



Study Abroad Perspectives: An Interview with Hirozumi Asai

by Tim Newfields

Hirozumi Asai is a pioneering figure in the field of commercial study abroad programs in Japan. Shortly after graduating from West Los Angeles College in 1978, he started a company that is now known as Educational Information & Consultants (EDICM). Subsequently he wrote two books about overseas study: one focusing on elementary and middle school Japanese students overseas (2002) and the other on misconceptions about study abroad (2005). In 2005 he also co-authored a book with Kazuko Morimoto about persons who are not employed, receiving education, or training - described in Japanese as "NEETs". In 2008 Mr. Asai resigned as CEO of EDICM to undertake a 10-month bus tour of 13 African nations. His experiences are summarized in a 2011 volume published by Togensha. Currently he divides his time between serving as vice-president of the Taste of Japan LLC, a slow-food restaurant chain, and serving as director of a non-profit organization known as the "Future School" as well as another NGO known as "Class Afloat".

This interview was conducted in October 2011 in Tokyo. The original Japanese interview precedes this English version. I acknowledge the help of Noriko Saitoh and Melissa Tsuchiya in working with this translation.

What changes have you noticed in study abroad patterns among Japanese since you first started work as an overseas consultant and mentor about 35 years ago?

I've consulted with some colleagues about that. Three broad trends are discernable since the 1970s, when the notion of "study abroad" became popular among Japanese university students.

One trend involves the diversification of study abroad destinations. Early SA programs were mainly to the USA or UK, then later to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Since the 1990s, however, interest in more exotic destinations such as China, Malta, the Philippines, and Fiji among Japanese has been growing

A second trend involves the diversification of program types. At one time the Japanese word *ryuugaku* implied formal academic study overseas for an extended period. Now it has come to connote any learning experience over any time span occurring abroad. Prior to the 1990s, most SA programs for Japanese entailed research in a specialized academic field or else receiving foreign language courses with the intent of streaming into some standard academic program. Since the 1990s, however, we've seen more programs incorporating alternative activities as such sports, dance, fingernail art, and so on – and only some feature foreign language classes. As a case in point, there are now SA programs in which parents and children participate in diverse activities such as surfing or horse riding. Overseas internships are also becoming more popular.

A third trend involves the commercialization of study abroad. Study abroad has lost much of its academic focus and can now be viewed as a sort of tourist commodity that's light-heartedly bought and sold. Most of the physical and emotional hardships that were once associated with many overseas study programs have been significantly reduced, making most SA programs an easy tourist experience. Although many universities still sponsor academic years abroad, we see more and more short-term programs being offered as packaged tours, particularly during summer break.

Some people criticize short-term study abroad programs as mere sightseeing excursions. What are your thoughts on this?



Even sightseeing tours have value and I want young people to experience more of the world. Chances are, they'll learn new things while traveling. I think we should abandon the notion that overseas study has to be a stringent academic pursuit related to formal study. In my view, those preconceptions are outdated and too rigid. People can study abroad for many different purposes and also in many different ways.

Some schools have little or no post-return component in their SA programs. As a consequence, many students seem to lose whatever linguistic gains they may have made overseas rather quickly. Do you have any concerns about this?

Well, perhaps the lack of follow-up lessons in many SA programs is a curricular issue that should be addressed by school staff. Quite a few commercial SA programs do offer follow-up programs, but naturally these involve some expense.

Actually, I believe SA participants themselves should have a greater voice in deciding what sort of follow-up lessons they receive after returning. If students become really motivated to learn more about a foreign language or culture, after returning they'll find ways to continue their studies. On the other hand, if they are merely forced to participate in such programs, I doubt their effectiveness.

In your view, what misconceptions do many Japanese have about study abroad?

Since the term *ryuugaku* is vague and encompasses many varied nuances, I hesitate to label any given notion of that word as a "misconception". These days some people term mere overseas trips as "study abroad" experiences. One misconception that Japanese do need to discard is the notion that some overseas destinations are somehow "superior" or "inferior" to others. Cultures simply cannot be ranked by any single yardstick. A few of the more prevalent misconceptions about study abroad among Japanese include:

(1) ***A belief that study abroad involves a homestay.*** Many people even today mistakenly equate "study abroad" with a homestay experience. Although many SA programs do include homestays, this is not necessarily the case.

(2) ***A belief that extended academic study overseas is possible regardless of academic performance.*** In Japan it's rare to expel students because of low grades. However, this is often not the case at overseas educational programs, particularly outside of sheltered foreign language classes. If a student is expelled from school, in most cases they'll lose their student visas and have to return home. Japanese studying overseas need to understand what the consequences are if their GPA drops below a certain point. Sometimes this is not explained clearly enough to students prior to departure.

(3) ***A belief that the academic standards of overseas courses are inferior to those in Japan.*** In particular, Japanese secondary school students often worry whether their mathematics instruction overseas will fall below Japanese standards. The fact is that standards vary widely from place to place. At any rate, such fears appear to be diminishing.

In 2005 you wrote, "we should question whether studying abroad will foster an international sense or an ability to comprehend how foreigners and Japanese differ . . . by the time most people finish high school, they have culturally-determined identities. For this reason, it often takes conscious effort to overcome some cultural biases, but that's essential to foster internationalism" (p. 24). In light of this, could you briefly highlight what 'internationalism' means to you?

Kokusai-sei, which might be translated in English as 'international sense', is a perplexing term to pin down. In my opinion, it involves appreciating one's native culture and language while maintaining curiosity and respect for differing cultures and languages. We have no choice about our



birthplace or parentage. To cultivate internationalism, we must be able to express our identities clearly - and also respect other expressions. Paradoxically, children who have been well-loved by their parents and grandparents up through their middle school years and who develop a clear sense of their own heritage seem to be ones most capable of adapting to diverse situations when studying abroad. I suspect they have an inner sense of security and basic self-esteem.

It can be said that foreigners living in Japan as well as children growing up in international households can become significantly "internationalized" even without formal study overseas.

There are cases of people growing up in very ordinary families whose parents lack any overseas experience becoming "internationalized" simply by developing a keen interest in foreign languages and cultures through such pursuits as reading books, communicating with foreigners on the Net, or becoming familiar with overseas teachers. Once there is a desire to understand foreign cultures and languages more deeply, "internationalism" arises spontaneously. In other words, even adults, without formal study overseas, can develop an international sense.

On page 25 of the same book you mention, "international exchanges in Japan are basically packaged projects for Japanese . . . their purpose is to make Japanese less embarrassed when traveling overseas - they do not foster internationalism in any true sense." How do you feel internationalism should be fostered?

Japanese universities are often perplexed about how to conduct international exchanges. Most so-called "international events" seem intent on instilling a feeling that "Japan is more fortunate than other countries" among participants from Japan. Here are three ideas about how I believe international awareness should be fostered:

(1) ***Have more summer school programs at universities.*** One option would be to have a bus trip in which Japanese students were paired off with international students via a buddy-system. Ideally, this trip should be a week, but even an overnight trip might do. The destination could be anywhere. It would be nice if students camped out in tents. Possibilities include various sightseeing spots in Tokyo, visiting earthquake-afflicted areas in Japan, or conducting exchange visits to other universities. The cost should be as low as possible so that students can cover their own expenses. The food needn't be fancy: rice balls and canned goods should suffice. I believe students should stay in places without electricity, water, or gas – a simple riverbed is fine. Too many Japanese are isolated by their gadgetry. Also, we need to realize that most of the people on this planet don't have fancy appliances. Each buddy-pair should be responsible for giving some kind of presentation during the excursion. With this basic set up, you'll start to notice a real difference in the interactions occurring. Some powerful alchemy can manifest once people are living together under the same roof with a common purpose!

(2) ***Have Japanese and foreign students work side by side.*** If international students are working someplace part time to cover their expenses, much can be gained by having Japanese students work along side with them at the same venue, even for a short period.

(3) ***Have more Japanese teach JSL/JFL to foreigners.*** If more Japanese taught their native language (either freely or cheaply) to others around the world it would foster valuable cross-cultural learning and friendships. We already see some Japanese interacting with peers from other countries on Internet social networking sites. Activities such as this not only stimulate an interest in JSL/JFL, they also enhance the image of Japanese students abroad.

You have also stated, "Things that are taken for granted while living in Japan may not appear so when visiting another country . . . whether or not Japanese can be called 'international' depends on no small degree on the sort of discipline and education that they receive prior to going abroad" (2005, p. 25). What sort of pre-departure training do you



recommend before embarking on overseas study? Also, what do you feel should be emphasized in such programs?

Traveling around Africa prompted a major change in my thinking about this issue. In Africa, most people experience life without electricity, tap water, or gas – things which folks in Japan now take for granted. What I would like all Japanese going overseas to have is a sense of basic etiquette – they should be able to greet strangers politely. They also need a sense of integrity and a commitment to uphold the promises that they make, regardless of where a person is from. When others remark that these are common characteristics of Japanese, I feel happy. As you can see, these are not intellectual attributes; they are basic attitudes and guiding principles of behavior. A few things that those preparing to study abroad should learn include:

(1) ***How to express basic greetings and show respect for the elderly.*** It's helpful to know when to use common phrases such as "Thank you", "It was a feast", "I've finished", "Good morning" and so on to facilitate smooth communication. One should also demonstrate basic politeness in day-to-day interactions.

As a case in point, a while back I was traveling with some Canadian students in Hiroshima. We were interacting with teenagers from around the world and the Canadian teens greeted everyone politely. Later that day when we were on a street train, some of those Canadian teens gave up their seats promptly to elder folks. Witnessing this, the Japanese teachers were deeply impressed because most Japanese youngsters nowadays lack this sort of politeness.

(2) ***A commitment to honor agreements made, to be on time, and endure hardships.*** For success in study abroad, it is good to cultivate a habit of rising at a reasonable hour, maintaining a modicum of proper grooming, and developing inner steadfastness. One British headmaster recently told me, "These days Japanese students have become slovenly and they lack inner composure." I was both shocked and disappointed to hear his remark.

(3) ***A capacity for critical thinking and lack of gullability.*** One middle school student I was responsible for had lots of his personal belongings stolen at school. He also lent money to schoolmates who never bothered to pay him back. Even though he was attending a prestigious school in Switzerland, his teacher had to advise him to be less gullable and develop a degree of "street smarts". All too often, con artists overseas sense that Japanese are easy targets.

A similar situation happened with some middle school girls from Japan attending an international school in Italy. The Italian boys used sweet words to entice them, then quickly took advantage of them. Shrewder teenagers would have seen their ploy and avoided the unfortunate situation that occurred. In short, Japanese need to develop a capacity to critically assess the agendas of people they encounter. They also need to learn how to say "no" in ways that are emphatic, without being unduly rude.

You also mention, "The Internet and cell phone have dramatically changed some aspects of study abroad. Now it is far too easy for Japanese students overseas to complain to their parents on a daily basis about trifling matters, and this creates a real headache for those organizing study abroad programs. I encourage young people not to depend too much on their cell phones or computers when studying abroad since this may impede their ability to communicate face-to-face and resolve conflicts in real time. When studying abroad, a certain amount of cross-cultural friction is inevitable"(2005, p. 48). In light of that comment, what do you feel is the best way to cope with cross-cultural communication conflicts?



I have some ideas of how to deal with the rapid spread of mobile devices and Internet use. Some schools are now taking measures to limit the use of mobile by students. For example, a boarding school in America has banned student cell phone use. A Swiss boarding school has taken similar measures and I think there should be some restrictions regarding student cell phone use.

Letter writing has several advantages over electronic texting. Writers can organize their thoughts more systematically in letters than in e-texts. It is also time-consuming to reply to every single electronic message. Most of the minor gripes mentioned over cell phones work themselves out over time. In addition, there's a tendency to be overly swayed by the emotional tone of cell phone messages: to solve some problems, a degree of calm detachment is needed. The staff of EDICM repeatedly reminds parents with children studying abroad not to spoil their children by responding on the spot to all of their requests.

Most Japanese parents sending their kids overseas worry about issues such as personal safety, crime, or drug abuse. However you mention a different sort of risk associated with overseas study - the possibility that some kids might succumb to idle ennui and languor – a condition described in Japanese as "NEET" [not employed, not receiving education or training - in other words, idle] (2005, p.55). Could you briefly discuss this?

Well, obviously foreign students who do not attend school risk losing their student visas. Since the 1980s truancy has become a more serious problem with Japanese children – both inside and outside of Japan. During that period I talked with many truant students. A fair number of them felt glad to be overseas, even though they didn't want to attend school. Generally I suggested that they find a way to cover their own expenses rather than be a financial drain on their parents. I should point out many Japanese do graduate successfully from institutions overseas and often their parents are very pleased. It's easy to find examples of both success and failure with overseas study.

Desperate parents are apt to implore, "I want my children to attend school instead of loafing off in their rooms!" However, some other parents are inclined to say, "If my kids don't want to go to school, then they shouldn't have to." Such children are more apt to be nonchalant about school attendance. However, the parents whom I've dealt with seem to want their children to be overseas rather than in Japan. In such situations, there's little need for contact other than handling occasional money transfers. On several occasions I've had to go to the USA at the request of parents to pick up their truant children. Generally speaking, such students do nothing except stay in their apartments all day long and hang with fellow Japanese. Since their visas have expired, they must leave as illegal immigrants. I've consulted some other study abroad personnel about this issue, and they have told me there are a significant number of "NEETs" overseas.

In the past if folks got bored, they used to read books or play sports. However, with the spread of Internet games, people are now more prone to stay indoors all the time without directly socializing with others. Many persons get stuck in a pattern of social withdrawal into virtual worlds. Some parents are not particularly bothered by this.

Could you explain what you meant when stating, "students will purchase hardship from the money they have used for study abroad" (2005, p. 87)? Also, what sort of advice do you believe schools should give students before they venture abroad?

A number of Japanese Fulbright scholars who studied in the USA after WWII have shared their stories with me. In the period of 1949-1971 there was a fixed exchange rate of one US dollar to 360 yen. During that period many Japanese had to struggle to continue their studies in the USA, but now they often regard those times as fond memories. The point I wish to make is that there's a certain value in going through some hardship.



These days when I ask university students planning to study abroad, "What hardships do you anticipate overseas?" most of them reply, "hardship is a drag!" They're focused solely on having fun. I'm tempted to say that the notion of "worthwhile hardship" is disappearing in Japan.

Japan has one of the highest standards of living in the world. As a consequence, anywhere you travel is likely to be less convenient in some respects than here. However, a friend recently told me, "Studying abroad in Japan is more inconvenient than other places". The perception of whether or not something is 'inconvenient' appears to depend on our background knowledge and expectations. Even though we might be dissatisfied with something at first, we can grow accustomed to it before long. After traveling extensively through Africa, I've come to regard simply having water to drink as a blessing. I believe people can become accustomed to anything.

You've written, ". . . overseas schools accepting international students tend to regard students as independent adults who are accountable for their actions. However, students in Japan generally aren't considered independent adults till they are twenty" (2005, p. 126). In your view, what's the best way to train people to be more independent when studying abroad?

I believe that parting from parents physically is one step towards independence and therefore study abroad is a way for minors to work towards independence. Indeed, many high school students' have moved towards greater independence as a result of overseas study for many years. However, my ideas have changed since 2005 when I wrote "even without much foreign language preparatory study, it's good to escape the confines of ones household and venture overseas." Now I've come to believe that it's natural for minors to be somewhat immature and dependent on their parents even after finishing high school.

Some overseas students make little (if any) linguistic progress while studying abroad. In the light of that, what do you think is the best way to learn a foreign language?

Whether or not students actually acquire foreign language skills while studying abroad depends primarily on their motivation to learn in my opinion. During the so-called 'bubble era' (1986-1991) in Japan when money was awash lots of Japanese were studying abroad. A fair number of those going overseas back then simply played around. However, in recent years as Japan's job market has gotten tighter and more companies are requiring high STEP-Eiken or TOEIC® scores among prospective employees, the situation has changed considerably. Now many Japanese are desperate to improve their test scores. It seems as if more people are motivated to learn English. Though fewer students are opting to study abroad because of financial constraints, the actual desire to learn foreign languages is growing in my opinion. I'm pleased that some of the "hungry spirit" of the post-war generation of Japanese is being revived.

In your 2005 book on study abroad, you emphasize the following three points: ① for success in study abroad, basic etiquette and commonsense are essential, ② it's important to stay positive, since new experiences will seem more enjoyable, and ③ Japanese traveling overseas should not discard their sense of Japanese-ness since persons lacking any clear sense of identity are generally not well regarded by others. Were there any other points you wished to emphasize?

Those are the basic points. However, the notion of "common sense" is a social construct that's difficult to explain. Also, I'm tempted to speculate about the relationship of those three factors previously mentioned. Perhaps we can say that ① + ③ create the conditions facilitating interactions with those from other countries. Also, I wish to underscore that a vigorous sense of curiosity when traveling abroad can facilitate our ability to stay positive.



I encourage more Japanese to study abroad not only for themselves or for their families, but also for the nation as a whole and indeed for the entire world. Only people with that sort of trans-personal attitude towards study abroad can succeed in the deepest sense of the word. With that frame of mind, even if they experience momentary setbacks or disappointments, they'll be able to return to Japan with a feeling of success and accomplishment.

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