

A Short-term Study Abroad  
and the Changes in the Images of One's Own

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Introduction:

In these days of well-developed transportation, many places in the world are now easily accessible. This is a welcome situation for those who are concerned with the business of learning and teaching a foreign language; for, there is potent value in the experience of studying abroad regarding a foreign language student's cross-cultural understanding, not to mention his communicative competence.

A foreign language learner usually has some general ideas about a host country and its people which have, for the most part, been shaped on the basis of the secondary information he has gotten in his home country. These images could be affected, and, hopefully but not necessarily though, modified in a desirable direction in the course of having actual communication with people in the host culture. Furthermore, these changes are not confined to the images of the other party, but similarly occur in the learner's perceptions of his own culture and people, as outcomes of interactions with a foreign environment.

Since the perception of people from other cultures is inseparable from the images of one's own culture and people, this reassessment taking place in the learner's existing concept structure, as the epitome of his own cultural/ethnic identity, is critically significant in relation to the

development of cross-cultural understanding.

The purpose of this paper is to see the changes, if any, in a foreign language learner's concept of his own people before and after his having stayed in a host country for some time. The survey was conducted on Japanese junior college English majors who participated in a short-term summer program in the United States of America.

Method:

The data was collected from fifty-seven female English majors at Baiko Jo Gakuin Junior College who participated in the Baiko College Summer Program of 1991 in America<sup>(1)</sup>. A seven-point rating scale<sup>(2)</sup> was used for the assessment of a student's images of the Japanese. Each student was asked to mark in a place between one to seven rating points which most closely fits her impression on each item of thirty pairs of adjectives and traits which may or may not apply to the Japanese. Each student did the same task twice in Japan : once before leaving for the Summer Program in June, and another after returning in October.

The results from the rating scale were processed as follows. The mean of each of thirty paired-adjective items was figured out for both surveys. The two profiles of the images of the Japanese drawn by connecting the means are shown in Appendix A. To compare the two means of each matched item, the matched *t*-test was used. The significance of each *t*-test value of the thirty items for two-tailed test was checked at the .05 level (See Appendix B).

Result:

On the whole, there seem to be not many marked changes between the two images that the students had about the Japanese. As seen in Appendix A, the two profiles show quite a similar, almost overlapped configuration each other.

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On looking closely at each item, there are five items out of thirty, each of which is statistically different in the two means at a significant level. In other words, the subjects perceived the Japanese in terms of the five items differently before and after their stay in America. Items in which changes are found are: 1. Somber/Cheerful; 2. Diligent/Lazy; 3. Optimistic/Pessimistic; 4. Workaholic/Enjoy life; 5. Generous/Selfish.

Two items, Diligent/Lazy and Workaholic/Enjoy life, are very common features, among others, which have been attributed to the Japanese as salient characteristics, particularly in the context of referring to the causal relation between long working hours and high growth of economy in Japan.

As to being diligent, many students of this group made remarks on hard working American students. They were deeply impressed by American college students who, relishing a good future prospects, studied hard to pursue their respective aims. They were also surprised to observe the high level of concentration that Americans often show in working as well as studying. Having met retired people who actively volunteered for community services and welfare activities was another fresh experience for them. All of these might have widened the scope of what the students used to understand by the term "work." Assumably, such students reconsidered their existing concept of diligence in a sense of long-hour working, and tried to see it with another eye, i.e., from an angle of "quality" or "manner" of working.

Thus, being exposed to another culture would provide a foreign language student with a very good opportunity of reflecting his cognitive structures from outside someone else's point of view. This experience is important in regard to the point that the learner could avoid the risk of falling into self-complacency and leaning toward chauvinism.

Yet, as Byram(1989 : 103) points out, simply having contacts with foreign cultures and peoples will not automatically and necessarily lead

the learner to desired outcomes. On the contrary, some adverse responses to new, foreign manners and behaviors could result.

On considering the change, in the item of Generous/Selfish, for instance, where the mean score moved toward Generous, there is a hunch that the students' existing perception of generosity was reinforced due to differences in expected behaviors regarded to be "generous" between the Japanese and Americans.

From the students' standpoint, who are familiar with a culture where consideration for the situations and feelings of others is a prime virtue, and accordingly, one would rather keep his opinion to himself than have conflicts with others, Americans' "I want to do this. How about you?" type of approach toward adjustment was, in fact according to remarks made by some students, interpreted as insensible, less perceptive, and even selfish sometimes. It may be added in this connection that although the students' images of Americans on the same item did not show a statistical difference, there was a trend toward the "selfish" direction<sup>(3)</sup>.

First-hand experience of a foreign culture "potentially requires a massive re-organization of foreign language learners' cognitive and affective structures (Byram 1989 : 115)." This modification may step forward or go backward. When a direct experience is very different from what the learner is used to, and is contradictory with his affective domain in particular, it becomes difficult for him to integrate the new experience into his existing frame of reference, and he would rather leave it, through emphasis of contrast and difference, as "foreign."

In order to make a foreign language learner's experience abroad fruitful, Byram(1989 : 99), admitting the advantages of direct experience of a foreign country, urges that "these advantages are only potential and cannot be taken for granted without the help and contribution of the

interpreter and critic" who are foreign language teachers. In this respect, it is important for the teachers as well as those interested in study abroad "to investigate how learners' cognitive structures might change through (foreign) language and cultural learning (Byram 1989 : 103)" so that they can encourage their students to become such ideal individuals who can "link between different cultural systems, bridging the gap by introducing, translating, representing and reconciling the cultures to each other(Bochner 1983 : 29)."

(1) The general contents and activities involved in the Summer Program and sociocultural situations with which the students came into contact are detailed in Kumagai (1992).

(2) I am grateful to Dr. Hara who has given permission for the use of the rating scale.

(3) The data are in Kumagai(1992).

Bibliography:

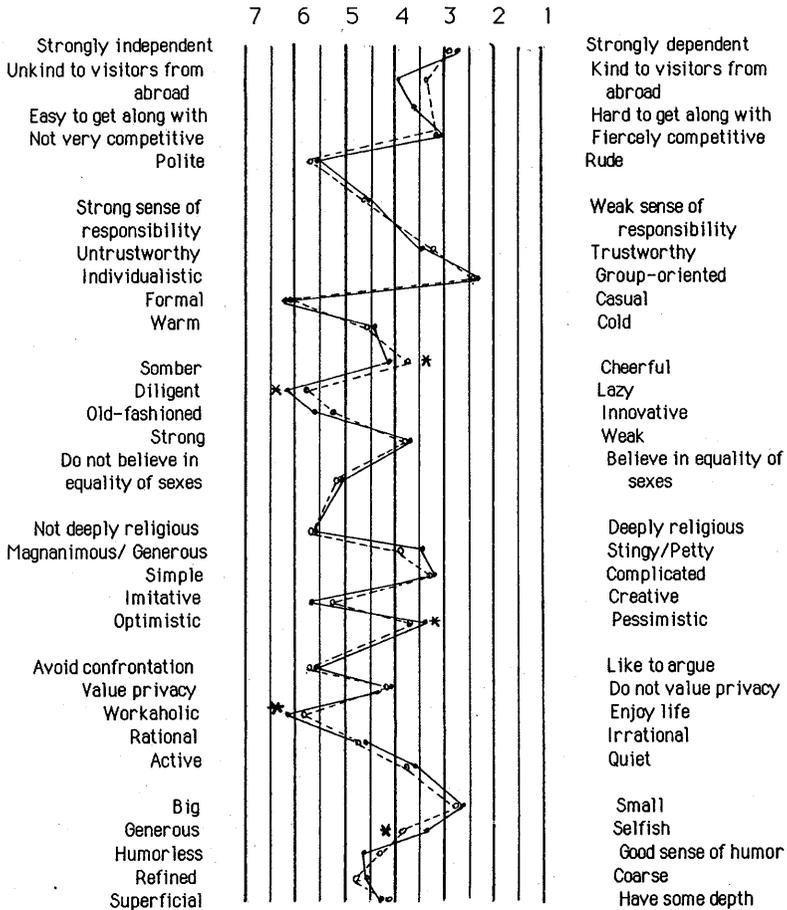
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Appendix A : Profiles of Images of the Japanese



N = 57

—●— = Survey I

-○- = Survey II

\* = statistically significant ( p < .05 )

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Appendix B : The Two Means and *t* - scores

	Survey I	Survey II	<i>t</i> - score
Strongly independent/Dependent	2.79	2.93	-0.58
Unkind/Kind to visitors from abroad	3.91	3.39	2.00
Easy/Hard to get along with	3.56	3.56	0.00
Not very/Fiercely competitive	3.09	3.19	-0.43
Polite/Rude	5.54	5.58	-0.24
Strong/Weak sense of responsibility	4.60	4.63	-0.15
Untrustworthy/Trustworthy	3.47	3.26	0.84
Individualistic/Group-oriented	2.46	2.49	-0.12
Formal/Casual	6.16	6.11	0.28
Warm/Cold	4.49	4.68	-0.95
Somber/Cheerful	4.16	3.77	3.00*
Diligent/Lazy	6.21	5.77	2.59*
Old-fashioned/Innovative	5.56	5.23	1.94
Strong/Weak	3.75	3.88	-1.08
Do not believe/Believe in equality of sexes	5.07	5.09	-0.10
Not deeply/Deeply religious	5.60	5.75	-0.58
Magnanimous/Petty	3.49	3.91	-2.00
Simple/Complicated	3.28	3.30	-0.08
Imitative/Creative	5.60	5.25	0.19
Optimistic/Pessimistic	3.40	3.67	-2.08*
Avoid confrontation/Like to argue	5.56	5.60	-0.21
Value/Do not value privacy	4.07	4.09	-0.09
Workaholic/Enjoy life	6.20	5.91	2.07*
Rational/Irrational	4.58	4.73	-0.65
Active/Quiet	3.61	3.75	-0.74
Big/Small	2.75	2.80	-0.26
Generous/Selfish	3.40	3.93	-3.53*
Humorless/Good sense of humor	4.58	4.42	0.73
Refined/Coarse	4.51	4.72	-1.24
Superficial/Have some depth	4.28	4.05	1.35

N = 57

\*  $p < .05$