



Study Abroad Perspectives: An Interview with Isamu Maruyama by Timothy Newfields

After college, Isamu Maruyama spent 18 years promoting intercultural exchanges at the International House of Japan, an incorporated public interest foundation established in 1952 with nearly three thousand members and an annual budget of over eight hundred million yen (2013a, p. 38; 2013b, p. 6). After that, he worked for about ten years at the Tokyo Foundation, a think tank established in 1997 and funded by the Nippon Foundation. Working primarily with graduate students from around the world, he helped with human resource development and scholarships. In April 2011 he came to work at Toyo University's Global Initiatives Office. Since then he has been involved in many university-wide human resource development programs such as promoting study abroad, language training, and internationalization. This interview was conducted in December 2013 by email and in person.

What prompted your interest in study abroad and what do you feel was the most significant thing you learned from your first overseas experience?

Well, I have liked English since junior high school. In high school I spent a year abroad in Utica, a city in upstate New York. That was a truly life-changing experience. There I attended an American public high school and I was often impressed by the scale of things in the USA. Since that time I have had a desire to communicate and work with people from other countries.

What trends have you noticed among Japanese students studying abroad?

In recent years, it has been said that young Japanese have become more “inward-looking” and less interested in studying overseas. However, during this last year or so it seems interest in study abroad has increased. A September 2013 *ICEF Monitor* article reports how interest in study abroad among Japanese university students has shown a modest rise according to several surveys. For example, a 2013 survey of 3,200 Japanese students by Recruit Marketing suggests a minor upsurge. Moreover, the *Ryugaku Journal*, a popular publication for students thinking of going abroad, mentioned that the number of college students it arranged to send overseas increased by 12% in 2012 compared to the previous year. This upsurge may be due in part by increasing government funding for overseas study. According to a recent *Asahi Shimbun* article, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology (MEXT) has increased scholarships for university students studying abroad by 60% to about 3.1 billion yen (\$40.4 million) from fiscal 2011.

What is the Japanese government in general and Toyo University in particular doing to promote study abroad?

In 2012 the MEXT established a “Global Human Resource Development Project” [*Gurōbaru jinzai ikusei suishin jigyo*] in which 42 universities have been awarded special funds to make Japan more competitive. In 2013 they also established a “super global university” initiative to increase the quality of Japanese education and bring at least ten Japanese universities into the ranks of the world’s top hundred universities. In addition, in 2013 the MEXT launched its “*Tobitate! Study abroad JAPAN*” campaign to send more students from Japan to study abroad. The goal is to double the number of college students (now 60,000 to 120,000) and high school students (now 30,000 to 60,000) going overseas by 2020.

At Toyo University, since fiscal 2012 we have been offering more scholarships to encourage students not only to study overseas, but also to engage in volunteer activities and





international internships. The Global Career Education Center offers various short-term internships designed to help more students gain experience overseas.

As you know, many universities in North America require incoming students to obtain a minimum TOEFL score before enrolling in a regular academic program. At Toyo University, a university-wide English program known as the Special Course in Advanced TOEFL (SCAT) is offered to help students to obtain “usable” English. About 250 students are currently enrolled in this program. They take four classes a week with American instructors who have TESOL certificates. Toward the end of the academic year, aside from their regular classes, SCAT offers a ten-day intensive TOEFL course in which 80-90 students participate.

A sizeable chunk of Japanese university students are not interested in studying abroad. In your view, why is that and what can be done to stimulate their interest?

Japanese students might be reluctant to study abroad for a number of different reasons. For example, some may feel that studying abroad conflicts with job hunting. This is particularly true among third and fourth year students. Another sizeable chunk of students feel that they lack language skills to study abroad. What they need to realize is that no special language skills are required for some short-term study abroad programs. Of course, financial concerns are cited as a frequent obstacle. Unfortunately, many students are unaware of the broad range of scholarships available promoting study abroad. Then again, those who feel comfortable with the “Japanese way of doing things” may not wish to undergo the culture shocks that are apt to occur abroad. Finally, some people believe they can learn about foreign countries through the Internet or through foreign television programs. However, without directly experiencing events overseas such experiences will be second-hand at best.

In order to stimulate interest in studying abroad, students need to understand how such experiences can broaden their horizons and foster their personal growth. Above all, I think that students coming back from study abroad are key in “selling” the study abroad experience to others. If a teacher or school administrator encourages students to study abroad, there may be a credibility gap. However, if fellow students convey the value of study abroad, most students will be much more inclined to listen. Because of this “leverage” we encourage post-return study abroad participants to talk about their experiences with younger peers.

Many universities in Japan are now establishing places on campus where only English is spoken. Could you tell me about Toyo University’s English Community Zone?

If students are able to enter and leave such spaces freely, such “all English” zones can have great value. There can provide a place for foreign students on campus and Japanese students returning from overseas experiences who are adept at English to mingle with other Japanese students. However, English-only zones need to be careful to provide opportunities for students with limited confidence in their ability to interact in English. To that end, we occasionally hold events in which even students with nominal English skills can participate and enjoy in a game-like atmosphere.

Toyo University offers an annual English Camp in addition to various short study abroad programs. In your view, how do these two programs differ?

Short-term language programs range from 4-6 weeks and offer intensive exposure to target foreign languages at partner universities overseas. They also provide a chance to experience foreign cultures firsthand. In many cases, they include a homestay that requires participants to not only use the target language in class, but also in day-to-day interactions. It may be unrealistic to expect dramatic enhancement of language proficiency in such short time frames, but I do believe that study



abroad programs provide a valuable chance for cross-cultural learning. That, in turn, can inspire participants to continue to try to master a foreign language.

The English camp that we offer is a 3-night, 4-day program at a university seminar house. During the camp, English is widely spoken and interactions run around the clock. Students who cannot study abroad due to schedule conflicts or financial concerns can benefit from this program. This English camp is designed and led by SCAT instructors, mainly for students who are not adept at English. For a modest fee such students can interact closely with native speakers of English. Each year about 30 students at our school have participated in the camp, but this year we received more than 130 applications for 90 seats.

It is not uncommon for university students who have studied abroad for an extended period to make significant gains in their foreign language skills, only to gradually lose those skills after returning to Japan. What is Toyo University doing to reduce foreign language attrition among returnees?

In addition to the English Community Zone that I have previously described, we also have a “Language Exchange Partner” (LEP) program to link international students visiting our campus with Japanese students wishing to make friends with them and retain their foreign language skills. Such exchanges serve a dual purpose: the Japanese students often provide some Japanese language tutoring for international students, and international students – who more often than not speak only very rudimentary Japanese – also provide some tutoring in English (or Chinese, French, Korean, etc.) to students from Japan. Needless to say, sometimes friendships flourish. We currently have some 260 LEPs out of a total student body of 30,000.

In reality, these programs alone are probably not sufficient to sustain the language gains that many students have made overseas. Ultimately, I believe that is the responsibility of each student, but we are ready to support in whatever way we can to meet their needs.

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