



Study Abroad Perspectives: An Interview with Eton Churchill

by Tim Newfields

Eton Churchill is a professor in the Department of Cross-Cultural Studies at Kanagawa University. He received a doctorate in education from Temple University Japan in 2003. Since 2009 he has also been teaching courses such as sociolinguistics, qualitative research, and ecological perspectives on language learning at Temple University Japan. He is perhaps best known as a co-editor of *Language Learners in Study Abroad Contexts* (2006). Aside from his work on study abroad, he has published papers on interlanguage pragmatics, vocabulary learning, and sociocognitive interaction in language learning

This interview was conducted by email during the spring and summer of 2012.

How have your ideas about English language education changed since you started teaching?

I'd say they have changed quite a bit, and many of the changes reflect how the field of SLA has evolved. My first language teaching experience was as a French teaching assistant in college, where I was trained to drill students on their use of forms. It was an approach largely based on behaviorism with structural underpinnings of the audio-lingual method. While teaching French in a high school in the United States, I continued this technique . . . but also developed a content-based course on the French Revolution. In 1992, I came to Japan and began teaching English in an intensive four-skills, content-based program that placed comprehensible input and pushed output at a premium. There, learner errors were not seen as harbingers of bad language habits, but rather as a natural part of the developmental process.

Today, in my skill-focused courses, I continue to ask students to produce extended discourse, and require them to do a lot of reading and writing to support their in-class speaking activities. I do extensive work with vocabulary, and focus on grammar as issues arise in learners' production. In my content-based courses, I try to provide visual support for my lectures, teach vocabulary as it comes up, and give students opportunities to confirm their understanding and to ask questions.

As an academic, my initial training focused on Gass's (1997, 2006) Input-Interaction-Output model, but my interests took more of a social turn in the late 1990s. Partially related to this, my dissertation was on how language learning opportunities were both created and missed during a study abroad program. The volume *Language Learners in Study Abroad Contexts* (2006), which was edited with Margaret DuFon, also reflects this interest. . . .

After completing my dissertation, I became increasingly interested in Dwight Atkinson's sociocognitive approach to language learning (2002, 2007, 2010, 2011) which advocates taking into account not only the learners' interaction with more proficient speakers, but also their interaction with the environment. A more detailed explanation of this take on language learning can be found in papers I've written with Dwight, Hanako Okada, and Takako Nishino in *The Modern Language Journal* as well as in my 2008 article in *Applied Linguistics*.

Could you tell us about your university's study abroad program? What do you feel is its strong point? Ideally, how would you like to see that program change?

With the push toward globalization in education, today we are no longer at a point where we can talk of university study abroad programs in the singular, as if there is one program at each university. Not only is there an array of short-term programs across departments, most universities also have study abroad options that feature extended study overseas for a year or more. Such programs will undoubtedly increase in the years ahead as universities continue to form more "outer



circle" sister school relations in Europe and Asia, as well as in more traditional "inner circle" destinations such as the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and Australia.

In addition, universities frequently arrange study abroad fairs where private and state-sponsored programs are being advertised to students. Study abroad options for foreign languages other than English have also been expanding. For students, the diversity of programs offered is probably a good thing as it allows them to do some comparative shopping.

I would say that the better programs are the ones where individual students can be more or less mainstreamed for at least a semester, but preferably a full year. If students' proficiency is such that they need to be in an ESL class, they will be best served if they are in classes where they are in a minority in terms of their first language. Finally, students will get the most for their money in programs where less of their expenses are going to intermediaries.

What interesting studies about multicultural education and study abroad you have read recently? Also, what sort of research studies are you hoping to see in this area in the future?

The article "Evolving threads in study abroad research" that I co-authored with Margaret DuFon in 2006 proposed some possible areas to investigate. Some notable studies that I have read since then include Celeste Kinginger's 2008 *Modern Language Journal* monograph, as well as her 2011 article in the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* on "Enhancing language learning in study abroad."

Others worth mentioning include Minegishi-Cook's investigation of study abroad students in Japan as well as Sasaki's 2007 and 2011 works on the effects of study abroad on Japanese EFL students' writing. Finally, Maeda-Simon's 2011 book about her own steps towards becoming a speaker of Japanese is worth reading.

In your view, how can Japanese universities better promote multicultural understanding?

This is a huge question that is really beyond the scope of an interview on study abroad However, here are a few thoughts.

The majority of Japanese students entering the university today have little to no background in World History. World History should be required at the high school level and teachers should be encouraged to integrate multicultural approaches into these courses. In their Japanese History courses, students should also learn more about multicultural issues. A few topics that come to mind include 1) the history of how the Japanese language became codified in the late 19th and early 20th century and the ramifications of this for other cultural groups such the Ainu and Ryukyans in Okinawa, 2) relations between Japan and the Ryukyus, and 3) Korean experiences in Japan.

As for Japanese universities, a soft approach would be to require professors in the humanities and social sciences to include a unit on multicultural issues in their syllabi. An alternative approach would be to create a set of core courses focusing on multicultural education and understanding and to require students to take a certain number of these courses before graduation.

Perhaps the most realistic path toward promoting multicultural understanding at Japanese universities is going to continue to be through the work of individual teachers, through their selection of content and the time that they devote to focusing on intercultural communication.

Some schools require their students to study abroad. What do you think of that policy?

If schools have well-defined goals and students can benefit from the programs, this probably makes a lot of sense in terms of the long-term needs of the students, the universities, and Japanese society. However, I see less value for the students if mandatory study abroad experiences are



essentially being used as advertising tools for schools that are having difficulty in attracting students.

What trends have you noticed among study abroad programs in Japan over the last 20-30 years? Do any of those trends concern you?

Probably my biggest concern would be what I see as a move from grass roots organization of study abroad programs to the commercialization of these programs. This trend is perhaps inevitable, but I believe that it leads to greater costs for the students and quite possibly lower returns.

On the positive side, we are seeing more Japanese students studying abroad in countries where English is not the primary language such as South Korea, Finland, Germany, China. More and more students are also studying English in countries such as Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. I see this trend towards greater diversity as beneficial to Japan and these students in the long run.

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