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Practice Article

Pre-Departure Learning Through Hybrid Sessions for Effective Preparation for Study Abroad Programs

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Abstract

This study presents a practical approach to pre-departure learning for university students to efficiently prepare for a short-term study abroad program. By integrating two modes of sessions, namely, face-to-face and on-demand, the teaching practice aims to elucidate students' purposes for studying abroad and preparing within a limited time before the program. The paper outlines an academic course of a study abroad program and its implementation process, including modes of delivery, content, and assignments. Observations and reflections on the implementation are discussed. The study formulates recommendations for educators on the effective application of the hybrid approach in similar contexts. The study concludes by highlighting the needs for future research on student feedback regarding pre-departure and on post-training learning after the program to comprehensively elucidate the learning outcomes of the hybrid approach.

本論文は、大学生が短期留学プログラムの渡航前の段階において、効果的に学習を進め準備を行う実用的方法について述べる。この方法は、対面形式とオンデマンド形式の二つを統合させるもので、学生が留学の目的を明確にし、留学前の限られた時間で効果的に準備ができるようにすることを目的とする。本論文では、留学プログラムとしての授業概要、及び、授業形式や授業内容、提出課題を含む実践の流れについて詳細に説明する。さらに、実際に行った過程で得た知見や考察を提示し、教育者が同様の文脈でこのハイブリッド方式を効果的に導入する際の留意点を述べる。最後に、このハイブリッド方式の実践による学習成果を包括的に把握するために、出発前の学習に対する学生から意見や留学後の事後学習についての研究の必要性を述べる。

The Faculty of Global Interdisciplinary Science and Innovation (GISI) was launched at Shizuoka University in April 2023. As indicated by its name, the faculty emphasizes interdisciplinary and practical learning to address local issues from a global perspective (GISI, n.d.). As GISI illustrates, the faculty aims for a participation rate of 100% among its students in a study abroad program. One of its specialized subjects is study abroad programs to develop human resources with a global perspective who can proactively collaborate with diverse individuals (GISI, n.d.).

Regarding short-term programs, additional learning is designed exclusively for GISI students to create a distinction in learning for general education courses. This structure also allows students from other faculties to participate in the same program without requiring additional learning for general education. Lemmons (2023) states that universities which provide pre-departure preparation for study abroad programs mainly focus on risk management and logistics and often neglecting personal reflection, culture, and language. Research has reported that short-term study abroad programs rarely provide students with sufficient time to develop language skills or intercultural perspectives (Lemmons, 2023).

This study describes hybrid sessions as one of the practical approaches for effective preparation for study abroad programs, shares the overall course design with additional learning as the specialized subject, and focuses on pre-departure learning through hybrid sessions. In terms of English teaching/learning format, the term hybrid has multiple interpretations. Komeda et al. (2012) used the term hybrid when referring to a structure combining a master's and doctoral program. Yokogawa (2018) employed the term hybrid for a program integrating an intensive course abroad with preliminary online lessons in Japan. Several studies define the term hybrid as a combination of instructional elements from traditional face-to-face formats and online course formats (Akutsu, 2020; Nakayama & Umamoto, 2022; Nomura, 2022). In this study, the term hybrid is defined as the integration of two modes, namely, face-to-face formats and online, particularly on-demand formats. This study clarifies that hybrid sessions benefit students and instructors in terms of time management and workload during the busy period of preparation before traveling and studying abroad. In addition, this approach provides an opportunity to share student performance smoothly among instructors and administrative staff. The purpose of this study is to elucidate the practical implementation of the proposed approach and to contribute for educators seeking to apply effective preparation for study abroad programs in similar contexts.

Literature Review

This study highlights pre-departure preparation for study abroad programs to increase student motivation and enable students to gain prior knowledge. Kosman et al. (2023) insist that pre-departure preparation should be provided to staff and host communities as well. Conversely, a platform for instruction and learning has been shifting especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Many studies have reported various teaching practices (Deacon & Miles, 2022; Hozaki et al., 2023; Iwasaki, 2022; Nakaya, 2022; Yoshikubo et al., 2023). The current study presents a design for the formulation of a proposed teaching approach.

Pre-Departure Preparation

Kosman et al. (2023) state that the preparation of higher education students for participation in study abroad programs is essential, and pre-departure preparation increases the probability that students will gain the benefits provided by such programs. They illustrate that the most common topics of pre-departure preparation are language, behavior, health and safety, visa requirements, and social, cultural, economic, and environmental aspects. Goldstein (2017) reported that prior knowledge of psychological concepts that are relevant to the student experience abroad helps students develop intercultural competence. A pre-departure course that focuses more deeply on cultural content has a significant impact on students' intercultural competence (Lemmons, 2023), and raises their awareness of their expectations, attitudes, and needs regarding intercultural exchange (Heinzmann et al., 2015).

However, as mentioned in the introduction, Lemmons (2023) is concerned that although the majority of universities provide pre-departure preparation, they mainly focus on risk management and logistics and lack an emphasis on personal reflection, culture, and language. Even though Lemmons discusses study abroad preparation in the U.S., the contexts of Japan and the U.S. are similar in terms of preparing students to travel abroad and study while being surrounded by a foreign language and culture in another country. Lemmons also points out that research has demonstrated that short-term study abroad programs do not frequently offer students sufficient time to develop language abilities or intercultural perspectives. Students should be prepared prior to the programs not only with general information about destinations but also with an academic attitude and self-reflection on perspectives toward different environments.

Online Learning

In addition, previous studies have examined online learning, such as designing interactive online courses (Hozaki et al., 2023), online courses in higher education (Iwasaki, 2022), online study abroad programs (Deacon & Miles, 2022; Nakaya, 2022; Yoshikubo et al., 2023), and collaborative online international learning (COIL) in study abroad programs (Nago, 2021). Some studies have pointed to the downside of online learning. Nakaya (2022) interviewed students after a one-week program conducted online via Zoom video meeting and observed that online programs may risk students learning in isolation, rather than competing with classmates and improving together. Deacon and Miles (2022) indicated that the effects of online courses are likely to be short-lived unless students engage in ongoing development, such as post-program projects and more structured classroom-based opportunities.

However, many studies have demonstrated that online learning has a positive impact on students. It can provide students with as much knowledge as face-to-face courses (Deacon & Miles, 2022), and students feel engaged and deepen their cultural understanding (Nakaya, 2022). Students were highly motivated to learn about social and environmental issues directly from local university students in target countries during pre-departure learning (Nago, 2021). Nago (2021) observed that students improved not only their language skills but also their communication skills by exchanging opinions, identifying solutions from multiple points of view, and developing sympathy toward one another.

In terms of teaching approaches, Yoshikubo et al. (2023) indicate that online learning is more suitable for classroom interactions facilitated by faculty members rather than research activities and creative projects that involve interaction among students. Moreover, on-demand classes enhance students' cognitive development, because they enable students to repeatedly watch sections that they do not understand. In fact, Nakazawa (2022) reported test scores from on-demand classes indicating students' understanding of the course content was at the same level or slightly higher than that of face-to-face courses.

Gaps and Opportunities

Regarding the content of pre-departure learning, previous studies have revealed that preparation with prior knowledge on language, behavior, or health and safety is effective; however, a need exists for developing academic attitudes and engaging in personal reflections on perspectives toward different environments. In terms of the mode of delivery, the advantages of online learning and on-demand lessons are well-documented; however, there remains a need for additional practical approaches and detailed guidance on the effective implementation of pre-departure learning for study abroad programs. Although certain teaching practices have been developed for the on-demand mode, they are less frequently utilized for student education prior to study abroad programs.

In previous studies, we observed three points that require attention in terms of practical approaches for pre-departure learning for study abroad programs: (1) the development of attitude and personal reflection, (2) preparation in two modes, namely, face-to-face and online, and (3) the utilization of on-demand for online learning. These points denote the gaps in the process of pre-departure learning for study abroad programs. Thus, we developed on-demand lessons as another strategy for the pre-departure preparation of students, specifically designed for the learning of useful English expressions and safety measures abroad in relation to social, cultural, and economic considerations. In addition, for the on-demand lessons, students are guided to self-reflect and write down their goals and expectations during study abroad and to establish the study abroad experience as a milestone in their education and career development. This study aims to fill the research gaps by providing a detailed description of hybrid sessions as one of the practical approaches for effective preparation for study abroad programs.

The Current Study

The hybrid approach for pre-departure learning implemented in this teaching practice aimed to enable students to learn useful English expressions and gain awareness of safety abroad in relation to social, cultural, and economic considerations. In addition, for pre-departure learning, students are guided to self-reflect by writing down their goals and expectations for study abroad, and to establish the study abroad experience as a milestone in their education and career development. Although this paper focuses on pre-departure learning as a topic, information on study abroad programs as a whole should also be provided for a better understanding.

Implementation

Overall Course Design

As previously explained in the introduction, additional learning in short-term study abroad programs is designed only for students of the Faculty of Global Interdisciplinary Science and Innovation to differentiate learning within general education courses. The short-term study abroad program for GISI students consists of three components, namely, pre-departure learning, the study abroad program, and post-training learning (Table 1).

Table 1

Overall Course Design

	Contents	Modes
Pre-Departure Learning	Guidance	Face-to-Face
	Safety Abroad	On-demand (Online)
	Useful English Expressions	On-demand (Online)
	Academic English	On-demand (Online)
Study Abroad Programs	English Classes	Face-to-Face
	Intercultural Understanding	
	Global Perspectives	
Post-training Learning	Group Discussion	Face-to-Face
	Presentation Preparation	On-Demand (Online)
	Group Presentation	Face-to-Face

Regardless of which country students travel to and which language institute they learn in, all GISI students participating in short-term study abroad programs are required to take the course to obtain two credits of the specialized course “Study Abroad Program I,” one of the elective courses mainly for the first and second year in the GISI curriculum. In face-to-face guidance, instructors explain the steps to follow, the content to cover, and deadlines for assignments in pre-departure learning. Students are also required to join a course in Google Classroom in which they receive and submit assignments online. Students need to submit all assignments before they leave for their study abroad programs. The details of pre-departure learning are illustrated in the next section of “Overview of Pre-Departure Learning.”

Study abroad programs typically provide English classes, opportunities for cultural exchange with locals, such as students and host families, and chances for participating students to independently explore the program location. Two study abroad programs were offered in AY2023, for four weeks in the United Kingdom and for three weeks in Australia. The programs in AY2023 were all conducted face-to-face. Through experiences in these programs, students are expected to increase their intercultural understanding and global perspectives.

After returning to Japan, the participating students are required to conduct a group presentation in which they report and share their experiences with other GISI students who have not participated yet. The group presentation

is conducted in English, meaning that the students need to collaborate with group members to compile presentation slides in English and practice delivering a speech in English in front of an audience.

As the last assignment in the course, the students submit an essay that reflects their overall experience in the specialized course. The writing assignment for an essay in the pre-departure learning is explained in the next section as Session 4 of Pre-Departure Learning. In the assignment, students once again self-reflect and compare their experiences with their goals and expectations set during pre-departure learning. Moreover, the students are encouraged to set their study abroad experience as a milestone in their education and career development, which is similar to the writing task during pre-departure learning. We expect that this writing process—that is, answering questions both before and after the program—will enable students to compare their thinking and feeling and discover their own improvements.

Heinzmann et al. (2015) state that pre-departure preparation increases students’ awareness of their expectations, attitudes, and needs regarding intercultural exchange. In particular, in terms of attitudes, this awareness is one of the keys not only to intercultural exchange prior to a program but also to their future study and career path.

Overview of Pre-Departure Learning

In the previous section on overall course design, we described the three components of the short-term study abroad program for GISI students. This section focuses on the first component of the course, namely, pre-departure learning, and provides an overview. Pre-departure learning consists of four sessions (Table 2).

Table 2

Overview of Pre-Departure Learning

	Modes	Contents	Assignments
Session 1	Face-to-face	Guidance	
Session 2	On-demand	Safety Abroad	Quiz
Session 3	On-demand	Useful English Expressions	Quiz
Session 4	On-demand	Academic English Writing	Quiz/Essay

In Session 1, we explain the assignments and steps for pre-departure learning in person. We also ensure that students can access and enter the course in Google Classroom. If students have questions or cannot access Google Classroom, we immediately assist them face-to-face.

In Sessions 2-4, students watch a video created by one of the instructors for GISI students. Lemmons (2023) states that students should be prepared prior to the programs with not only general information about the destination but also academic attitudes and self-reflection on perspectives toward different environments. Therefore, we included topics on safety abroad, useful English expressions, and academic English writing. In particular, for Sessions 2 and 3, we produced videos that featured social, cultural, and economic considerations.

The video in Session 2, which consists of five episodes, focuses on safety abroad. Based on information from the Shizuoka University Organization for International Collaboration and the instructors’ own experiences, several points to keep in mind when traveling and studying abroad are presented along with examples. Similarly, the video series in Session 3, also consisting of five episodes, introduces useful English expressions, such as phrases frequently used in airports, classrooms, homestays, and handling troubles, which students practice along with in the video.

The sessions are delivered in an on on-demand mode, and students submit a quiz via Google Form after each video. One of the instructors created the quizzes, each including five multiple-choice questions to verify students’ understanding of the video summary.

Lastly, in Session 4, students write down their goals and expectations for study abroad. Through this writing task, we expect students to establish the study abroad experience as a milestone in their education and their career development. As mentioned in the previous section on overall course design for the last assignment in the course, students submit an essay that reflects their overall experience in the course. This writing task is significant as it allows students to compare their thinking and feeling before and after the program and to realize their own improvements.

Format of the On-demand Sessions

The previous section described three sessions in which students underwent pre-departure learning through an on-demand mode via Google Classroom. When we created the videos for on-demand assignments, we considered the following points:

- One session is designed for 90 minutes in total.
- Each video ranges between 25 to 50 minutes.
- Each video can be divided into short episodes.

Each video contains several episodes, allowing students to frequently stop to watch in short periods of time. However, this is not only an orientation prior to travel but also part of an academic course; thus, we retained the total estimated time for student engagement at 90 minutes per session.

Observations and Reflection

This teaching practice was implemented in the fall semester of 2023 as an intensive course. We provided face-to-face guidance in January, and the students completed the pre-departure learning in February before their programs took place from February to March 2024. We share our notes derived from observations and reflections from the perspectives of teachers.

Observations

By monitoring student submissions, it appeared that students found navigating Google Classroom—from logging in to submitting assignments—easy. Before traveling, some students, especially those living alone, visited their families, while others were engaged in club activities or part-time jobs. Despite their busy schedules, none of them missed assignments. All assignments were displayed on one page under the class tab in Google Classroom, so students could see their assignments as a to-do list. This likely made it easier for them to recognize their assignments, and reduced the likelihood of forgetting them.

Moreover, their scores in the quizzes suggested that they, in fact, watched the videos before taking the quizzes. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the quizzes asked students to identify what was true in the videos, a task that required watching and understanding the explanation.

In Google Classroom, instructors can set up both the timing for delivery of quizzes and automatic scoring for correct answers. Thus, quizzes were automatically administered and scored, which is timesaving for instructors in terms of marking and assessing students' understanding. However, for the writing task, we lacked such an automatic checking tool. Nonetheless, online collection and storage of papers proved useful, as instructors could access student submissions and monitor their performance.

Reflections

In summary, the teaching practice worked very well. Creating videos and setting up a course in Google Classroom were time-consuming processes. However, after creating the videos and the course, we can reuse the same materials and settings for other cohorts, which will save time in the long run. In terms of video content, although all information was intended to be helpful for students traveling and studying abroad, we observed a few points for improvement.

First, in the episode on immigration at an airport, students learned and practiced typical questions and answers. However, practicing the presented phrases may not always be necessary, because major airports now have installed electronic devices that enable people to enter a country without being asked any questions by an immigration officer. Instead of practicing traditional questions and answers for immigration, students may benefit more from learning how to ask for assistance when using unfamiliar self-service devices or when these machines malfunction.

Second, we made a video on academic English writing and introduced typical rules for formatting a paper completing writing assignments. While students evidently need this knowledge, some apply it more than others. However, English classes at language institutes abroad typically focus on communication skills, placing greater emphasis on listening and speaking rather than writing. In such cases, a video covering academic English speaking and listening—such as prior knowledge of public speaking or note-taking while listening may help students better connect feel pre-departure learning to their experiences abroad.

Conversely, videos on useful expressions for homestays or handling problems such as phrases to describe feeling sick or to report issues—were indispensable, as students should know how to express themselves clearly when they need help.

Discussion

Compared to a single mode of learning, pre-departure learning in a hybrid mode provides multiple benefits to students and instructors. First, we discuss the benefits in terms of time management and workload during the busy period of preparation prior to traveling and studying abroad. Second, we highlight how this approach provides an opportunity for the sharing of student performance among instructors and administrative staff in an efficient and effective manner.

Flexibility of Hybrid Sessions

From the students' perspectives, the hybrid sessions are beneficial because they allow students to maximize their free time while preparing to study abroad. When receiving instruction on assignments, guidance is provided in a face-to-face mode, which facilitates asking questions and provides an overview of pre-departure learning and

important tasks more effectively. Students simply need to open Google Classroom whenever they are available to study and submit assignments, instead of traveling to campus or attending video meetings.

As Nakazawa (2022) reported, students can watch video clips repeatedly, especially sections they do not understand well. The on-demand mode allows students with a sufficient amount of time to learn according to their level of understanding. This strategy is particularly useful for learning in areas where individual progress varies widely, such as language acquisition, cultural awareness, or self-reflection on perspectives.

From the instructors' perspective, the hybrid sessions are valuable, because they can be used to track student progress and submission simply by accessing Google Classroom. As mentioned in the previous section, although creating videos is initially time-consuming, time is saved by using the same videos or by updating with slight changes, if any, for future cohorts.

Establishing pre-departure learning online is possible even with guidance at the beginning. However, we believe the advantage of meeting in person at least once at the beginning of the course. Thus, we apply the face-to-face mode to the guidance phase to provide students with resources and support while introducing the instructors and staff in our team. This ensures that students can approach these personnel at any time if they need assistance with the course. Moreover, we expect that the face-to-face mode gives students a sense of engagement and responsibility in the course.

Potential Implications for Student Support

Thus far, this study has discussed the perspectives of students and instructors. We also present a suggestion for student support as a potential implication of this teaching practice. As Lemmons (2023) stated, pre-departure preparation typically includes logistics and visa information. In our case, we provided guidance on these processes and assisted students in independently applying for a passport, visa, and insurance. This aspect requires administrative staff to monitor each student's progress, which can occasionally lead to unnecessary trouble and confusion.

To avoid such trouble and confusion, we suggest using the assignment function in Google Classroom. Assignments can be presented in the form of a quiz or questionnaire, and students can submit the assignments along with the confirmation number of each application. In this manner, the administrative staff can easily track student progress and collect important information in one place without the need to contact students by email. In addition, it enables administrative staff to smoothly share student progress with other instructors, ensuring that all team members have access to shared information for providing support in both academic and administrative aspects.

Conclusion

This study has discussed how hybrid sessions benefit students and instructors in terms of time management and workload during the busy period of preparation prior to traveling and studying abroad. In addition, this approach allows instructors and administrative staff to share students' performance status.

For schools and educators applying this practice, our reflection in implementation suggest that the degree of familiarity of students with learning management systems and the extent of their capability to navigate these systems should be considered. In addition, setting reminders for each assignment is advisable for students because instructors and students may be preoccupied with the multiple tasks required during the preparation.

Finally, we recommend careful consideration of the schedule for pre-departure learning, particularly avoiding conflicts with school events such as final exams. At the same time, sufficient time to work must be given for assignments in pre-departure learning. If students are familiar with and ready to navigate learning management systems and pre-departure learning is adequately scheduled, the proposed approach in this study can be widely applied in higher education for effective preparation for study abroad programs. To elucidate the comprehensive effects and learning outcomes of this teaching approach, future research is needed on student feedback regarding pre-departure and post-training learning after the program.

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