Study Abroad Perspectives: An Interview with Elaine Gilmour

by Tim Newfields

Elaine Gilmour has a M.Sc. in Applied Linguistics from Edinburgh University and has been involved in language teaching since 1983. She began ELT teaching in Sudan and China. Since 1989 she has taught at four universities in Japan and she's been involved in a variety of research projects, most notably looking at how children learn languages in bilingual contexts, developing multi-media language learning software, and broader issues of language and culture. Other enduring interests include language testing and researching trends in ELT. This interview was conducted electronically in the summer of 2010.

How did you first become interested in study abroad programs?

Since joining Miyagi Gakuin University (MGU) in 1989 I got involved in coordinating and setting up study abroad programs. MGU offers one-month vacation style language school programs as well as the undergraduate SA year at overseas universities. My initial contract with MGU stipulated that I was expected to administer the short stay UK summer tour program. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Technology (MEXT) encourages SA within paired "sister school" relationships. In my view, this has resulted in fewer students taking up the opportunity to do a SA experience. One problem many SA students face concerns fee payments and the exchange of credits. A few Japanese universities readily accept course credits from foreign universities, while others place a limit on them. This tends to reduce student enthusiasm for studying overseas.

Moreover, it's my impression that most SA programs substantially rely on the pastoral care of tenured foreign teaching staff at Japanese universities; for many it is presented as one of their expected duties. I've witnessed several different phases in Japanese university administrations, and decided in 2007 (whilst on sabbatical) to research further into ethnographic directions in SA.

How have Japan's SA programs changed in recent decades?

According to Sugimori (2009) the number of Japanese studying in the United States has been waning. In 2002, nearly 46,000 Japanese were there; that number shrank to 34,000 by 2007, and by 2009 it fell to about 29,000 (Ono and Tuang, 2010). One person in charge of promoting student exchanges at the Japanese MEXT Ministry has been quoted as saying, "While some of that is due to a smaller overall pool of students, today's Japanese university students tend to be more inward-looking, preferring to stay in Japan" (Sugimori, 2009, p. 14).

Though fewer students from Japan are currently heading to the United States, the numbers going to China, Britain, Australia, Taiwan, South Korea, Canada, and other less expensive destinations have increased recently. In 2006 some 18,363 Japanese students made China their temporary home – 24 percent of those studying abroad. Britain ranked third among Japanese SA students, with 8.1 percent heading there (Ono and Tuang, 2010). Educational costs seem to be one reason for this trend, with aspiring overseas students keen to find cheaper destinations. In addition, many try to avoid paying for extra tuition at their home institutions since course credits undertaken while abroad are often not recognized.

In what ways would you like to see Japanese university SA programs change?

Many universities in Japan need to redesign their SA programs to promote more productive learning experiences within the wider rubric of the modern language and culture. The SA experience of many students could be improved if courses included interactive ethnographic, task based learning modules. Sending institutions also need to do a better job of preparing students for social interactions in their host cultures. Participants need more than just well crafted ESL courses – I believe they also need to learn how to become novice ethnographers.

What are the key features of an ethnographic approach to SA?

An ethnographic approach to language learning draws on social and linguistic anthropology, aspects of sociocultural theory, and sociolinguistics. Kramsch (1993) advocates a multidisciplinary approach in which learning lies in the combination of the experiential and intellectual; conceptual frameworks are developed for observing and understanding daily life in environments where the language/culture under study is understood through interaction with members of the L2 community.

Consider how communicative language teaching developed to encompass sociolinguistic approaches. Similarly, by focusing not only on language behavior, but also considering what gives meaning to those behaviors, the cultural content of a course can be synthesized. In my opinion, this should happen through learning initiatives that involve students in real world social tasks. However, as Stern asserts 'Culture teaching must not be confused with a formal course in social and cultural anthropology and needs to be more informal and personal' (Stern, 1992, p. 222).

How do you feel ethnographic training should be incorporated into SA programs?

The Council of Europe (2001, pp. 102-103) includes policy statements on *sociocultural knowledge/competence* and *intercultural awareness*. These provide a reflective starting point for ethnography projects, framed as they are within the wider discourse of intercultural communication. These statements resulted in part from an increasing realization that sociocultural knowledge played an important part promoting appropriate language learning within different communities. If SA institutions integrate task/project based approaches involving ethnographic training into their university studies based on the idea of language learners themselves as ethnographers, this should not only encourage more interactive cultural awareness, but also greater learning continuity in each SA environment.

In addition, because ethnographic fieldwork employs interviews and observation, students would associate (all be it organically), with a range of people from different social backgrounds within the host society. Ethnographic study requires students to "hang up their culture" (Gilmour, 2002, p. 17) and hopefully minimize the reported tendency to "hang out" mostly with other Asians in their selected English speaking SA context. If on the other hand, students are selecting destinations like China, Taiwan and South Korea; then of course the predominance of Asian culture is their preference.

What points do you feel university faculty designing SA programs should bear in mind?

The Japanese universities I have researched do not appear to make an effective learning provision within their SA arrangements – they are included as "icing on the cake" with little interaction or academic investigation of what actually goes on in SA situations. Granted there are one or two exceptions where possible community involvement is maximized – but on the whole that simply does not happen as effectively as it could. The question then becomes, "how can universities update and develop the quality of their SA participatory experience?" It goes without saying, attempting to tackle this question for the 1,223 or so universities in Japan is of course reductive. I suggest a more fruitful approach would be to explore how the European modern language degrees developed their "students as ethnographers SA approach" and then implement a parallel approach in Japan.

How do you feel instructors can enhance learning experiences in SA programs?

First, I believe it's worth learning about the Ealing ethnography project described by Roberts *et al*. (2001). The project provides general programmatic statements for translating intercultural learning objectives into practical course content.

If we conceived of a 3-year ethnography project, the first year would focus on learning beliefs, mores, and values in the host culture as well as some training in ethnographic methods prior to departure. The second year, which would be spent abroad, would focus on ethnographic projects and data collection. The third year, in which participants return to their home countries, would focus on writing up the ethnographic projects for publication and giving oral presentations about the projects as well as an evaluation of the entire program.

Is the ethnographic approach you have described applicable only to those going on SA?

No - some form of ethnographic studies can be integrated into the language/culture curriculum even for students not planning to participate in a SA experience. Research themes for ethnography projects could cover areas such as body language, stereotypes and representation of others, language and social interaction, indigenous folkways and mores, gender as culture, family varieties and lifestyles, and so on. Such an approach would help to sensitize learners to not only aspects of big "C" Culture but also the scope and application of little "c" culture. Sample student ethnography projects are described in Roberts *et al* (pp. 185-189, 2001).

What sort of support should be provided for novice ethnographic researchers?

Students need a degree of supervision and guidance. They may be required to submit periodic fieldwork reports or diaries; this can be done by a variety of electronic means. They may need help in determining the final research focus since ethnographic accounts grow out of the field situation and are not the result of attempts to find answers to an already existing question. In such cases, guiding questions may be necessary to help students wax into their themes. With the help of informants, students need to realize the storylines behind phenomena they are exploring. Most novice ethnographic researchers need a lot of writing support.

How should ethnographic research be assessed?

Robert *et al*. (2001, p. 205) provide a list of assessment criteria for final ethnographic written projects for undergraduates. I believe it is worthwhile letting students have a copy of the assessment

criteria by which they will be judged at some point during the final composition phase. This allows the writing to become a constructivist-learning task, not just a testing exercise.

How do learners who have gone through ethnographic study abroad experiences tend to change?

Jordan (2001) suggests that learners who have used ethnographic approaches are typically positive about the fact that they were better prepared than many students for theirs SA period - both in terms of study and project work, and in personal terms. They tend to be excited about working among informants and feel a sense of ownership of the unique projects they produce. They can often articulate in mature, self-reflexive ways about the changes they have undergone. It is thrilling to hear young researchers speak of ethnography as a new way of seeing and a new way of listening. Persons who go through the SA experience tend to think differently about self/other relations and also about language and what it means to be a language learner. And I would add one further plus: they gain a competitive advantage. Knowing and being enthusiastic about a different language and culture would promote the ability to imagine effective marketing in that second culture - which has to be good for future business relationships, especially when we think about the burgeoning opportunities for advertising and marketing through the Internet.

In what areas would you like to see more SA research conducted in the future?

I think evolving digital technologies can offer a great deal for SA researchers. The semiotics of language teaching is instantly available on the Internet and we can see web-based communities, social networking sites and blogs such as Facebook, as well as targeted advertising. Developments in the field of communication technologies have empowered many people, resulting in a more "connected individualism" or what some Japanese call "personalism," - as people use *social media* to create, read, or watch user-generated content. For example: writing or commenting on a blog; participating in an online discussion; watching videos on YouTube; viewing photos on Flickr, etc. These facilities provide an accessible and instantly exploitable resource for student ethnographers, even for those having only mobile phone connections. The applications can only be imagined: either for training novice ethnographers, or as a part of SA data collection and collaboration on projects, or language and culture home institution foundation projects.

Finally, are there any issues you perceive as problematic to the development of an ethnographic approach?

One problem is convincing younger Japanese colleagues to have enthusiasm for society-based ethnographic types of interactions and study. The overarching reluctance of Japanese academics to embrace the values of the international community (and even speak any of the six recognized world languages effectively) is, in my opinion, a reason why Japan has slipped in its international competitiveness ranking from number one in 1993 to number 27 in 2010, according to the International Institute for Management (Yamamoto, 2010). Without a stabilizing connection with the business classes in other countries it is difficult to see how Japan will be able to compete equally and economically amongst other G8 nations in the future.

Furthermore, because of the dramatic increase in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) courses being offered in universities in non-English speaking countries, SA to locales where any of the world's six major languages are spoken means students can go to universities in Bahrain, Brazil, China, Estonia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, etc.; with a much greater range of opportunities available than their sister school menus offer. As I mentioned at the beginning of this interview, it tends to be the foreign teaching staff that provide the pastoral care for students involved in SA; it's relatively rare to find tenured Japanese academics who themselves have actually participated in SA programs. Conversely, in contemporary European universities the majority of faculty members in any modern language department will have completed at least one SA as undergraduates. The European Erasmus program, if I may cite the example, sent nearly 200,000 students on SA this past academic year (2008-09), with the goal of getting at least 3 million students (over the course of 25 years since its inception in 1987) to have traded places by 2012. Androulla Vassiliou, the European commissioner presently in charge of education, announced the program was essential to improving the employability of future generations of Europeans (Swalec, 2010). It is also my impression that SA participation can effectively promote business relationships; particularly for the small entrepreneur style businesses that the Japanese government is hoping will expand. Ethnography puts people in touch with people at a personal level, and that just might be what's needed to stimulate a renaissance in the Japanese higher education sector. And politics aside, ethnography is just fun. People who like travelling and experiencing other cultures will just have lots of interactive and enjoyable adventures. They will also tend to mature as effective, connected, international individuals. In my opinion prestigious, high-class, plantation types of economies were really over before the end of the 20th century, why continue within such an atavistic paradigm?

Suggested Reading and Works Cited

Adaskou, K., Britten, D. & Fahsi, B. (1990). Design decisions on the cultural content of a secondary English course for Morocco. *ELT Journal*, *44* (1) 3-10.

Adams, R. (2006). Language learning strategies in the study abroad context. In M.A. DuFon & E. Churchill (Eds.) *Language learners in study abroad contexts*. (pp. 259-292) Clevendon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Barbour, N. (2000). The LARA Project (archived). Retrieved on March 7, 2010 from http://www.llas.ac.uk/lara/

Brown, D. E. (1991). *Human Universals*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press.

Freed, B. F. (1995a). Language learning and study abroad. In B. F. Freed (Ed.) *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context*. (pp. 3-33) Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Gilmour, E. C. (2002). Language, culture and learning. *Miyagi Gakuin University Journal*, 95. 1–19. Retrieved on March 8, 2010 from http://web.me.com/elainecglmr/Socioculture/sociocultural_learning.html

Gilmour, E. C. (2007). The study abroad experience: Critical issues and the case for developing an ethnographic paradigm in cultural studies. *Miyagi Gakuin University Journal*, 105. 1–64. Retrieved on March 8, 2010 from http://web.me.com/elainecglmr/Socioculture/sociocultural_learning.html
.
Isabelli-Garcia, C. (2006). Study abroad social networks, motivation and attitudes: Implications for second language acquisition. In M.A. DuFon & E. Churchill (Eds.) *Language Learners in Study Abroad Contexts*. (pp. 231-258) Clevendon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Hodges, L. (2002, October 17). Why Europe lacks allure. *The Independent Online*. Retrieved on March 22, 2010 from http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/higher/why-europe-lacks-allure-746788.html

Jordan, S. (2001). Writing the other, writing the self: Transforming consciousness through ethnographic writing. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 1 (1), 40-57.

Jordan, S. (2002). Intercultural issues in foreign language learning and ethnographic approaches to study abroad. Retrieved on March 7, 2010. http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/100#ref8

Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press.

Murao, J. (2009, July 23). University cultivates intl. experience. *The Daily Yomiuri*. p. 14.

Matsuda, Y. (2009, June 18). Only 2% of researches plan to work overseas. *The Daily Yomiuri*. p. 3.

Ono, K., Tuang Joo, T. (2010, January 21). Taro doesn't study here anymore, US loses its allure as a study destination. *The Daily Yomiuri*. pp. 1 and 3.

Swalec, A. (2010, June 22). More Europeans students living it up abroad. Reuters. Retrieved on July 26, 2010. http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKTRE65L18O20100622

Roberts, C., Bryam, M., Barro, A., Jordan, S., & Street, B. (2001). *Language Learners as Ethnographers*. Clevendon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Stern, H. (1992). *Issues and Options in Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press.

Sugimori, J. (2009, April 30). Fewer Japanese studying abroad. *The Daily Yomiuri*. p. 14.

Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and Language* (2nd Edition.). (A. Kozulin, Trans.*)*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. [Original work published in 1934.]

Yamamoto, M. (2010, June 12). What Kan cabinet should do to revitalize Japan. *The Daily Yomiuri*. p. 12.