

# Raising Awareness: Measures to Raise Awareness in a Study Abroad Preparation Program

Thomas LEGGE  
Adrian WAGNER

## Introduction

This investigation focused on a group of students participating in the *Super Global Program (SGP)*, a study abroad program that is now in its third year. It is one of the most prestigious programs at a private university in Osaka, Japan. The SGP seeks to recruit highly motivated students with some underlying English ability and support them to qualify for international exchange programs. The SGP is a small group of students who receive a high level of support through an intensive English program with a focus on IELTS preparation and academic English. The goal is for students to achieve an IELTS score of 5.5-6.5 and successfully complete one or two semesters of regular faculty classes at an English medium university. This paper focuses on the most recent 2019 program intake in which there were a total of 8 students.

---

**Keywords** : awareness, IELTS, self-study, study abroad, university

This is the authors' second piece of research into this program. The first research into the 2018 intake investigated the relationship between levels of a new composite construct of awareness and overall success in the program (Legge & Wagner, 2019). Although this new paper makes some statistical comparisons of success in the program across both years, this was not its predominant purpose. Instead we have sought to examine the extent to which we were able to facilitate the students' awareness regarding study abroad and have analysed some of the methods we used in the pursuit of this.

We decided that an effective way to ascertain whether we had managed to increase awareness was to utilise the same questionnaire given to students in the previous investigation. This allowed us to once again quantify the responses and to directly compare the results although a direct comparison was not our main aim. We were then able to describe some of these initiatives in more detail before making some observations about the effect they had on the current group. These two elements combined with a brief exploration in the form of case studies provide the basis for substantive analysis.

It is probably worth reiterating two things, namely why we feel that awareness is so important in students and how we choose to define it. First, although based upon a statistically small sample, our previous research did show a clear correlation between students with higher levels of awareness and success in the program. We take success to mean meeting the criteria, applying and being accepted to study abroad at one of our partner universities (Legge & Wagner, 2019, pp. 68-70). It also illustrated how increased awareness can cause students with very little chance of success or very low motivation to exit the program (Legge & Wagner, 2019, p. 69) and how it

can encourage certain students to put more effort into their studies (p. 70). In other words, we found that aware students are more likely to succeed, and they are easier to manage. Secondly, in our previous paper we outlined the difficulty we had in defining and measuring ‘awareness’, at least as described in conventional terms. As a result, we opted to create a new composite construct of awareness, appropriate for our study abroad context. It was evidence of this construct that we looked for in both our quantitative and qualitative analysis of data gleaned from questionnaires and interviews. Since we shall continue to utilise this construct, it is summarised here:

Awareness... (encapsulates) motivation and autonomy but, also, (is) different from both. It is a term and a construct that we apply to mean the consideration, knowledge and self-directed acquisition of knowledge, self-reflection and diligence over time. (Legge & Wagner, 20219, p. 54)

This definition, although illustrative of the way in which we consider awareness, also considers one of the major challenges of any attempt to measure it, namely the fact that it is only really possible to do so at a fixed point in time. Indeed, since we see awareness as changing and evolving over time (p. 74), we are aware of the limitations of any statistical claims we may make. Nevertheless, it remains our contention that informative, comparable analysis of awareness as we see it can be achieved.

## **Method**

We decided to carry out this investigation in three distinct stages. We began by analysing our program holistically with the goal of identifying areas of the curriculum and the management of the program into which we could

introduce new initiatives designed to build awareness in students. We devised these with a simple brainstorming session.

Having selected the most workable initiatives, we set about redesigning and reformulating the syllabus and administrative elements (information sessions, paperwork etc.) in order to incorporate them. It is important to note that these initiatives were not simply implemented by teachers alone but required support and assistance from the university and ancillary staff at both the planning and the implementation stages. The program then commenced.

The second stage came post-implementation in the form of a questionnaire delivered to students two weeks after their return from a study abroad trip to the Philippines in the summer. This questionnaire was identical to the one used to identify awareness in our previous piece of research (Legge & Wagner, 2019, pp. 58, 61, 63, 64) and it was delivered at around the same point in the academic year. As with the previous year, it was followed by a face-to-face interview to clarify students' answers where there was any uncertainty. Although reflection on the previous year's research had identified some changes that we felt would improve the questionnaire (such as the modifying the averaged scoring system in the first section (p. 60), it was felt that the ability to make direct statistical comparisons with the previous year's intake was of greater importance. As such, we elected to leave the questionnaire, flawed though it may be, unchanged. The four sections of the questionnaire are summarised in the next section.

Once again, we elected to combine two sections together for further analysis, although this time under a new heading. "University and Course" and "Life Abroad" (pp. 63, 64) were presented both separately and combined un-

der the new heading “Study Abroad Focused”, found in Figure 5 of this paper. The reason for combining these headings was that we felt both sections pointed towards the same aim, namely the study abroad experience in the future as opposed to ‘Strengths and Weaknesses’ which focuses on the present and ‘Philippines’ which is reflective awareness (i.e. looking at past events).

Since we had previously identified a lack of awareness particularly around *future* study abroad as an especially strong barrier to success in the program (p. 65), we felt that this was an area we more closely wanted to examine and so created a distinct, combined category for this piece of research.

Finally, at the end of the program, we once again conducted a holistic, qualitative analysis of the changes that we had made and our impressions of their success. This analysis was comprised of discussion between teachers (and ancillary staff), questions to students, homework analysis, program interviews, feedback forms, teachers’ impressions, grade scores, IELTS scores, Study Plans and other elements. To supplement this, we once again utilised three case studies to add some additional colour to our analysis.

### **Initiatives to Increase Awareness**

As a result of our preliminary findings from the previous study we decided to examine the teaching and non-teaching components of the program course and to implement various changes in order to increase students’ measured levels of awareness. Many studies, such as that of Coterrall (2000), have indicated that strategies to increase learner autonomy, a quality we see as being closely connected to our custom concept of awareness, can have a positive effect if built into a language learning curriculum.

The recent explosion of interest in learning strategies has provided language teachers with suggestions as to which learning strategies to present and, more importantly, empirical justification for spending time with learners discussing and experimenting with such strategies. At the heart of learner autonomy lies the concept of choice. This principle relates particularly to extending the choice of strategic behaviours available to learners, and to expanding their conceptual understanding of the contribution which strategies can make to their learning. (p. 111)

Many of the initiatives were more linked to the structure and administration of the course, while some were directly with class content.

In total, we identified 16 initiatives trying to build students' awareness. 10 of these were completely new and the 6 which also existed in 2018 were all expanded and given greater prominence. The initiatives are summarised in the table below (Figure 1).

#### Initiative Number - Summary

1. Essay question about which country students wanted to study in and the course they wanted to study. Undertaken at the initial application stage of the program.
2. Specific questions about the student's proposed country of study and likely course. Asked during the initial application interview for the program.
3. Study Abroad Explanatory Session
4. 1-week research project and presentation by each student on which university they are aiming to study at and which modules they would like

Raising Awareness: Measures to Raise Awareness in a Study Abroad……

**Figure 1** *Initiatives to Raise Awareness*

Initiative Number	New from 2019	Section(s) Focus				Type			
		1. Strengths and Weaknesses	2. Philippines	3. University and Course	4. Life Abroad	Spoken	Written	Individual	Group
1									
2									
3									
4									
5									
6									
7									
8									
9									
10									
11									
12									
13									
14									
15									
16									

	Yes
	No

to take.

5. 3-monthly study abroad check-ups informal interviews
6. HW - Essay about good points and bad points of the study abroad trip to the Philippines.
7. Interview about the study abroad trip to the Philippines.
8. Weekly practice tests (Listening / Reading / Writing) with scores and IELTS band equivalents (Listening and Reading) and detailed corrections and feedback (Writing)<sup>1)</sup>.
9. Mid-year progress meeting.

10. Weekly study plans
11. Strengths and weaknesses essay
12. Talk by a former program student about his experiences studying abroad
13. Organizing a visit and presentation session with a visiting university from Malaysia
14. Frequent emails related to students' indicated areas of interest
15. Encouraging students to drop in to talk face to face
16. Weekly IELTS deadline and test availability reminders

Initiative Number - Detail (numbers correspond to the initiative number in the summary above)

1. Getting students to write about which university and course they wanted to study at as part of the application process for the program served two aims. Firstly, we wanted to assess students' English writing level as we had done in the 2018 program, albeit with a discursive essay unrelated to study abroad. Secondly, we wanted to get students thinking about study abroad before the program even started, since we hoped it would discourage students without a clear goal or plan from entering the program in the first place.
2. This was essentially the spoken version of Initiative Number 1. We had previously asked students in interviews why they wanted to study abroad, receiving the expected, typical responses about wanting to make foreign friends, experience global culture etc. (See Schnickel, J., Martin, R., & Maruyama, Y. (2010). Asking students for specific countries and courses allowed us to ascertain quite clearly which prospective



## Raising Awareness: Measures to Raise Awareness in a Study Abroad……

students had given thought to a specific, personal, study abroad plan and which had not.

3. As with last year, all program students attended a Study Abroad explanatory session delivered in Japanese by a Japanese member of staff. This introduced the personnel of the International Centre (which operates the study abroad programs at the university) as well as the study abroad partners, application processes and deadlines. Students were given a booklet containing this information, which has been referenced and consulted in almost all study abroad discussions and interviews with students. All students on the program are now very familiar with this document.
4. The one-week project involved students researching their chosen university and course on the university's website and then preparing a presentation about them in class, early in the first semester. For most students, this was their first time researching anything in English and many found using the English language websites of their target universities quite difficult. Nevertheless, this introduced them to an essential element of their future study abroad experiences, namely navigating an English language website to make course choices, research accommodation options and find out university policies etc. It was interesting to note that there was not an obvious correlation between English levels and ability in this task. It did however seem apparent that students who had researched more effectively, and in more detail, delivered much more informative presentations.
5. In order to avoid students 'coasting', putting off making decisions, not booking tests or generally falling behind in studies, it was decided that

quarterly one-on-one informal interviews would take place between teacher and student. These proved to be a good opportunity to remind students of their obligations, deadlines and their strengths and weaknesses as perceived by the teacher. Students were given an opportunity to ask questions and all took the opportunity to do so. This not only appeared to increase students' awareness but also our own as teachers. As a result, we were able to better report on the program to senior management, which may lead to better decision making in terms of changes and improvements to the program in future.

6. As part of their summer intensive course, students were asked to write an essay reflecting on what they learned on their study abroad trip to the Philippines as well as what they perceived to be good and bad about the experience. Many students wrote that the one-on-one tuition allowed them to spend many hours practicing speaking and that this extended practice represented a good opportunity for them. They enjoyed the challenge of living in a foreign country, albeit for a short time, and using English in the 'real world'. At the same time, many were critical of the teaching quality, lack of IELTS knowledge and poor food and facilities. Most students also identified a lack of focus on Reading and Writing, both of which were often cited as areas of weakness.

We were surprised (and heartened) by the insight and reflection displayed by students in these essays. Although given very little direction by us, all students were able to show high levels of awareness both in terms of the experience but also in identifying their own strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, several expressed an (unprompted) desire to improve and work on areas of weakness in the future in these essays.

## Raising Awareness: Measures to Raise Awareness in a Study Abroad……

It goes without saying that the feedback we received through this exercise was also hugely helpful in raising our own awareness and enabling us to improve the program in future.

7. The interview about the Philippines study abroad trip comprised two teachers and one student and was based on the student's essay and questionnaire feedback. It provided students the opportunity to discuss their experiences in more detail. This was useful, particularly in cases where the students had made negative comments. Students appeared to feel more comfortable expanding on these points in spoken rather than written form (despite assurances that comments made in the essays would be free from judgement and treated in the strictest confidence).
8. Weekly IELTS practice tests in Listening, Reading and Writing were conducted. Students were given band scores for Listening and Reading as well as being told how many extra raw points they required to hit the requirement for their chosen university. Students were introduced to a simplified version of the band score marking rubric in order to make them aware of the specifics of the level of English they would need to hit the requirement of their chosen university.
9. A one-on-one mid-year progress meeting was held with students at the end of the summer. At this stage, students had all already taken the IELTS test once and several had taken it twice. At this progress meeting, goals and objectives were discussed and, in three cases, changed considering the IELTS scores and other evidence. Since students were more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and the requirements of the prospective universities, together we were able to create more re-

alistic, achievable objectives.

We had also conducted these progress meetings in the 2018 study but found that even at this stage of the program, several students had unrealistic, unachievable goals, or simply lacked any goals. These students were mostly unaware of their own English ability or the difficulty in achieving the requirements for the programs they were aiming for. With just a few months left before many of the universities' application deadlines, for these 2018 students it was already too late. Conversely, with the 2019 intake, any changes in plans seemed to have been conceived of *before* the meeting and seemed to come from a position of greater awareness. One reason for this was that it was the students *themselves* proposing suggestions for alternative universities, study methods etc.

10. Following this meeting, students were given a personalised study plan which highlighted their current highest IELTS scores, their target university and course and the requirements for entry. This was geared towards the students' strengths and weaknesses, having been first discussed with and then agreed to by each student. It featured a target number of hours per area of study and students were responsible for submitting a study report, as well as any written tasks, each Monday morning.

Although we also gave students these study plans in 2018, the rate of participation in 2019 was considerably higher. Average completion in 2018 was just 37.5% compared with 67.9% in 2019. This participation was particularly helpful in that it reinforced the observable, targeted study that students were doing which can only have increased their awareness. Furthermore, it was invaluable to us in managing the pro-

Raising Awareness: Measures to Raise Awareness in a Study Abroad……

**Figure 2 Example Personalised Study Plan**

Study Plan:

Your current best scores are as follows:

Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Overall
5	5.5	4.5	5	20

Time left before application deadline: **10 weeks**

This is what you need to do every week to have a chance of meeting your goal.

<b>Listening</b> 2hrs	3x Mini IELTS full tests
<b>Reading</b> 3hrs	3x Mini IELTS full tests
<b>Writing</b> 2hrs	2x IELTS Task 1 2x IELTS Task 2
<b>Speaking</b> 2hrs	<b>Either:</b> Native Camp application <b>Or</b> Talking to international students

Total is **9 hours** extra study per week. It will not be easy, but this is what you must do to have a good chance of studying abroad. If you need materials, ask me.

I expect you to report to me every week on Monday Morning by email what you have done.

gram as it gave us constant feedback on elements like students' scores, motivation and organisation, amongst many others.

11. Students were asked to write a strengths and weaknesses essay at the end of the first time, an attempt to encourage greater reflection on their own English ability. While students tended to convey this simply in terms of the four main skills, there was some evidence of deeper reflection. One student claimed to struggle with more abstract IELTS reading

texts but found the scientific texts easier. Another expressed dissatisfaction with her note-taking abilities in the IELTS listening section.

Teacher feedback on these essays focused on suggestions for overcoming these difficulties and proposed learning resources that the students could use for self-study.

12. Since the first intake of students had begun to return from their study abroad placements, this afforded the opportunity for one of these students to address the 2019 group and to talk about his experience studying abroad in the USA. The group were visibly engaged in the student's description of this experience and several asked questions at the end, a somewhat rare occurrence for Japanese students (Swan, 2001).
13. It was also possible to arrange for a group of undergraduate students from Malaysia to meet with the Super Global Program students on their visit to the university. This provided the students with not only an opportunity to meet with students from a highly different culture but also to practice speaking English with non-Japanese speakers. This was the first opportunity for some of the students to speak English without any kind of "safety net" and provided a rare insight into what social interactions in a foreign country might be like. In the class that followed, students referred to being surprised at the difficulty they had in understanding the Malaysian accent and expressed frustration and some surprise at their inability to communicate as well as they might have hoped.
14. We frequently emailed students in relation to their stated areas of interest for their study abroad course choices. These communications included things like news article links, YouTube videos, local events and seminars within the university itself. The purpose of this was to build

## Raising Awareness: Measures to Raise Awareness in a Study Abroad……

subject matter awareness and intrigue. We wanted students to be constantly reminded of the reasons for being part of the program and to reflect on whether the preferences for the courses they had chosen remained strong. In other words, we wanted them to be continually thinking about their end goal as much as possible.

15. Students were also encouraged to drop into the International Centre to talk face-to-face with both teachers and staff. This kept communication channels open and allowed for both parties to ask and answer questions. Once again, the purpose of this was to keep students focused on their goals and to create awareness on both sides about progress and changes of plans.
16. Finally, a major focus for this year's intake was in procedural awareness. Several students in 2018 ended up facing a more limited range of options simply by not being aware of important elements, in particular the deadlines for IELTS tests (which are frequent and constantly changing). To avoid students missing opportunities as a result of not being aware of impending or changing deadlines, announcements were made in class every week indicating the current application windows and test availability. Students who needed to take tests were constantly reminded of these dates and incidences of students wanting to take tests but not being able to do so were greatly reduced.

### **Awareness Scores (2018 v 2019)**

The 2019 data we collated came in the form of an identical questionnaire to the one that we used in 2018 (Legge & Wagner, 2019, pp. 58, 61, 63, 64). We opted to do this in order to be able to make some basic comparisons

of levels of awareness across both years despite the misgivings about our original scoring system. The scoring criteria for each of the four criteria is summarised again below.

### **1. Evidence of Awareness of Strengths and Weaknesses**

Students' awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses was assessed through five yes/no questions, designed to examine the triangular relationship between three key areas: their individual IELTS section scores, their own perception of their strengths and weaknesses and the study that they were doing. This section was scored out of five with one point being assigned to each question. Where the two reviewers differed in opinion as to whether to award a point, a half point was awarded. Scoring for this section ranged from 0 to 5.

The criteria were as follows:

- 1) Are they doing any study?
- 2) Does their amount of study reflect the distance from their target IELTS score?
- 3) Is their study balanced towards their self-perceived strengths and weaknesses? (Students were asked to identify these earlier in the questionnaire)
- 4) Is their study balanced towards their actual IELTS section scores?
- 5) Is their study likely to be effective?

### **2. Evidence of Ability to Reflect on Philippines Experience**

Students' ability to reflect on their study abroad experience to the Philippines was assessed through their answers to five open questions. Students



Raising Awareness: Measures to Raise Awareness in a Study Abroad……

were scored on a scale from 0–5 for each question resulting in a total score of 25. This score was subsequently divided by 5 to give a final score out of 5 points. These scores were recorded to 1 decimal place. Where the two reviewers differed in opinion as to the score, the average score was recorded for that question (e.g. if Reviewer A gave a 3 and Reviewer B gave a 4, a score of 3.5 was recorded).

The scoring scale was as follows:

**Figure 3** *Philippines Experience Scoring Scale*

Score	Description
0	No awareness/ failure to respond
1	Brief nonspecific (e.g. <i>English improved</i> )
2	Not specific but mention of individual skill or ability including grammar / vocabulary / course structure / learning environment
3	Slightly specific mention of skill / ability / test section / course structure / learning outcome / learning environment
4	More detailed response mentioning skill / ability / test section / course structure / learning outcome / learning environment
5	Very detailed response mentioning skill / ability / test section / course structure / learning outcome / learning environment and analysis of personal learning outcome

The questions were as follows:

- 1) Please describe your experience in the Philippines.
- 2) What new things did you learn?
- 3) What English skills did you improve?
- 4) Is there anything that you wished you had been able to improve that you couldn't improve?
- 5) What was the reason that you could not improve this?

### **3. Evidence of Awareness of University and Course**

This established whether students had chosen a specific university and course, whether they were aware of the entry requirements and whether they had given adequate consideration to those decisions. Students had previously been given access to a list of exchange partner universities and their requirements.

Students were firstly given a point for selecting a course and university. They were then given two points for a clear reason or one point for a vague reason for the course element and then the same for the university element for a maximum total of five points.

### **4. Evidence of Awareness of life as a Study Abroad student**

This assessment established whether students had thought about the likely challenges involved in studying abroad in a foreign country. To establish this, they were asked two questions.

- *Other than IELTS study, what English skills do you think you need to improve to keep up with classes and function in daily life while studying abroad?*
- *Other than English ability, what other skills or knowledge do you think you need to improve to prepare to study abroad?*

The scoring for the second assessment gave one or two points for each of the two questions. For each, one point was given for a relevant but brief or non-specific answer, whereas a specific, detailed answer was awarded two points.

A final bonus point was available for any specific reference to the overseas university environment, such as a different classroom learning style. The

## Raising Awareness: Measures to Raise Awareness in a Study Abroad……

purpose of the bonus point was to try to differentiate perceptions of long-term study abroad as a study experience as opposed to simply a travel or life experience. A total of five points was awarded for this assessment.

The scores averaged over the two separate cohorts were as follows:

**Figure 4 Overall Average Awareness (2018 VS 2019)**

	1. Strengths and Weaknesses	2. Philippines	3. University and Course	4. Life Abroad	5. Overall
2018 intake	1.94	2.89	2.41	1.82	9.06
2019 intake	2.50	3.20	3.19	2.75	11.64
Change (%)	+28.79	+10.79	+32.16	+50.81	+28.38

## Analysis

Firstly, it is important to emphasise, as we discovered in the 2018 study, that measuring awareness at a fixed point in time is intrinsically a compromised reflection of reality (p. 74). That is to say that awareness, even within our own composite definition manufactured for this purpose, is not a static concept and ebbs and flows over time. A change in circumstances can render previously acquired awareness redundant and it is of course possible for very aware students to falter and very unaware students to succeed.

However, taken in the whole, it is clear to see that there is a significant increase in levels of awareness, as measured through the questionnaire and subsequent interviews. Indeed, 2019 students scored more than 28% higher than their 2018 counterparts, with awareness levels being higher in all four sections (Figure 4).

Putting the quantitative data aside momentarily, it is also worth noting that

both English teachers and Japanese ancillary staff noticed and frequently commented upon an increase in awareness of the 2019 intake. This commentary was not always termed with specific reference to awareness (although a close Japanese approximation 意識 or *ishiki*, usually translated as *consciousness*, was often used by Japanese staff) but also through related terminology<sup>2)</sup> such as *'being prepared'*, *'studying/working hard'*, *'diligent'*, *'motivation/motivated'*, *'plan'*, *'realize'*, *'knows what he/she has to do'*, *'understand'*, *'clear goal(s)'*, *'ambition'*, *'dream'*.

Naturally, there are myriad potential influencing factors that could have brought about this change, either as perceived anecdotally or observed in the statistical data. It would be remiss though to discount the very significant likelihood that the changes we made to the 2019 program did indeed have a sizeable impact on the overall awareness of students.

Students demonstrated better awareness in terms of their personal strengths and weaknesses (Figure 4 Section 1) to the tune of a 28.8 percent increase. Of the 8 students in the 2019 intake, 7 were doing at least some study, although only 2 were doing what the authors deemed to be sufficient. This study was well balanced too, with 5 of 8 prioritizing the type of study they were doing based on their own perception of their strengths and weaknesses. Interestingly, in all 5 cases this perception matched up with the students' actual IELTS scores, suggesting that the more detailed analysis of IELTS results that we undertook with students, discussed in the following section, might have been reasonably effective in directing students towards more productive study.

Less encouraging were the results for the final question of this first section. Our analysis of the actual study undertaken by students, although it was well

### Raising Awareness: Measures to Raise Awareness in a Study Abroad……

targeted towards strengths and weaknesses, showed that it was only likely to be effective for one student. Unfortunately, students were simply either not doing enough study (6/8 students) and/or were studying in a way that was unlikely to be effective (7/8 students).

This is an area that it would be prudent to focus on in future iterations of the program. Wenden (1995) argues that development of *task knowledge*, an important component of *learner training*, should be treated separately from *language training* and clear language learning strategies help students not only to improve their language skills but also increases their awareness and ability to learn independently. Doing more to foreground the concept of individual language learning strategies might lead to greater autonomy and awareness in our students. Specifically, task knowledge in our case would refer specifically to the IELTS as a whole, as well as distinct skill sections and task types. The entire process of applying to a university exchange program, and completing a period of studying abroad could also be perceived as a kind of task.

There was also modest improvement in levels of reflective awareness with respect of the study abroad trip to the Philippines (Figure 4 Section 2). Students scored 10.8% higher in this section in comparison with the previous year. The impact of this is somewhat difficult to ascertain when compared to other sections as the figures are based on averaged data (a design flaw in our original model) but it is at least possible to see improvement.

We did also observe that 2019 students were able to report more concrete positives and negatives about the study abroad trip in the post-questionnaire interviews. There was also more specific reference to pedagogical matters, whereas the previous intake focused mainly on environmental aspects such

as the weather, shopping, bathroom cleanliness, insects (although in both groups, this type of feedback remained the clear majority).

The section in which students were asked about the university and course they had chosen saw a very considerable increase in measured awareness. It rose by over 32% (Figure 4 Section 3). In fact 6 out of 8 students had made a clear choice of a target university and the course they wanted to study there at the time of the questionnaire. Of these 6 students, 5 had very clear reasons for wanting to study at their chosen university, scoring maximum points, The other student had a vague reason. As far as course choices were concerned, half of these students had a specific reason and half had a vague reason.

Finally, awareness about the reality of life as a study abroad student was also much higher. (Figure 4 Section 4) In fact, the increase for this section was the largest of all at over 50%. For the 2019 intake all students scored at least one point on each question in this section (although no students made specific reference to the overseas university environment or learning style). It was encouraging to note that several students referred to important (and oft-ignored) considerations such as the financial implications of a university-mandated ban on part-time working, unavailability of specific Japanese foods etc.

The major improvements observed in Section 3 and Section 4 were almost certainly the result of several initiatives taken by us with the 2019 intake. Indeed, these two areas were where we focused most of our initiatives. The reason for this focus was that our previous research has shown that students with low awareness in these two areas had the lowest likelihood of studying abroad (Legge & Wagner, 2019, p. 65).

## Raising Awareness: Measures to Raise Awareness in a Study Abroad……

For the purposes of clearer analysis, we have therefore also combined Sections 3 and 4 into one category which we have called “Study Abroad focused” (Figure 5).

**Figure 5** *Study Abroad Focused Awareness Averages*

	Study Abroad Focused / 10*
2018	4.24
2019	5.94
Change (%)	+40.19

\* Two sections of 5 points each combined to make 10 points

Since we believe that these are probably the two most relevant factors for study abroad, it is reassuring to see that their combined awareness score rose by over 40% (Figure 5). Our experience has so far shown that in high level but time-pressured programs such as ours, students who have reasonable and achievable goals, a clear focus and an appreciation for what the study abroad experience will involve stand a much better chance of achieving the requisite English qualifications and subsequently a study abroad place.

### **General Observations**

As well as referring to the questionnaire data, it is perhaps instructive to also make some more general comments as to the students’ awareness as perceived by us as observers.

- Almost all students had come up with both a Plan A university and course and a Plan B university and course. This seemed to keep students grounded in their expectations and more conscious of their English ability. The selection of an easier Plan B seemed to make students

reflect more on how realistic their prospects were of achieving Plan A.

- Students' aims in general were more realistic. There were only two cases of students aiming for a Plan A or Plan B target university that was completely out of reach, based on our assessment of their IELTS score chances. Both changed to more realistic plans without being explicitly prompted to do so.
- One student seemed determined to study modules overseas that would not have allowed him/her to transfer credits and thus this study abroad plan would almost certainly have been rejected by the university. Despite being warned several times that this was unlikely to be possible, the student showed little interest in other options. Whilst this didn't bode well for the student's study abroad prospects, it did at least highlight to us a potential problem and that our interventions were likely having little effect. This allowed us to divert resources towards other students with more achievable aims.
- Students were more consistent and more accurate in diagnosing their own weaknesses and their self-study appeared to be more targeted towards those areas (although many students continued to study whatever they found most enjoyable and study was often unlikely to be effective).
- HW completion was higher than with the previous intake and was carried out to a higher standard.
- Attendance at Practice Tests was higher.
- IELTS scores were higher overall.



## Case Studies

We do think that brief case studies can be instructive in providing context and understanding, particularly in programs that last for as long as a year. As such, we have included three below. Each was chosen as representing a clear effect of awareness, although it is worth noting that this is simply a snapshot of what we observed. Indeed, we would have been able to document several examples such as these for every single student in the program.

### Student A

Student A began the program with an IELTS score of 4.5 and demonstrated frequent basic grammatical and spelling errors which were very likely to significantly impede progress beyond that level, despite regular IELTS training and test experience. The student did not initially appear to be aware of this. However, through regular writing tests with extensive grammatical and spelling correction (Initiative 8), weekly study plans with a focus on grammar and spelling (Initiative 10) and the essay on strengths and weaknesses (Initiative 11), we were able to help the student to see that this needed to be a major area of study focus.

Although the student's grammar and spelling saw modest improvement, what is perhaps more interesting, given the focus this and the previous study had on awareness, is that the student on his/her own initiative organised a meeting with us to discuss changing his/her initial Plan A university choice from one requiring a band 6.5 to another requiring a 5.5. The stated reason was that the student was aware of this problem, was studying hard to improve but was still struggling with basic grammar and spelling and that he/

she felt that a 5.5 would be as high a band as he/she could expect, given the timeframe. He/she added that even achievement of a band 6.5 would be insufficient for him/her to feel comfortable and that he/she was worried about failing or having an unpleasant experience whilst overseas.

This shows not only an awareness of the student's own English ability but also an awareness of the test itself and the banding criteria. It is also worth noting that this student originally had had very clear and compelling reasons for studying the course and university for which a 6.5 would have been required, perhaps more so than any other student. In other words, in this student's case, deciding to pursue a Plan B cannot have been a decision which was taken lightly.

We would suggest that seeing that a change was required and putting a sincerely held dream to one side are actions that can only be taken by someone who is fully aware of their situation. In fact, the student had the highest awareness score of the entire group (14.8).

Since we felt that the student had no realistic prospect of achieving a band 6.5, it is highly likely that his/her awareness prevented him/her from clinging on to an unachievable aim. Had the student not made this change, he/she would have ultimately failed to meet the goal of the program, namely to study abroad (as has quite regularly happened in previous iterations of the program). Instead, the student scored a 5.5 and a study abroad place at a different university.

#### Student B

Student B began the program with existing study abroad experience and a relatively high level of English. He/she had a study-abroad qualifying

## Raising Awareness: Measures to Raise Awareness in a Study Abroad……

IELTS score on entry to the program, although the student's first choice university in the UK required a higher score.

The student quite quickly achieved the required score for his/her chosen university and showed an impressive ability to critically research and select academic courses relevant to both his/her interests, career goals and his/her degree program in Japan.

What was apparent, however, was that the student's perception of what the study abroad experience was likely to entail was predominantly based on his/her experiences studying abroad as a high school student. Whilst the student was well prepared and, one could certainly say, aware from an academic perspective, the student appeared to have thought less about what *university* student life abroad would be like.

Despite several initiatives to better inform students about life abroad such as an explanatory session about Study Abroad university options (Initiative 3), a talk from a student who studied in the USA (Initiative 12), a visit from students from Malaysia (Initiative 13), we still had concerns about the extent to which students had thought about the realities of life abroad as a university student. This fear was borne out in the questionnaire data - this particular student scored just 2 out of 5 points in this area which was below average.

We again noticed this when the student explained how much he/she was looking forward to staying with a host family at a drop-in meeting (Initiative 15) to talk about course choices. It transpired that this had been the living arrangement with the student's previous study abroad experience at high school. The student was visibly shocked to hear that this was not only uncommon in the UK but also likely impossible at his/her chosen university. The student was evidently disappointed. Fortunately, we were able to inter-

vene, and the student became very positive about the prospects of independent living or living with other students.

This perhaps illustrates that, despite teachers and administrative staff members' best efforts, it is still possible for fundamental details to be passed over or misconstrued, even by students who show high levels of academic awareness, resourcefulness and English skill. As such, we can see that it is vital to keep communication channels with all students open and to do so through a wide range of initiatives. Failure to do so can put even those students with high English ability at risk of not studying abroad.

#### Student C

Student C began the program with quite a low level of English relative to his/her peers. The student was diligent in terms of academic study but preparatory activities and consultation with the student appeared to suggest that he/she had put little thought into a university and course.

For example, the student's essay (Initiative 1) mentioned a specific country but neglected to talk about a university or course. Reference to a country but not a specific university also occurred in the program interview (Initiative 2). The student's research project (Initiative 3) did mention a specific university although only in passing, focusing more on the country that the student wished to study in. Our concerns were exacerbated in the results of the questionnaire as the student failed to write down the name of a target university or course.

Once again, a broad gamut of initiatives enabled us to become aware of this ourselves and provided an opportunity to take corrective action, in this case at the mid-year progress meeting (Initiative 9). Here we were able to

### Raising Awareness: Measures to Raise Awareness in a Study Abroad……

discuss the student's concerns at length and to come up with a plan. In fact, at this meeting, the student told us about his/her worries surrounding English ability and asked whether it would be wise to drop out of the program. The student explained that he/she felt that study abroad was an unattainable goal and that he/she could not think seriously about which university he/she wished to attend as he/she did not expect to achieve a qualifying score.

Having this meeting gave us an opportunity to reassure the student, to give an accurate summary of his/her English level and prospects and to create an achievable and realistic study plan (Initiative 10). It transpired that the student, who at that stage had achieved an IELTS 4.0 score, had been unaware that he/she could study at one of our partner universities with a lower band score of 5.0.

By making the student aware of this, we were able to turn a student on the verge of quitting into a motivated student with a concrete, achievable goal. Were it not for this intervention, in all likelihood the student would have despondently left the program. Instead, he/she achieved a 5.0 qualifying score and a study abroad place a few months later.

### **Limitations**

Certain awareness-raising initiatives are much easier to accomplish with smaller numbers of students. With only eight students in the program, whilst it was not possible to meet one-to-one as extensively as we would have liked, it was at least still possible (such as in Initiatives 5, 7, 9 and 15).

Furthermore, since we also had regular classes with our students, it was also possible to discuss specific learning concerns with them that we had encountered first-hand. In many other programs like ours, those responsible

for the running and logistics of the program may not be involved in the teaching and vice versa. Our dual roles enabled us to combine these elements.

Whilst we were perhaps in a favourable position in this respect, it cannot be understated that even in our case, teachers' influence can only go so far. It is still true that much of the little time that teachers have together with students on this program is spent teaching them English. This reality puts an enormous burden on students to find out what options are available to them and how best to pursue those options independently.

That is to say that despite the initiatives that we have implemented above, it should not be forgotten that it is students themselves who are doing the bulk of the work. It is all too easy to overstate the role that we as teachers play and understate the role that students themselves play in their eventual overseas study (or otherwise). A key part of our initiatives to build awareness in our students is to provide a clear framework of information gathering and support to enable students to help themselves.

The final point to note is that, even where everything falls into place, external factors still play a significant role. Of the eight students in this study, all are either in or are close to a position where they can study abroad at their first or second choice university. Undoubtedly not all of them will do so. Financial concerns, family changes, health issues, a loss of motivation are amongst myriad factors that can get in the way of a student studying abroad, even under usual circumstances.

Unusual circumstances also present themselves on occasion. At the time of writing, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all inbound and outbound student exchange has been suspended and it is highly likely that students from this

intake will see their opportunities for study abroad diminish or change as a result. Whilst there is little that educators can do to avoid the disappointment that can come from such situations, it is important to remain mindful of the fact that study abroad is not the only aspiration that students have and that a rounded approach to education, even within a study abroad-focused program, is likely to be beneficial. Awareness-building initiatives should, where possible, build not only awareness relevant to the here-and-now but also to nurture the kind of thirst for knowledge that will benefit students for the rest of their lives.

## **Conclusions and Applications for Future Iterations of the Program**

Quantifying how much impact our initiatives have had and how much is natural variation between groups of students is certainly difficult to ascertain in a small-scale study like this. Nevertheless, the increase in awareness, as far as we have been able to quantify in this research, we would argue is undeniable. It is clear from the data we have collected and the comparative success of students in this intake of the program that the initiatives we have adopted are having a positive effect. The students are more aware and they are more successful.

Furthermore, we believe that the observations and perceptions of those conducting action research that accompany quantitative data are an integral part of any research findings. Based on what we have observed, it is indeed our sincerely held belief that these initiatives to increase awareness *are* working and that this can genuinely be seen not only in our survey data but also in the lived experiences of students. Students *are* visibly more engaged.

They *are* more focused, and they *are* enjoying the program more. We are in little doubt that our initiatives have played a considerable part in that

It is therefore our intention to continue to develop these initiatives for the benefit of the students of future iterations of the program. It is hoped that a continued concerted effort to do so will ensure high levels of awareness and more students being able to study abroad as a result.

At the same time, there comes a point logistically where it is simply not possible to continue adding more initiatives. Whilst we are not quite yet at that point, we can see the need for a clearer strategy. It seems clear, for example, that students' self-study, especially prior to the introduction of the study plans (Initiative 10) is an area which needs further improvement. Facilitating that at an earlier stage when we know considerably less about the students will not be easy, so it seems that, once again, awareness from both teachers and students will have to play a central role.

With this in mind, the next challenge for this area of our research is to examine how to more precisely measure students' awareness at an earlier stage, which will almost certainly require a more complex, multi-faceted approach to the collation of our data. It is likely that our student questionnaire will need to be adapted and expanded upon, and for new means of data collection to be introduced.

Whilst this will make quantitative comparisons with previous intakes more difficult, it is hoped that a more expansive dataset will help us to see more clearly how awareness is constituted in students within this context. It is also hoped that we can create a framework which allows us to model how students' awareness changes over time so that we can plan the academic calendar accordingly.



Raising Awareness: Measures to Raise Awareness in a Study Abroad……

Finally, we hope to be able to identify more clearly which of the individual awareness-building initiatives correlate most closely with success in achieving a study abroad place. We are optimistic that through better understanding what works and why it works, we can be even more targeted and strategic in our approach to future programs.

### Notes

- 1) IELTS instructors are strongly discouraged from giving students predicted Band scores for either Writing or Speaking sections
- 2) In both English and Japanese. For Japanese comments, the closest English approximation has been given for brevity.

### References

- Cotterall, S. (2000). Promoting learner autonomy through the curriculum: Principles for designing language courses. *ELT journal*, 54(2), 109–117.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/54.2.109>
- Legge, T. & Wagner, A. (2019) Awareness as an Indicator of Success in a Study Abroad Program, *人間文化研究*, 11, 43–79.  
[https://stars.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository\\_uri&item\\_id=9136&file\\_id=22&file\\_no=1](https://stars.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository_uri&item_id=9136&file_id=22&file_no=1)
- Schnickel, J., Martin, R., & Maruyama, Y. (2009). Perspectives on studying abroad: Motivations, and challenges. *Language, Culture and Communication: Journal of the College of Intercultural Communication*, 2, 103–120.  
[https://rikkyo.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository\\_uri&item\\_id=5760&file\\_id=18&file\\_no=1](https://rikkyo.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository_uri&item_id=5760&file_id=18&file_no=1)
- Swan, M., & Smith, B. (2001). *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems (Vol. 1)*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wenden, A. L. (1995). Learner training in context: A knowledge-based approach. *System*, 23(2), 183–194. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X\(95\)00007-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X(95)00007-7)

## Raising Awareness: Measures to Raise Awareness in a Study Abroad Preparation Program

Thomas LEGGE  
Adrian WAGNER

This research paper builds upon previous research focused on gauging the awareness, motivation, autonomy and improvement of English ability of learners in the Super Global Program, a study abroad preparation program at a university in Japan. As the previous paper found that “awareness” and engagement of the students was a key factor in the success of the program, several new initiatives to support students in the program were introduced from the academic year of 2019.

It is an unfortunate fact that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to prevent students in the SGP from studying abroad on schedule. However, the data gleaned from this research shows that the new support initiatives were effective to a degree and before the interference of the pandemic, the majority of the 2019 cohort were in a good position to achieve their goals in the program.