...	very / somewhat / it was OK / it wasn't so good / it was bad
2	The % of Japanese students in my class was ...	100% / 75% / 50% / 25% / 5%
3	The classes were ...	too hard / hard / OK / easy / very easy
4	I was homesick ...	very / somewhat / a bit / a little / not at all
5	I contacted people in Japan ...	a lot / often / sometimes / rarely / never
6	I spent ___ on homework each day.	over 2 hours / 1-2 hours / 30min – 1 hour / 10-30 min / less than 10 min
7	My English level was enough for the program	very / somewhat / a bit / a little / not at all

2.2 Interviews

After the online survey, 11 volunteer students were asked to participate in one-to-one interview with one of the authors. Table 4 shows the background information of each student.

Table 4

The Interviewees' Background Information

Student	Sex	Institution	Country	Choice of Institution	TOEIC®	
					Pre	Post
s01	m	Victoria	Australia	1st choice	440	490
s02	m	York	Canada	1st choice	430	470
s03	m	Exeter	U.K.	2nd choice	385	--
s04	m	Hope	U.S.	1st choice	510	630
s05	m	York	Canada	1st choice	495	645
s06	f	Cambridge	U.K.	-	325	--
s07	m	Cambridge	U.K	2nd choice	435	525
s08	f	Hope	U.S.	1st choice	675	785
s09	f	Hope	U.S.	1st choice	370	440
s10	f	Hope	U.S.	1st choice	610	680
s11	f	Waikato	New Zealand	1st choice	185	385

Note. The TOEIC® "Pre (before studying abroad)" was taken in December 2016, and "Post (after studying abroad)" was taken in October 2017.

As can be seen in the table, most of the students went to the institutions of their first or second choice, and they all had better TOEIC® scores after returning from the study-abroad program. On average, there was an increase of 25.7 on the reading section, and 45.0 on the listening section.

The interviews were conducted over three weeks in October, 2017, two or three months after the students had returned from their program. The interviewer was an instructor from a different faculty than the students, which in theory limited the pressure they might feel otherwise. The interviews used open-ended prompts to encourage the students to speak freely.

- Please tell me about your accommodation situation
- Where did you eat most of your meals?
- What was your main mode of transportation?
- What did you think about the level of your classes?
- Did you feel homesick? How often (and how) did you contact people at home?
- What did you think about the cost of living (compared to Japan)?
- What languages did you use at home, school, and in social contexts?
- What did you do in your free time?
- and finally,
- What advice can you give to help future study abroad students prepare?

The students were all enthusiastic participants and spoke on average for approximately 20 minutes each. They appeared to enjoy recounting their experiences and did not mind discussing the challenges they faced. As is often the case, it was the challenging situations that inspired them to spend more time describing.

3. Results

3.1 Online Survey

Out of the 79 returnees, 75 responses (25 male and 50 female) were collected through the online survey and grouped according to whether they fell in the academic or social realm.

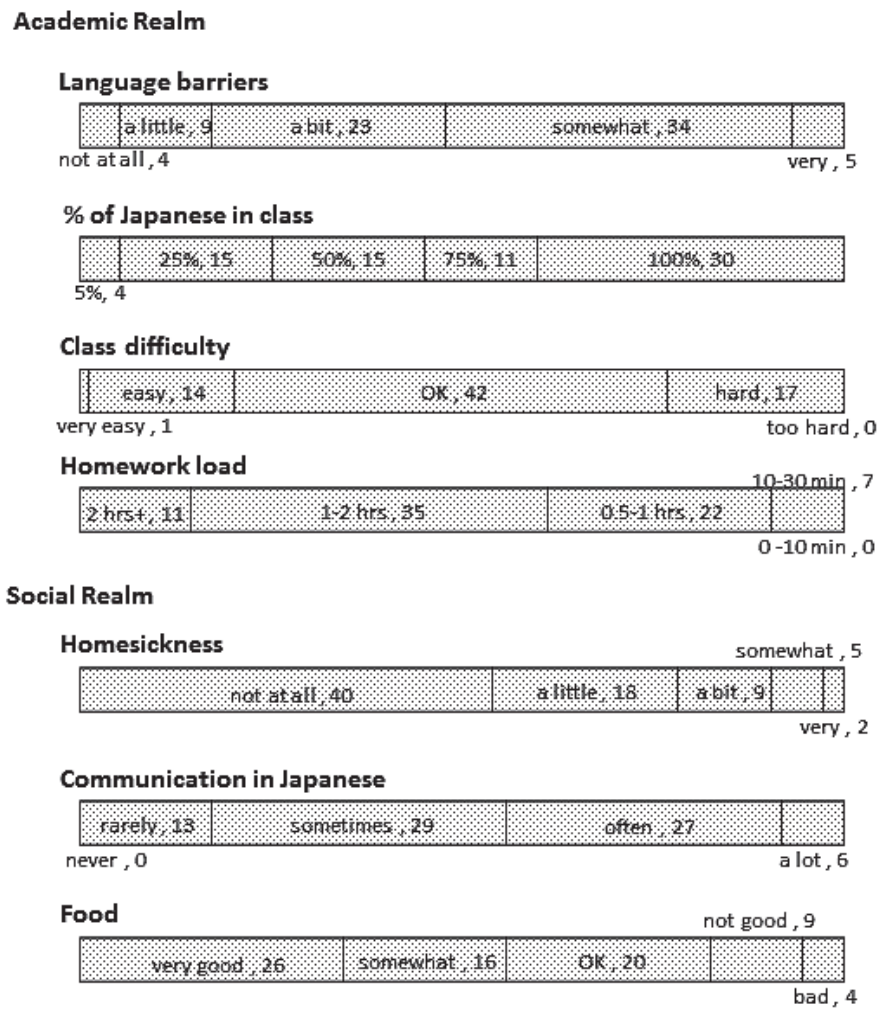

Figure 1. Result of the online survey. The answer choices are aligned in accordance with positive (left) to negative (right).

3.2 Interview Summary

After distilling the content of the interviews, a few significant threads became evident, and these were grouped into academic and social realms.

3.2.1 Academic Realm

3.2.1.1 Language barriers and class makeup

Given one of the main goals of the program was to improve their English language skills, it is not surprising the students had a lot to say on this topic. Those in mixed

nationality classes felt pleasantly challenged and were able to stay in the target language for most of the time. Those in classes with only Japanese had different opinions. Some felt the teacher was able to maintain an English-only atmosphere, but others complained their classmates quickly became distracted and spoke Japanese in class.

For some outgoing students, their solution to maximize their opportunity to speak English was to disassociate themselves from their classmates once the lesson had finished, and to pursue friendships with non-Japanese speakers. Some did this by approaching other foreign students on campus, in bars, or coffee shops. A couple looked to sports, such as playing soccer to going to the gym, in order to connect with others with a similar interest.

A number wished they could have spent more time with local people and had more opportunity to speak English outside of class. As the local student population changed over the time period they were there, it was apparent to one interviewee that had she made more American friends initially it would have been easier to maintain connections with them, even if they were off campus working summer jobs.

From the suggestions of the students, there are areas where instructors and administrators can assist students in preparing for their study abroad experience. As language improvement is a key goal, it makes sense that placing Japanese students in accommodation situations and classrooms with non-Japanese speakers makes it more likely that goal will be accomplished. If the program is exclusively one nationality, then it would be helpful for additional excursions and mixers to include non-Japanese whenever possible.

3.2.1.2 Class difficulty and homework load

Students reported an overall satisfaction of their assigned class level, meaning the screening process was successful. They said that although the classes were challenging, they generally felt they had the necessary skills to participate in most of the discussions. Many, however, commented that they lacked sufficient general understanding of politics and global issues, so this hindered them when it was time to discuss such topics. In order to compensate for this, some watched more local news or tried to read the news more frequently than they normally would when in Japan.

Overall students reported a slight increase in homework compared to what they do in Japan, but this was dependent on which school they were attending and what point they were in the semester. They said there were more project-oriented assignments than they typically have in Japan, and these demanded a significant amount of time. However, at other times the burden was not as intense.

3.2.2 Social Realm

3.2.2.1 Homesickness and communication in Japanese

In any one's life relationships play an important part, and this can be especially so given the amplification of culture shock combined with homesickness. However, a somewhat surprising result was that the students did not seem to have any real problems with homesickness. This may be due to their age, level of maturity and the fact that a number of them have experienced living alone previously. It also may be due to the ease in which international communication is accomplished.

There were a fair number who contacted their parents and friends on a weekly basis, usually by using the chat application Line, but none reported a need for daily contact. Messages from family and friends appear on smartphones instantly, and such links mean that the chances of feeling isolated are less than the days when calling was prohibitively expensive and letters took weeks or more.

3.2.2.2 Food

The students experienced a wide range of delight and frustration when it came to meals. Some were happy to have host families that provided new, ethnic and innovative dishes, while another was a bit shocked to be served frozen food at practically every meal. That student enjoyed the family a great deal, and decided to take an avoidance approach and accept the situation as a cultural difference that required flexibility. Most commented that the rice was not like Japanese rice, but said they got used to it and in the end, it was tolerable. For those living in the United States, they all said the food provided by the campus cafeteria was "too heavy" in taste. Their solution was to eat less, skip meals, eat out, or prepare their own food. One student felt he was not getting enough vegetables and approached a mediator, in this case the program liaison, to make an indirect request to the host mother. In the end, he reported he was satisfied with the outcome.

3.2.3 Other Findings

3.2.3.1 Accommodation

For a majority of the students, joining a family and making non-Japanese friends allowed them to mover from being simply a 'visitor' and observer to being a participant in the local community. These students professed more satisfaction in their overall experience than those who were rooming with other Japanese. For those living with roommates or a host family, this was perhaps the most significant source of enjoyment, but also of conflict. It is no surprise, given they were spending months with non-family members, generally for the first time in their lives. The students who lived with host families described having challenges understanding the other members of the household, but by being patient and asking people to repeat things, they felt they were successful at communicating for the most part. Perhaps surprisingly, those students paired with others of the same nationality had some friction, and to deal with the problem used avoidance strategies and spent more time away from their classmates and roommates.

3.2.3.2 Cost of living

For many cost of living was not a significant issue once they were overseas, as their meals, tuition and accommodation were included in the program. Still, some mentioned the high cost of eating out as being an impediment to their enjoyment. Ways they overcame this was to purchase food at the grocery stores and cook at home, often with their roommates.

3.2.3.3 Transportation

Transportation turned out to be a rather minor issue for most students. They all said they learned the bus systems rather quickly and were able to negotiate travel on public transportation without incident. Some even booked their own long distance travel using English websites, and these trips included hotels and visiting other cities. The fact that the students were comfortable in doing this may belie their age and familiarity with online platforms. The only complaint students had was that in some cases there was a lack of public transit and they felt isolated. They did not have many options to overcome this, but some approached local students who had cars, and others chose to walk 20-30 minutes to the store. One student did have situation where he left his passport on the city bus, but he took the logical steps to contact the company and recover it successfully. Shorter commutes for those living on campus at

first would seem preferable, however, those that travelled for an hour on foot or by bus also said they enjoyed the experience of being immersed in their surroundings.

3.2.3.4 Culture shock

For the most part the students adjusted well to living and studying abroad, and using their innate social skills they were able to negotiate the difficulties that arose. None of the students reported any lasting culture shock, though some realized they needed to look past their pre-existing assumptions. One student was at first shocked at the site of his host mother's tattoo, but later realized that this was a norm and it is important to maintain flexibility and an open mind when joining a new culture.

One student in particular described her study abroad experience in New Zealand as life-changing (see Appendix). She actually suffered a type of reverse-culture shock when she returned, and it affected her so much that she began to have discussions with her family about pursuing opportunities overseas. At the time of the interview she said she had the support of her family, and planned to do a working holiday or further study overseas.

3.3 Limitations

As with any survey there were limitations to what can be deduced from the interviews. Perhaps most significant was the fact that all the students were from a Japanese university. Also, the small number of students (eleven) interviewed meant they do not necessarily represent the entire student body. These students entered the university with the knowledge that the program included a period of study abroad, so they were predisposed to travel. They were 'pioneers' of the program, and had no senior students to consult. Their ages were also very similar, so it is impossible to know how more or less mature students might respond to the challenges faced when overseas.

The students went to three different countries and studied at universities, but all the programs were specifically focused on English language learning, and students were assigned to classes based on their test scores. Whether these students would thrive in mainstream academic programs is unknown. While the students were overseas long enough to learn a fair bit about living abroad, the four-month program is only half of what is typically considered a year abroad. It is possible that in a longer a program

there may have arose other significant issues for them to deal with.

Since the time period spanned summer in United States and the United Kingdom, those students had less chance to interact with local students on campus, and it was likely more difficult to find non-Japanese English-speaking friends. In addition, only some lived with host families the entire time, and the flexibility required to live with others of a different culture is no doubt greater than living with people with a similar background.

As far as procedures, the authors attempted to limit bias by having the interviewer be from another faculty. The students did mention a number of things that could be improved upon, such as transportation, housing, food and class makeup. However, the students were aware that the information would get back to their supervising teachers, and they may have been a bit hesitant to describe what they perceived as additional faults in the program.

4. Suggestions for Teachers

In Nutt's 2017 survey, he found that his students appreciated basic conversation practice more after they went overseas. In particular, lessons dealing with self-introductions were deemed useful, as anyone in a new situation can imagine.
Regarding pre-departure instruction, teachers should consider teaching different negotiation strategies and organizing roll-plays set up to create situations where conflict resolution is necessary. Discussing elements of the Thomas-Killman Conflict Mode Instrument (1974), and learning when it is best to be more assertive or more cooperative will aid students. Barrie J. Roberts (2018) has developed an ESL-specific program for instructors to use with students to both enhance their social skills and language at the same time.

Role-playing can be an appropriate way to set up a lesson where students need to think on their feet and resolve a difficult situation. For example, a scenario in which a student wants to go out, but the host family wants she or he to stay in. Or a situation where a roommate wants the kitchen clean but other roommates are not worried about the mess and busy with homework. Of course, having students practice basic introductions and conversations about 'safe' topics is important, but many students commented they had an inadequate knowledge of politics and more serious social

issues, so reading the news and have critical discussions about such topics would be useful. Rather than formal debate, having discussion groups consider and research an issue, and then later discuss with another pair or group, would be a good experience and help prepare them for the challenging atmosphere of an international classroom abroad.

A lesson might begin with prompts that require serious consideration such as:

> What do you think is the best aspect of your society?
> What policies of _____ (leader of xxx country) do you agree/disagree with?
> What do you think of nuclear weapons? Why do you think this?
> What are the biggest challenges your country faces at the moment? and how can such challenges be overcome?

There is an abundance of materials produced today that can provide students with interesting topics for discussion. Having students prepare presentations on global issues can also be a good approach, especially if they are given the opportunity to have small group or one-on-one discussions, as these are the most likely scenarios they will encounter while abroad.

5. Conclusions

After looking at the initial survey data, and then the in-depth interviews, we concluded that the students used a number of negotiation strategies to solve the issues that came up. Some used avoidance and accommodation strategies, while others were more assertive and sought specific remedies to situations. Contrary to the stereotypes that Japanese are all passive, we saw many examples of students taking the initiative to improve their experiences. In the interviews, some displayed metacognition of changes they went through overseas and considered their experiences to be eye-opening.

Given studying abroad is becoming easier and more accepted, it is very likely that the pool of Japanese students going overseas will continue to be significant. Overseas universities, eager to gain additional tuition from international students, have developed hybrid courses that encourage students to enroll in language courses and

then move on to academic work. In order to better equip students with the tools they need to succeed socially and culturally, it would be useful to study how their personalities and negotiation skills change over time, and to get a better sense of the problems they face and how they deal with them. The so-called 'inward tendencies' of Japanese can initially create barriers to effective communication with people of different backgrounds, but with adequate preparation and negotiation skill, students should be able to overcome these issues and thrive overseas.

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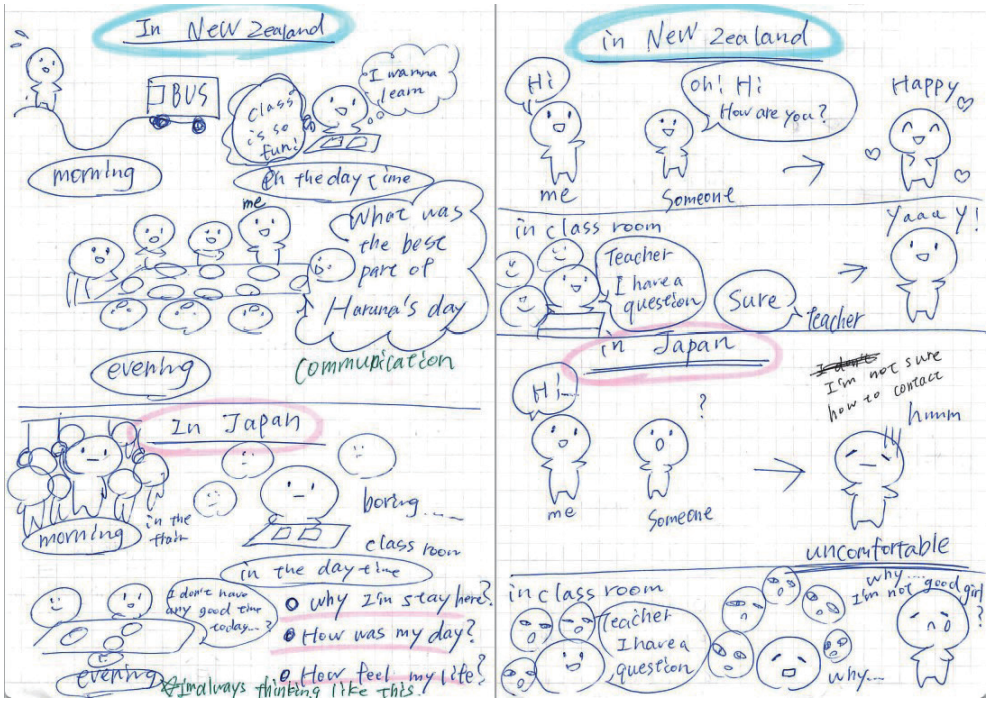
Appendix: A student's description of reverse-culture shock.