

A Pre-departure Program for Students Who Study Abroad

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Introduction

This paper will focus on pre-departure instruction and outline a short course for preparing these students to maximize the benefits of studying abroad. The focus will be on institutionally organized non-credit programs that have intensive English language lessons and a homestay as major features. As an example, I will use the pre-departure course syllabus at Trajal Hospitality and Tourism College, which sends students to Australia and the USA for ten months. However, most of the suggestions in this paper could be useful for anyone preparing students for an extended stay in a foreign country where learning the local language and extensive interaction with locals will be part of the experience.

The Challenges of Studying Abroad

There can be no doubt that studying abroad is an effective way to increase language proficiency, learn about culture and develop personally (Asai 1997, Ishino et al. 1999, Grove 1989). It is also an expensive undertaking for students and can demand considerable resources from the schools and other participants. It seems to be in everyone's interest to maximize the learning that takes place. Yet the structure of many institutionally organized study abroad programs (which keep students together and limit interaction with the local culture), unrealistic expectations (especially on the part of the students), cultural factors, and inefficient learning habits can all have a negative impact on students trying to make the most of their experience.

Ideally, schools which send students abroad should try to ensure that adequate instruction or orientation is provided prior to departure, shortly after arrival and upon return back home. Grove (1989) suggests that most attention and orientation resources be allocated to students after they have arrived in the host country and spent at least a few weeks there with their host families, when students are best able to comprehend problems and think about how to work toward solutions. However, pre-departure instruction also can play an important role in preparing students. It can lay the groundwork for later instruction, and make a big difference in the important first few weeks after arrival. It can also help maximize language learning prior to departure and help relieve some of the anxiety that students inevitably feel before leaving. And in the case of short programs, pre-departure instruction may be the only time available to cover many of the important issues involved in studying abroad.

The Goals of Pre-departure Preparation

Grove (1989) identifies five distinct goals for a pre-departure orientation program for students. They are:

1. To help students to focus on their own culture (values and behaviors).
2. To help students develop realistic expectations.
3. To help ease pre-departure anxiety.
4. To describe the program and system of expected behaviors.
5. To give practical and logistical information.

To these I would like to add two more:

1. To give some instruction on language learning strategies.
2. To give some intensive instruction in English, specific listening practice and survival homestay vocabulary.

To meet these goals, we can divide the pre-departure course into three general areas of focus:

1. Expectations and cultural awareness training
2. Language preparation
3. Logistical information and form processing

In the execution of the actual syllabus these are likely to get considerably mixed up, but in preparing a pre-departure program it is useful to view them as separate.

Expectations and Cultural Awareness Training

Dealing with expectations and cultural differences is problematic for three reasons:

1. The majority of students really cannot envision the form that life studying and living abroad takes and therefore do not know the extent to which their expectations may be unrealistic;
2. Given their age and experience, students are not used to looking at their everyday life as a system of culturally determined values and behaviors that could clash with those of another culture;
3. The study abroad experience is defined by an individual student being matched with an individual host family in the context of a program, meaning that students need to get used to the idea that generalizations will not always hold true. Therefore, they will need to learn skills that will help them to cope in their particular situation.

While Johnston (1993) suggests proceeding to questionnaires and group discussions after some warm up activities are used to start the pre-departure course, we have found it more useful to begin by building up a knowledge base about studying abroad before that. This schema building is critical since it begins to give students a framework for comparing cultures and lifestyles (individual and national) and helps them to clarify their expectations. Indeed, after students become better acquainted with the experience they are embarking on, they will naturally give up on some of their more unrealistic expectations.

Exercises to raise the idea of culture, what King and Huff (1985) call 'deep culture' an elaborate system of rules, assumptions, and patterns of thought that we have learned, that we carry with us, and that we act on each day of our lives' (page 35) are also necessary. Culture learning lessons/activities consist of looking at specific examples based on the experiences of past student participants, raising awareness of the notion of deep culture and how it can affect relations, and especially, the phenomenon of culture shock. At various points in the course, teachers must strive to help students develop a sense of empathy, something which various researchers (especially Bennett 1993) point to as essential for successful culture learning.

Language Preparation

The months before departure are a good time to devote extra attention to language instruction and language learning strategies as well as capitalize on the extra motivation students are feeling and help to reduce some of their very real worries about understanding and communicating while abroad.

In addition, students are often unaware of how to approach the new world of English they will find themselves in after arriving in the host country. Some training in vocabulary management, shadowing and self-talk, asking questions and other strategies can help give students a sense of control over their language learning experience and get them started on finding strategies they like and find effective.

For direct language instruction, three areas deserve special attention.

1. The most important is listening and students need extra practice in listening to natural language in the correct dialect. Commercial materials are available but homemade videos may be even more useful.
2. Another area is homestay and classroom vocabulary. Students are unlikely to have encountered a lot of the vocabulary they will need in their daily lives with an English-speaking family or in an English-only classroom. Some short lists of essential phrases can be passed out and practiced regularly and students can be encouraged to attach labels to things in their homes to learn that vocabulary.
3. The third area that students may need extra work with is in talking freely at length about themselves. This can be addressed by

having students bring in pictures of their homes, families, neighborhoods, friends, favorite things, etc. and explain the contents to partners who ask questions. The same pictures can then be taken with the student when he or she goes abroad. Roth (1997) suggests a very interesting technique that mixes language learning and culture nicely. Students are asked to fill clear files (notebooks with transparent pockets) with all sorts of information about themselves, their class, school, and culture. Time is allotted in the pre-departure course for students to work on these family trees, home floor plans, etc. Students also include some of the advertising flyers that come as inserts in newspapers. These ads for pizza delivery, new homes or apartments, cars, restaurants, clothing, etc. contain pictures and are a great introduction to Japanese culture. By sharing their clear files with host families, students can share more about themselves and start some wonderful cultural discussions. As with their pictures, students can practice explaining these in the pre-departure course.

Logistical Information and Filling out Forms

Filling out forms correctly can take an agonizingly large amount of time. Visa forms and homestay placement forms (and possibly insurance forms, bank card applications, etc.) need to be filled in. The amount will vary from school to school, country to country, and program to program. It is important to consider the necessary forms when making plans for available time before departure. Even when they are filled out quickly, forms need to be checked carefully. Mistakes in certain government forms can cause serious delays as new forms may need to be sent for from the host country.

The amount of logistical information that must be conveyed will depend very much on the program, the destination, the age of participants and the amount of support available during the study abroad term.

Course Timing and Length

In general, programs should not begin too far in advance of the departure date but they should also not be held in the few days before departure when students have too many other concerns. Johnston (1993) does not mention an amount of time but seems to suggest that at least a couple of lengthy sessions should be held. The amount of time will vary by institute, but certainly at least 4-6 hours are necessary for addressing expectations and giving logistical information and filling out forms. If teachers wish to have students work through some cultural awareness training lessons, have enough time to talk with graduates of the program and practice some of the English learning strategies, then considerably more time is necessary, certainly more than ten hours. At Trajal Hospitality and Tourism College the course is held as a regular once a week lesson in the second term of students' first year, beginning six months before departure. In all, a total of 13 hours are used. Students then go on to study abroad as the second year (ten months) of their program. In February, a final orientation is held on a weekend and students are asked to come with their parents. This meeting is used to fill in some of the final necessary forms and to provide some orientation to the parents about the program. Around this time, special intensive lessons are also given for about ten days for those students who seem to need or want extra help. By the end of February, students have had the last of their pre-departure instruction and know a little about the family they will be staying with. Later, they will also receive a booklet which gives essential contact numbers, information about the curriculum they will follow and other logistical and cultural information and advice. Our students do have a big gap of time until the middle of April when they depart, which is not ideal but is unavoidable.

Pre-departure Course Syllabus

The course is organized into 13 one-hour sessions. A variety of different activities are used: short presentation lectures, past student participant presentations, group discussions with past participants, role-playing activities, etc. Extensive use is made of students who have already completed their study abroad term since they can convey more relevant and up to date information in a manner which is more understandable and interesting for students. There are some pitfalls, however. In general, there is a problem of coverage vs. intensity. Past student participants naturally tend to talk about their own experiences, which while very interesting often do not give the whole story. We have found that short presentations, followed by past students rotating between groups of first-year students, followed by a teacher summary is best. The presentations by past student participants can also be used as case studies. At times during the presentations, teachers may want to pose questions that students discuss in groups. We also organize our sessions topically and encourage everyone to stay on topic. One other problem is that even in small groups, students may be reluctant to ask some questions. Some technique should be used to make it easy for students to ask questions easily and without embarrassment. Johnston (1993) recommends making an anonymous list of concerns or having students write and submit questions on cards and then addressing those concerns in a whole class discussion controlled by the teacher. Either of these allows teachers to also introduce some topics that may not have come up during other discussions.

Session One and Two: Building Schema

Two hours are devoted at the beginning to setting the context for the study abroad experience. Extensive use is made of video, slides and students who have returned from abroad. The object is to paint as clear a picture as possible of the everyday lives of students and host families, complete with the highlights and mundane details to show the differences and similarities with their present lives. The pictures show rooms in homes, students sitting at the dinner table with host family members, students going to school, sitting in class, participating in activities, relaxing in lounges, etc. Several students who have completed the program also describe their families, daily schedules and experiences. Questions are not taken during these sessions but it is made clear that there will be plenty of time for questions in later sessions.

At the end of the first of these two sessions, questionnaires are passed out and students are asked to complete them and submit them within a few days. They are then read by teachers and notes are made to address issues in the following sessions. The questionnaires are divided topically into sections (the same as the course itself) and students are asked to answer questions about their present lives and what they expect their lives to be while abroad. Some questions ask students what they would do or how they think they would feel in certain situations.

Some time is also used to describe to students the content of the pre-departure program and the general time frame of events before departure and while abroad.

Session Three: English Learning in the Pre-departure Period

In this session, students are told of the English learning aspect of the program and study abroad experience. Teachers explain the problems students can expect in communicating and some of the things they can begin doing to work on their English before departing. A phrase list of essential homestay vocabulary is passed out and students are told that there will be periodic tests during the pre-departure course to check on their ability to produce this vocabulary. Listening log sheets are passed out and students are advised on places where they can practice listening during their free time (various radio stations, Internet, etc). Students are shown how to record their listening on their sheets that contain space for them to record both intensive and extensive listening practice. In this session the personal clear files are also introduced and students are shown a sample and asked to begin collecting pictures and flyers.

Session Four: Safety

Safety is a prime concern of the school and a source of many questions from both students and parents. Students have heard many rumors or seen things on television and the aim of this session is to put some of their fears to rest. However, students need to be advised of the many real dangers of living abroad and how they can reduce the chances of meeting with problems. This session can really only begin to raise awareness and safety definitely needs to be covered once more after students have arrived in the host country. For this session, teachers and past student participants give short presentations and then most of the time is used in answering student questions.

Session Five: Homestay Placement Forms

The entire session is devoted to filling out homestay placement forms. The forms are only in English and contain questions about preferences, lifestyles and medical history. Students usually have difficulties in answering some of the questions. The very act of filling out the forms allows teachers the chance to raise some of the issues in homestay placement, for example the different types of families and the general advantages and disadvantages of each. Most students tend to expect families with children and may not be aware of the freedom that can come with living with a single host, or the extra care that can come with living with a retired couple. The host family the student is paired with will have a very large impact on the total study abroad experience. Good placement forms, full and honest answers by students, and conscientious use of that information by the placement office in the host country can go a long way to reducing problems and ensuring the satisfaction of students.

Session Six: Health, Illness and Diet

This is another presentation with a question and answer session. Various issues relating to health are covered and a wide variety of

cultural issues tend to arise. The majority of this session is devoted to short presentations by teachers and past student participants, but parts of the essential English phrase list dealing with food preferences and illness are also covered. Some role playing with this vocabulary is done.

Session Seven: Visa Forms

Usually at about this time of the year, the visa forms need to be filled in. The entire session is used for this. Trajal Hospitality and Tourism College uses an agent to procure the visas. This session is lead by the agent.

Session Eight: Cars and Travel

Since most students are eighteen, there is considerable interest in getting licenses and buying cars, particularly among students headed to the USA. Students need to know the amount of money necessary in order to make a decision about a car well in advance. Travel options are another thing students have often not thought so much about. Most students have the expectation to visit the most famous places in the host country and may not know the amount of money needed to do so or the other cheaper travel options available to them in the large gaps of free time they will have between terms. In this session, the school calendar is explained and the teacher and past student participants discuss travel and car experiences. Time is also allotted for questions and answers.

Session Nine: Studying English in the Host Country

In this session, student progress is checked on the listening logs and personal clear files and a short quiz is given on the list of homestay vocabulary. Some listening activities using authentic material from the host country are then done. Students may be too used to the controlled style of textbook listening and need some exposure to the kind of language they will actually hear. The advantage of using homemade materials (audio or video tapes produced in the host country by the staff of the school to which students will be going) is that they can be copied and given to students for additional practice without copyright problems. Also in this session, a short list of effective strategies for studying in the host country is covered. We cover some vocabulary management techniques, including the use of labels both before departure and in the host country, the use of a vocabulary notebook (Lewis 1997) shadowing and self-talk (Murphey 1998), and asking questions. We also introduce and recommend the ideas of Marshall (1989), who suggests that students look for a mentor during their time overseas and engage in a daily learning cycle of planning, practicing, communicating and evaluating. The techniques presented in this session really need to be practiced for students to understand how to use them and decide if they suit their learning styles. If possible, teachers should try to work with teachers of other English courses to provide some chance for students to try out the techniques.

Session Ten: Host Family Life 1: The Host's Side

In this session the teacher explains the host family system from the host's perspective. Students are shown the contract that is used when host families are engaged and the teacher stresses what is and is not the host's responsibility. By this point in the course considerable mention of host family problems and highlights has already been made and this session is an attempt to shift discussion towards a different perspective. We introduce the results of a survey of host family complaints and how some of the complaints stem from misbehaving students but that many others are the result of cultural factors or lack of communication between the host and student. We ask students to look at their own family situation norms and their own lifestyles and think about where problems might occur when moving in with a new family.

Session Eleven: Culture Shock and Culture Learning

The stages of a study abroad experience are explained to students (King and Huff 1985, Grove 1989) and the concept of culture shock is introduced. Past student participants discuss their experience with culture learning and culture shock and the teacher covers some of the factors that can increase the amount of what Paige (1993) calls 'the psychological intensity of the experience.' Emphasis is placed on the process of culture learning, which can be long and difficult but is ultimately rewarding. The teacher provides a summary of the negative and positive effects of culture shock and some techniques students can use to overcome the negative effects (from Hess 1997 and Weaver 1993). At this stage, it is really only important that students know that culture shock is a natural part of the culture learning process, that it will happen to them, and that when they have passed through it they will be wiser. The idea is that this knowledge will help them 'replace neurotic reactions with coping strategies' (Weaver, 1993, page 144)

Hess also outlines a strategy for culture learning that he calls the 'action-reflection-response strategy' (page 27) It is a technique where

students observe a cultural event, reflect upon it, get more information about what happened and why, and then reevaluate their response. Teaching this strategy for learning experientially is particularly important for students who are more accustomed to a one-way lecture style. An example of a difficult-to-understand cultural behavior found in a movie is shown to students so they can practice this learning technique.

Session Twelve: Host Family Life: Dealing With Problems

The focus of this session is communication and how good communication with host families can reduce problems and improve the experience. In contrast with the earlier session, this one deals with what students themselves can do and some ideas for making the most of a less-than-ideal homestay are presented. Student participants who encountered problems recount their experiences. Students are told what kinds of problems are most common, what they can do when problems occur (and some of the cultural implications of certain courses of action), and the resources in place where they can get help. The process changing hosts is also explained. Throughout this session, we strive for a balance of perspective and promote the notion that it is not so much a problem of good or bad host families (or students for that matter) but rather the chemistry of a particular host family matched with a particular student. Each side has feelings and expectations and is coming from a different culture. Making the effort to communicate and understand each other is the best that can be done.

Session Thirteen: Making Friends and Studying English

This final session is used to summarize earlier points, check on students' progress with English and promote a little enthusiasm that we hope will motivate students to make the most of the two months remaining before departure. A final quiz is held for the essential homestay vocabulary and the personal clear files and listening logs are checked. Past student participants then discuss their experience with meeting friends. Care is taken to select students who had very positive experiences. Some of the ways students can go about meeting new people (either locals or students from other countries) are presented. A final point is made that English ability is closely connected with meeting people and establishing friendships and that effort is need for both of these.

To conclude this session, a sheet containing the schedule for departure and contact numbers is passed out to students.

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