

Informed Advice for Students Preparing for Study Abroad: How Can Language Teachers Help?

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Abstract: *For Japanese university students committed to studying abroad, what tactical advice or study strategies can university language teachers offer to address students' pre-departure preparedness? The research literature provides insights into typical problems faced by linguistically diverse international students (LDISs) attending credit-bearing programs at English-medium institutions (EMIs), yet these studies tend to focus on targeted LDIS populations within specific disciplines and/or contexts which can affect the generalizability of findings. Additionally, since studies are often concerned with the post-arrival phase of the study abroad experience, little attention has been given to the issue of pre-departure preparedness, which begs the question: What pre-departure guidance can language teachers in Japan provide to their students? This brief paper suggests several practical preparation strategies to address three areas in which LDISs require support: language development, academic skills, and cultural adjustment.*

Keywords: overseas study preparedness, English-medium institutions, linguistically diverse international students

Introduction

The Japanese Association of Overseas Studies (JAOS) reported that the number of Japanese students (adults, junior and senior high school) studying abroad offline in 2023 increased by 218% compared to the previous year and reached 83% of pre-pandemic levels at 64,421. Among these students, nearly three-quarters chose English-speaking countries (United States 22%, Australia 18%, Canada 15%, Philippines 10%, and New Zealand 8%) and language-focused programs of less than 3 months in duration (Nash, 2024). This report offers encouraging news for the offline, short-term overseas language study sector in the post-pandemic era.

In the case of university-level, credit-bearing study abroad opportunities, programs can take several forms: online or offline, short-term language and culture-focused programs, long-term credit-bearing programs (to fulfill degree requirements at home institutions), or dual-degree

programs hosted by domestic and overseas institutions. To initiate and facilitate these programs, Japanese universities have established 'partnership agreements' with overseas institutions. Kato & Ota (2024) reported (as of 2017) that Japanese universities held partnership agreements with 26,747 institutions, with "Asia accounting for about half, followed by Europe and North America." According to Nash (2024), the number of Japanese tertiary students abroad in 2022 increased five times when compared to 2021 to 58,162, yet this represented less than half the number of students in 2019. These studies suggest that, for Japanese university students in the post-pandemic era, the overseas studies recovery is still underway; therefore, the necessity for practical guidance in the form of pre-departure preparations is a timely consideration for those seeking to study effectively overseas. This paper briefly explores practical, research-informed, pre-departure preparation strategies for Japanese university students who are actively planning to study abroad in credit-bearing discipline courses at an English-medium institution (EMI). It should be emphasized that the following discussion is not aimed at students who plan to attend short-term, language-focused study programs commonly associated with overseas pathway programs. Those programs typically emphasize language skill development (often connected with a particular English language proficiency exam) and general academic skills. Instead, the skills and preparation strategies discussed below are meant for university "exchange students" or *kōkan ryūgakuse* in Japanese. But first, what is *preparedness* in this context? To properly situate a discussion of preparation strategies, we must: 1.) define preparedness, 2.) consider commonly held perceptions of preparedness, and 3.) identify the 'goals' which are driving students' desires to study abroad.

Preparedness

The notion of preparedness aims to ensure the successful transition of linguistically diverse international students (LDISs) into overseas institutions. Broadly speaking, pre-departure preparedness for overseas study can include activities which address topics such as language, behavior, health and safety, visa requirements, and other considerations relating to social, cultural, economic, and environmental impacts (Bessette & Camden, 2017; Hartman et al., 2018). Preparedness also considers other stakeholders, e.g., teaching faculty, staff, and community members, with studies revealing that when stakeholders are not ready to provide support for LDISs in a consistent and coherent manner, negative impacts on learning can occur (Kosman, et al., 2023).

Taking an LDIS-centered view of pre-departure preparedness allows us to examine the common challenges faced by LDISs enrolled in credit-bearing programs at EMIs through their lived experiences. Although the research literature tends to focus on targeted LDIS populations, which can affect the generalizability of findings, broad themes within those findings can inform pedagogical interventions.

Study Abroad: Perceptions of Preparedness vs. Reality

One common assumption among language teachers is that students will return from their overseas study experiences with greatly enhanced communication skills. However, this assumption is based upon three flawed premises: 1.) If students have met language entry requirements for overseas study, they will possess sufficient communication skills to participate in discipline courses, 2.) Students will find campus-based support to assist them with academic and language skills

development, when necessary, and 3.) Cultural engagement will occur by virtue of simply living and studying abroad. Fraser & Robertson (2025) call into question these commonly held assumptions by analyzing the experiences of LDISs at a regional Australian university and reveal that these assumptions were not always reflected in LDISs' realities. One key finding from this study illustrates that LDIS preparedness can be better understood through examining the perceptions of preparedness among key stakeholders, and specifically, the misalignment of those perceptions. Additionally, their study echoed the findings of other studies, which have identified insufficient communication skills, inadequate academic skills, and cultural/social isolation as core challenges faced by LDISs attending EMIs.

Identifying Goals

Anderson et al. (2015) advocate the value of pre-departure students identifying their overseas study goals, beyond simply earning credits toward a particular degree. What are their motivations? Can students identify the personal, academic, or professional reasons driving their desire to study abroad? Teachers can play a vital role in helping students connect their aspirations with concrete goals. By asking students to reflect and record, for example, under *Personal Growth*, how they might define notions such as independence, resilience, and confidence (and how these concepts might be exemplified with real-world scenarios), teachers can assist students to imagine how they might meet their own study-abroad objectives. This approach can also be useful in identifying and defining other goals related to *Social/Cultural*, *Academic*, or *Professional/Career* factors. A simple table can be useful in facilitating this activity:

Table 1. Identifying pre-departure goals by domain

Category	Motivations	Real-world scenarios
<i>Personal Growth</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Desire for independence, adventure, and self-discovery – Development of resilience, and confidence – Interest in travel and experiencing new lifestyles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Living on my own in a foreign country – Overcoming problems related to daily life, e.g., finding housing, and on/off-campus support systems
<i>Social / Cultural</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Influence of family, peers, or alumni who studied abroad – Desire to gain international experience and broaden worldview – Interest in understanding different cultures and societies – Development of cross-cultural communication skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Being accepted to an overseas institution – Socializing with domestic classmates outside of the classroom – Learning about national and local customs
<i>Academic</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Access to high-quality education or specialized programs – Exposure to different teaching styles and academic cultures – Foreign Language acquisition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Being accepted to an overseas institution within your desired discipline – Attending lectures and tutorials taught in English
<i>Professional / Career</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Belief that international qualifications enhance employability – Opportunity to build a global professional network – Access to internship and work opportunities abroad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Earning a prestigious degree which increased employment prospects – Working within a local company

Identifying Challenges and Intervention Strategies

Language skill development

Within the context of pre-departure preparations for students who wish to study abroad at EMIs, language skill development can be simplified into four broad categories: *academic English proficiency*, *oral communication*, *listening comprehension*, and *pronunciation & accent*. Below are brief descriptions of each category, which provide the framing for intervention strategies.

Academic English Proficiency: Studies have shown how LDISs struggle with discipline-specific vocabulary, academic writing conventions (Coxhead, 2012), and complex listening tasks, e.g., lectures, seminars, tutorials (Ferris & Tagg, 1996).

Oral Communication: Japanese university students often have difficulty participating in class discussions or group work due to limited fluency or confidence (Stroud, 2017).

Listening Comprehension: Fast-paced lectures and the use of idiomatic language can pose challenges for non-native speakers (Rahimirad & Moini, 2015), and certain speech patterns can be difficult for them to follow (Krashen, 1976; Huang, 2004).

Pronunciation and Accent: Misunderstandings can occur among LDISs due to unfamiliar pronunciation or regional accents of native speakers (Jung, 2010; Huang, 2004).

Pre-departure preparation strategies for developing language skills:

1. Enroll in academic English preparation courses focusing on writing, listening, and speaking

While English proficiency exam preparation courses can be generally helpful, they are limited by their scope and relevance to a particular discipline. If possible, pre-departure students should attend online courses within their field of study, such as through a massive open online course (MOOC). Teachers can work with students to help choose from a multitude of MOOC platforms to identify and enroll in appropriate courses that mirror the program aims, content, delivery style, and academic expectations they will encounter while attending discipline classes at an overseas EMI. Today, there are over 1,500 universities offering free online courses. Additionally, governments and the private sector (e.g., Coursera®, edX®, FutureLearn®) have created MOOC platforms to help students find appropriate course content taught in their preferred languages.

2. Practice listening to authentic academic content

In addition to enrolling in a MOOC course, students can take advantage of other online resources (e.g., TED Talks®, YouTube® lectures). Teachers can assist students by creating practical note-taking exercises and oral report assignments (based on notes) to sharpen critical listening skills and summary writing skills. This approach can help facilitate the acquisition of important discipline-specific vocabulary and jargon, thus helping students shift from academic to professional communication skills.

3. Join online conversation groups with native speakers or fluent English users

Strong communication skills are critical for successfully negotiating everyday life when living and studying abroad. These skills also support cultural engagement on and off campus and are commonly mentioned in the research literature as the greatest obstacle to building meaningful relationships with domestic students and faculty members. To remedy this, pre-departure students

must seek out opportunities for face-to-face communication with native or fluent English users. Additionally, students who enroll in MOOCs will often be required to participate in group discussions with other students during tutorial sessions.

4. Use tools like Grammarly® or Hemingway Editor Plus® to self-assess writing skills

There is a general belief among LDISs that academic success is predicated upon academic writing proficiency. This opinion is understandable as writing assignments are routinely used in performative and proficiency-based assessments; therefore, pre-departure students must work to improve their academic writing skills and understandings of writing genres they will encounter at EMIs. In addition to ChatGPT®, pre-departure students must learn how to utilize AI-writing assistants such as Grammarly® or Hemingway Editor Plus® to develop their writing skills while strictly following academic integrity guidelines. By utilizing AI-writing assistants to practice academic writing, students will become more confident when faced with credit-bearing writing assignments. However, as current AI-writing assistants are capable of making mistakes and/or incorrectly assessing student writing, language teachers must provide mediated feedback to students to truly foster writing skill development.

Special note: The issue of when, how, or even if, students should utilize AI-writing tools is a complex and evolving debate that is best conducted at a discipline level. Moreover, arguing the potential pedagogical merits and demerits of these tools is far beyond the scope of this paper. However, as pointed out by Isemonger (2023), a general rethinking of the role of ‘teacher as mentor’ in the ChatGPT® era is perhaps the most appropriate and productive position. Briefly, Isemonger (2023) argues that teachers must play an active role to ensure that AI use aligns with pedagogical goals by explicitly teaching students how to use generative language models (GLMs) effectively and critically, sharing best practices, and collaborating on prompt design. Much has been published regarding the risks associated with AI-writing tools from ethical, pedagogical, and practical perspectives (Hagendorff, 2024). These risks underscore the critical importance of teachers to protect their students from the pitfalls of overreliance on AI-writing tools through thoughtful, collaborative instruction and guidance.

Academic skills

There are four considerations broadly related to academic skills that should be included as part of LDIS pre-departure preparations: *overseas academic expectations, note-taking & time management, assessment types, and collaborative group work.*

Different Academic Expectations: Unfamiliarity with critical thinking (Shaheen, 2016), independent research (Yeoh & Terry, 2013), and plagiarism rules (Hayes & Introna, 2005) are common academic skills where LDISs struggle to meet institutional expectations.

Note-Taking and Time Management: International students often have difficulties juggling multiple assignments or understanding how to take efficient lecture notes (Spencer, 2003).

Assessment Types: In some cases, LDISs find essay writing (Cennetkuşu, 2017), open-ended questions, or oral presentations (Al-Nouh et al., 2015) as modes of assessment challenging and/or unfamiliar.

Collaboration in Group Work: Group dynamics, unclear roles, or language barriers can sometimes hinder LDISs’ productivity (Popov et al., 2012; Popov et al., 2022).

Pre-departure preparation strategies for developing academic skills:**1. Learn about academic conventions in the host country, including referencing styles, and how to avoid plagiarism**

The research literature offers an abundance of cases where EMI teaching faculty and LDISs have struggled to address the misalignment of perceptions regarding academic expectations and integrity. Chiefly among these misalignments is the problem of plagiarism. Student plagiarism can occur for many reasons, including poor time management, lack of understanding of the concept of plagiarism, desire for good grades, and laziness, etc. However, in many cases, LDISs resort to AI-tools (and inadvertently misappropriate these tools) in the absence of finding on-campus support to address their language deficiencies. Consequently, language teachers must help their pre-departure students navigate the use of AI tools in the broader contexts of digital literacy and local academic cultural practices, and understand the AI fair-use guidelines established by the discipline they are intending to enter.

2. Practice writing structured academic essays and doing short research projects

Pre-departure students should practice their expository writing skills by exploring topics they are most likely to encounter at the EMI. Overseas universities commonly post their course outlines online; therefore, language teachers can help their pre-departure students determine specific writing assignments to target for practice. At present, AI tools are only somewhat helpful in providing students with explicit instruction regarding composition structure. Also lacking is the ability for AI-writing tools to provide users with step-by-step 'scaffolding' opportunities to learn how to construct more sophisticated argumentative and/or persuasive essays. Lastly, AI-writing tools still have trouble identifying poor or faulty logic or providing accurate feedback to student authors regarding other rhetorical features (i.e., the quality, placement, and development of ideas). For these reasons, language teachers must oversee the development of pre-departure students' writing skills, to include: the selection of topics based on actual writing assignments found within the discipline, and the introduction of useful AI-writing tools in the later stages of the writing process to assist authors with sentence-level, syntactical issues (Isemonger, 2023).

3. Use apps like Notion®, Trello®, or Google Calendar® to build time management habits

Time management can be challenging for students (and teachers), so it is worth discussing with pre-departure students how they can more effectively manage their time abroad by utilizing certain technologies. It is this author's opinion (based on experiences as a student and teaching faculty on American, British, Australian, and Japanese university campuses) that managing one's time is comparatively more challenging at overseas institutions than in Japan. The reason for this is because most overseas universities operate under a modular scheduling system. In other words, there are no set class 'periods' – only unequal time slots across the week which accommodate lectures, tutorials, and lab meetings. Furthermore, overseas institutions often use 'all-in-one' integrated learning management systems (LMS) which combine various functions such as email systems, school calendars, student support services, course webpages, and messaging features. Understanding how to leverage these apps will create more efficient use of one's time and increase productivity.

4. Join webinars or workshops offered by host institutions or international student networks

Pre-departure students must familiarize themselves with the culture and the systems of their host institution. This should include explicit information (e.g., How do students communicate with their professors outside of class?), and more implicit, academic cultural knowledge (e.g., How are collaborative learning or oral presentations handled if LDISs lack confidence in their language abilities? Are any accommodations given to LDISs?). Language teachers can help their pre-departure students by joining them (initially) when they attend host institution orientation meetings or international student workshops. At a minimum, teachers can assist pre-departure students in making lists of questions and concerns to ask school officials or current international students.

Cultural adjustment/engagement

Cultural adjustment and social engagement (on and off campus) are critical for a positive overseas study experience as they greatly impact LDISs' communication development and academic performance (Lutfiana et al., 2020; Barker et al., 1991). By understanding some of the challenges that await them, pre-departure students can better cope with issues of *culture shock*, *social integration*, *communication styles*, and the possibility of *discrimination* and *stereotyping*.

Culture Shock: The initial excitement that many international students experience at the beginning of their overseas study may give way to confusion, homesickness, or frustration (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Mulyadi et al., 2024).

Social Integration: Difficulty making friends with local students and/or understanding social norms (Bianchi & Martini, 2023; Zhou & Zhang, 2014) are common problems faced by LDISs.

Different Communication Styles: LDISs may encounter challenges to understand indirect communication, humor, or sarcasm (Bell & Attardo, 2010; Pomerantz et al., 2020).

Discrimination or Stereotyping: Some LDISs may encounter microaggressions or feel excluded (Lee, 2006).

Pre-departure preparation strategies for addressing cultural adjustment/engagement:

1. Set realistic expectations about the adjustment process

Foreign language teachers could talk to pre-departure students about their own study abroad experiences or experiences when they first came to Japan. Thus, language teachers could discuss from their experiences the various 'phases' of a study abroad experience: excitement and optimism (the Honeymoon phase), disorientation (the Culture Shock phase), loneliness & homesickness (the Adjustment and Adaptation phase), acceptance and serenity (the Acculturation phase), and upon returning to their home country (the Reverse Cultural Shock phase). With the understanding that these phases are commonly experienced by international students, pre-departure students' concerns will be assuaged and replaced with a more reflective mindset when they do occur.

2. Research cultural norms and values of the host country

Cultural norms and values can be observed through the communication styles of EMI teachers and domestic students (in the form of classroom etiquette). By cultivating an open and curious mindset, the pre-departure student can begin to examine cultural differences by seeing them as an opportunity to learn. Language teachers can encourage students to consider different lifestyles and communication styles as a possible reflection of a national (or regional) character, reflecting (perhaps) multicultural diversity within the host country. Teachers can also help pre-departure

students consider where these differences in cultural norms and values may have originated based on a host country's history, geography, or regional differences. To this point, language teachers might share when they have felt social or cultural differences (culture shock) in Japan. Rural Japan versus urban Japan, for example, offers a multitude of discussion points. Additionally, teachers could explore when they felt socially excluded or discriminated against in Japan. Where and when did this occur? And most importantly, upon reflection, how did the teacher interpret these feelings? Additionally, discussions of individualist versus collectivist societies, and high versus low-context cultures and their possible impacts on language use and culture could lead to fruitful discussions.

3. Connect with student support groups or cultural societies online before arriving overseas

Cultural engagement and social integration occur on an individual level. They also determine LDISs' feelings of belonging which in turn affects their sense of well-being, language development, and academic performance. Thus, the sooner that pre-departure students make connections with other students (domestic and international) the better. In terms of language development, exposure to different communication styles can help LDISs understand what role, for example, direct/indirect language use, humor, or sarcasm play in shaping the meaning of messages. On a cultural level, domestic students often enjoy playing the role of 'cultural informant' to newcomers, explaining how things get done on and off campus. Language teachers should strongly encourage pre-departure students to 'Give it a go!' by joining academic, sporting, and social clubs to meet like-minded peers. Remind students that not only will they be enjoying themselves but also, they will be developing deeper understandings of the host country, university, and local community while improving their communication skills.

4. Cultivate an open and curious mindset – see cultural differences as learning opportunities

A semester or a year-long study abroad experience can yield a lifetime of discoveries about a country or region, its peoples, places, customs, academic cultures, and perhaps most importantly, ourselves. Curiosity, of course, is the driver behind these discoveries. It would be easy to assume that students actively pursuing opportunities to study overseas would possess an abundance of curiosity which could sustain them while abroad. However, pre-departure students can benefit from explicit discussions with their teachers around the notion of maintaining an open mind – as there are so many things that they are simply unaware of. The expression 'You don't know what you don't know' illustrates this idea. In many cases we are simply unaware of what we don't know because we don't know that something exists. As with overseas travel, living and studying abroad provides opportunities to discover these new possibilities. In Australia, why do shops close in the early afternoons? In America, why do many people own guns? In Japan, why do parents send their children to private 'cram schools' after regular school? By simply paying attention to one's surroundings and asking 'Why is that?' can lead to endless discoveries.

Conclusions

The origin of this paper grew from my interviews with LDISs (which included Japanese students) within an engineering and science faculty at a regional university in Australia. While the aim of that research project was to investigate language development among LDISs, it became clear that many of my assumptions regarding the 'study abroad experience' were inconsistent with the

lived experiences of those I interviewed. Specifically, it was clear that since most pre-departure preparations had focused on meeting institutional English language requirements for entry, many of the LDISs interviewed were struggling to meet institutional academic standards. The causes underlying these 'struggles' were individual, dynamic, and complex; however, themes did emerge and were consistent with other research findings. This paper is an attempt to create a practical guide for language teachers to use with their pre-departure students to address possible skill deficits and to raise awareness of the issues they will likely encounter as a LDIS enrolled within a faculty at an overseas EMI.

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