

# RYUGAKU

## STUDY ABROAD N-SIG NEWSLETTER

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### Message from the Coordinator

Dear Members,






The *hanamis* are over and the new academic year is well underway. It is a busy time for everyone, preparing for classes and starting new research projects. But it is also the perfect time to send *Ryugaku* something for publication in the next issue.

At the JALT EBM in June, Study Abroad SIG has the chance of becoming a full SIG. We have met all the criteria and it should just be a formality. However for the SIG to become truly successful we need our members to participate more. At present, places where members can become really involved are limited, but writing something for *Ryugaku* is an obvious place to start. Bernard Susser's paper in this issue will hopefully inspire everyone to get researching and writing. We are aiming for a high level, but we hope we can work together to attain this quality, and encourage everyone to try and make *Ryugaku* essential reading for people involved in Study Abroad in Japan. We welcome both practical and academically focused papers and reports relating to cross-border education. Full details are on the back cover of this issue.

Another way to become involved is to attend the Pan-SIG Conference on May 22nd and 23rd, at Osaka Gakuin University in Kishibe, just a few minutes from Shin Osaka. It promises to be an interesting event.

Regards,  
Andrew Atkins

### The SA SIG Executive Team

				
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# Perspective and Interest in Studying Abroad: What American High School Students want to know before Coming to Japan

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## Introduction

In March of 2010, I visited my hometown of Laveen, Arizona U.S.A. and met with the students at Fairfax High School and talked with them about Japan and their interests in visiting and studying there. They had a lot to say. It seems that there is a strong interest in studying in Japan and a lot of students were interested in it. The only problem seems to be in creating programs that can meet their interests/needs and really make them want to come and study. Surely there must be ways to increase and actualize such opportunities.

Taking into consideration the declining birthrate and its effect on the numbers of students enrolling in Japanese universities, without a doubt there is a strong need for universities to consider alternative ways of increasing their enrollment. One solution may be in creating more study abroad programs where students from other countries will want to come to Japan and study. Since Japanese universities generally have little to entice foreign students beyond study opportunities in Japanese language and subjects related to Japan, the prospect of large numbers of students wanting to study long term (one year or more) seem to be slim. Short-term study programs (two weeks to one month) seem like a more logical and practical approach.

In this article, I would like to share some of the suggestions that were gathered from my talks with a group of American high school students. Though it would have been nice to have been able to spend more time

with them, the information gathered is quite valuable (in big thanks to the students and their bombardment of questions). The information gathered here can be applied to increasing and improving current study abroad programs in Japan.

## **The Students**

On Friday, March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010, I spoke with more than 170 students for over two hours. The students ranged in age from 15-18 and were members of the school's AVID program (Advancement Via Individual Determination). AVID students are individuals who based on their academic achievements and interests, not only have a strong possibility of going on to college, but have a possibility of receiving scholarships and grants to pay their tuition. Many of these bright students are interested in traveling abroad and studying in other countries. Learning about other cultures seems to be a shared interest amongst them.

Our discussion was recorded.

Here is what the students wanted to know:

### **#1: Will it cost us an arm and a leg?**

The first question was how much studying abroad costs; especially in a country like Japan where prices are relatively higher in comparison with other countries. Though students were interested in studying in Japan, one of the first drawbacks in choosing to go there was that they thought it would be too expensive. Some students asked what they would be able to gain out of the experience and if the experience would be worth the price. A few students said that if it is too expensive, they would probably choose to go somewhere else or stay in Japan only for a short

time. Some said that although Japan would be a nice place to visit, they more likely would want to go to a country where they could get more for their money. Some countries in South America—especially Brazil and Peru—were a popular alternative.

Their concern was if the experience would be worth the price.

## **#2: How much Japanese language will we need to know before going and will our study count as credit back home?**

Students wondered if they could go to Japan without any knowledge of the Japanese language and take their basic language courses there and then have the credits transferred back to their colleges in America. Could they complete the two-year foreign language requirements in one semester of courses in Japan? If possible, many wanted to study in Japan for a semester before starting their freshman year and becoming involved in their studies. Going right out of high school seemed the most attractive route for them.

Their concern was if they could complete their foreign language requirements by studying Japanese in Japan without any prior experience in learning the language. In their own words: 'Can we come as we are?'

## **#3: Are Japanese customs hard to learn and will we have to know them before going?**

Students worried about their lack of knowledge regarding Japanese customs and if it would be necessary for them to learn 'everything' before visiting. A few students worried that if they could not follow proper Japanese etiquette, even in everyday situations like eating, walking around town and interacting with people, they might

unintentionally give a bad impression or cause some type of mishap through cultural clash. Some worried that they might be punished for making such a mistake. I asked them if they would be willing to learn as much as they could about Japan and Japanese culture and customs before going and most of them agreed that it would be important.

Their concern was if it would be difficult to learn Japanese customs and if they would be able to learn enough before going to Japan. Could they come as they are or would their lack of knowledge cause a problem?

#### **#4: What are Japanese students interested in?**

The students were interested to know what Japanese students do in their free time. They wanted to know what things they shared in common and if they would be able to fit in with Japanese daily life and could easily make friends. Some asked what Japanese youths would think of them, what clothes Japanese students wore and what things were cool and in fashion in Japan. Would there be any clashes?

As long as things were not too different, the students agreed that it would be interesting to experience living in Japan. Everyone thought that having friends in Japan would be pretty 'cool.'

Their concern was if they could fit in with Japanese life and could make friends and would share common interests.

#### **#5: What subjects can we study in Japan besides Japanese?**

The students were interested to know what subjects/courses they could study in Japan besides the language. Could they study about Japanese history, culture, religion, anime, or take some lessons in traditional arts like kendo, karate, aikido, judo, the tea ceremony, calligraphy, and so on? Students said that they would love to learn some of the traditional arts, if possible, and some stated that it would be their main reason for wanting to go to Japan. Surprisingly many students, boys and girls, were interested in learning martial arts.

Their concern was if they could study other things besides Japanese language. Can they learn a traditional art? Martial arts seemed the most popular choice.

### **#6: Are Japanese people prejudice? What will they think of us and do they mind students from other countries studying there?**

A big concern of the students was if Japanese people are prejudice. Would students from other countries be welcomed or unwelcomed there? The students seemed to have an impression that studying in Japan would be hard because Japanese people, from their perspective, do not seem to welcome foreign people in their country; a few had heard some rumors from relatives who were stationed in Japan while serving in the U.S. armed forces. Students wondered if they would be in any kind of actual danger or encounter discrimination or just feel unwelcomed while they were in Japan. Some of the students noted that though Japan would seem like an ideal place to study in and visit, there is not much information regarding the study abroad programs available there. According to them, their school is loaded with pamphlets about study abroad programs in European, South American and even Asian

countries; however, Japan is often not included. They wondered if there was a reason. The only thing they could come up with was prejudice.

Unfortunately, this was one of the students' main concerns and a big focus of our talk. It should be noted that many of the students at Fairfax are minorities. Being from the same area, I understand their concerns and can relate with them. Though I did my best to assure them that Japan was not such a country, and that they would probably not encounter prejudice, some students still had doubts. It is sad when prejudice becomes a deterrent for studying abroad in any country.

## **Discussion**

It seems that though numerous students have a genuine interest in studying in Japan, there is little information about such programs and what students can actually gain from them; and therefore, students may be apprehensive. Students do not know enough to want to invest in such experiences which they believe will be costly, and are not sure if they will be worth the price. There may also be misconceptions and a lack of general understanding in regards to Japanese culture and how the Japanese people feel about students from other countries studying in Japan.

The solution may be to create more appealing study abroad programs based on students' interests and needs, and then promote them and entice students from around the globe. Once students begin coming in, and the word of mouth spreads, the programs will begin to grow. With this approach Japanese universities can create more learning opportunities, share Japanese culture and traditions, while increasing

their enrollment and earnings. Like all things, universities need to adapt to changes in order to survive.

## **Conclusion**

Talking with the students at Fairfax High School about Japan was a great experience. The questions and concerns they had are likely shared by students in other countries, and this information is valuable for improving upon existing study abroad programs and in creating new ones. Increasing study abroad programs seems like a logical solution which can benefit everyone. More attention in this area is definitely needed.



Some of the students at Fairfax High School who were interested in martial arts.



# Researching the Test Preparation Course: What Is Needed

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Most of us responsible for preparing our students for Study Abroad are involved with TOEFL or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test-preparation courses. Considering that high-stakes English test preparation courses are common not only in Japan but around the world, one might think that there would be an extensive body of research on such courses, particularly concerning their efficacy, but in fact Hamp-Lyons claimed in 1998 that “there seem to have been no studies of whether TOEFL preparation...courses actually do improve scores” (pp. 330-331); Alderson (2004, p. x) repeated this claim in 2004 and I have been unable to find many even through 2009. This gap in the research literature can be seen as an opportunity for those of us teaching such courses to use the data we collect as we teach to conduct research on methodologies and effectiveness and help fill this gap. The main purposes of this article are to introduce the previous research on this topic and to suggest areas where further research is needed. I hope that this article will inspire Study Abroad SIG colleagues to contribute with their own research to our knowledge of how best to prepare our students for these high-stakes exams.

## 1. Purpose of the TOEFL iBT

The TOEFL iBT was introduced in 2005. While previous versions of the TOEFL have been evaluated highly and used widely, they also have been the subject of severe criticisms, not only for deficiencies as a language

test (e.g., Brindley & Ross, 2001, p. 151; Cumming, 2002, pp. 75 ff.; 2007, pp. 474-475; Stoyhoff & Chapelle, 2005, pp. 98-99; Tasker, 2001; Traynor, 1985), including weak predictive validity (see a review of studies in Roemer, 2002, p. 16) but also because of their role as instruments of “linguistic imperialism” (e.g., Templer, 2004) and ideological and social control (e.g., Pennycook, 2005, pp. 10-12; Shohamy, 1997; 2001, pp. 131 ff.). In describing the reasons for the latest revision, which resulted in the iBT, Jamieson, et al. (2000, p. 3) stated two main dissatisfactions with the previous versions: (1) the use of discrete-point test items and traditional multiple-choice items “have a negative impact on instruction”; and (2) those who use TOEFL scores to accept and place international students in English-speaking universities have complained that many students who have high TOEFL scores “arrive on campus with insufficient writing and oral communications skills to participate fully in academic programs.” The TOEFL iBT is substantially different from earlier versions (see e.g., Zareva, 2005), particularly in its emphasis on testing communicative ability (see e.g., Jamieson, et al., 2008; for an evaluation, see Stoyhoff, 2009, pp. 6-14). Kunnan (2008, pp. 144-145) praised the research effort behind the design of the iBT but added that “researchers will have their hands full with similar research studies for the next few years before they can defend their claims regarding the validity of score interpretations, fairness, access and consequences of the iBT TOEFL” (p. 145).

What is needed:

(1) Research on the validity, reliability, etc. of the TOEFL iBT.

(2) Critical analyses of research on the iBT published by ETS.

## 2. Previous studies of TOEFL and other preparation courses

I noted above that there has not been very much research done on TOEFL preparation courses. The first study that I am aware of is Alderson & Hamp-Lyons (1996); other studies include:

Alderson (1998)

Forster & Karn (1998)

Heffernan (2003a, 2003b, 2006),

Johnson, Jordan, and Poehner (2005)

Lucas et al. (2009)

McCabe et al. (2003)

Narron, et al. (2003)

Wadden and Hilke (1999)

Wall & Horàk (2006, 2008)

There is no space here to critique these studies in detail. One point that future researchers must keep in mind is that the greatest problem of studying the effectiveness of a single university test preparation course is the practical impossibility of distinguishing the effect of the test preparation course from the effect of the other English courses the students may be taking concurrently (or in many cases extracurricular exposure to English in private language lessons, overseas homestays, etc.).

There has been some research on the coachability of other tests. Spratt (2005, pp. 19-20) reviewed several studies of effectiveness of test preparation courses, emphasizing that they are few in number and present disparate results; her conclusion is that “there is currently no evidence that test coaching achieves better test scores” (p. 24). One well-designed study not reviewed by Spratt was Robb and Ercanbrack’s

investigation of TOEIC test preparation (1999); their results were inconclusive. Many studies have been done of IELTS preparation courses, with similar results (e.g., Green, 2007a, pp. 255 ff.; 2007b; Hayes and Read, 2004; Shaw & Falvey, 2008). Some research concerning the effectiveness of test preparation courses and materials for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), also produced by ETS, suggests that coaching does improve SAT scores, although there is quite a bit of disagreement concerning the extent of such improvement (see e.g., Briggs, 2001; 2002; 2004; Gladwell, 2001; Hansen, 2004; Jaschik, 2006; Kaplan, 2002; Powers & Rock, 1999).

What is needed:

- (3) Large-scale, valid, and reliable studies of the effectiveness of test preparation courses.
- (4) Comparative studies of test results from students who took test preparation courses with results from students who took only a standard English-major curriculum.

### 3. TOEFL test preparation materials

A related issue is the quality and effectiveness of the test preparation materials used in these courses. Hamp-Lyons (1998) published a severe critique of TOEFL test preparation materials, arguing that they are "educationally indefensible" (p. 334). Wadden and Hilke (1999), coincidentally the authors of TOEFL test preparation materials, wrote a strong critique of Hamp-Lyons, to which she responded in kind (1999). Interestingly, Hilke and Wadden had published previously their own critique of TOEFL preparation textbooks (1997), finding many of them deficient: using reading topics that are not characteristic of those usually appearing on the actual TOEFL test, or over- or under-representing question types. Lucas et al. (2009) provided a detailed

analysis of textbooks for the TOEFL iBT writing question (pp. 30-31). In the end, as Hamp-Lyons said, “the research to prove that preparation materials boosts scores does not exist, but even if it did, further research would be needed to prove that the boosted scores were valid” (1999, p. 273).

What is needed:

- (5) Detailed reviews, analyses, and comparative studies of test preparation textbooks.

## 5. Ethical questions, authenticity of scores, test wiseness, and washback

This section covers the ethicality of test preparation courses (teaching to the test) and does not cover other ethical issues related to high-stakes testing such as washback effects on the curriculum (e.g., Hamp-Lyons, 1997; Wall, 2005, pp. 38-39), method effects (Shohamy, 1997, pp. 341-343), the devious uses to which test scores may be put (e.g., Shohamy, 2001), the lack of independence of much ETS research on the TOEFL (Raimes, 1992, pp 188-190), “the inevitable corruption of indicators and educators” (Nichols & Berliner, 2005), etc.

Concerning test preparation practice, Hamp-Lyons (1998) argued that we have little information on what qualifications or training is required of instructors of TOEFL preparation courses (p. 330; on this topic see the recent survey by Brown & Bailey, 2008) and there is no evidence that such courses actually improve TOEFL scores (pp. 330-331). The TOEFL preparation textbooks she examined do not promote skills that relate “to any EFL/ESL curriculum or syllabus or to any model of language in use.” Further, she cited authorities who see “practice on a published previous or parallel form” of a test “as educationally

indefensible (boosting scores without mastery) and of dubious ethicality (coaching merely for score gain)" (p. 334; see also Mehrens & Kaninski, 1989; Miller & Seraphine, 1993).

This type of practice includes training in test-wiseness, defined by Yang (2000, p. 5, citing Millman, Bishop, & Ebel, 1965, p. 707) as "a subject's capacity to utilize the characteristics and formats of the test and/or test-taking situation to receive a high score"; Yang (pp.5-7) presents related definitions and examples; he found that 48% to 64% of questions on the listening and reading subtests of the old TOEFL were susceptible to test-wiseness (p. 320; see also Forster & Karn, 1998). For example, familiarity with the test would include knowledge such as "guessing is not penalized" (Yang, 2000, p. 24); this becomes test-wiseness when examinees are taught that "statistically, answers B and C are the most common correct answers" for multiple choice questions so students should decide on one of them as a "guess response" and fill in all blanks with that rather than leave a question blank (Forster & Karn, 1998, p. 8). Cohen (2006) gave the example in which students could answer reading comprehension questions about a passage after reading only the title (p. 321; see also Powers & Leung, 1995; Tian, 2006). It is important to differentiate familiarizing students with the test, which is ethical, from teaching test-wiseness skills, which may not be. Messick (1996) pointed out that "a validated proficiency test can be subverted by test preparation practices or coaching emphasizing testwiseness strategies that might increase test scores without correspondingly improving the skills measured by the test...In contrast, test preparation practices emphasizing test familiarization and anxiety reduction may actually improve validity: scores that formerly were invalidly low because of anxiety might now become validly higher" (p. 246). Of course, there are a variety of opinions on what might or might not be

ethical: Haladyna, Nolen, and Haas (1991, p. 4), for example, consider training in testwiseness skills to be ethical (provided all test-takers get the same training) but brand as unethical developing a curriculum based on the test's contents or studying items similar to those that appear on the test.

Training that improves scores without improving skills invalidates whatever inferences score users might want to make (e.g., Mehrens & Kaminsk, 1989); this has been called "test score pollution" (Haladyna, 1992; Haladyna, Nolen, & Haas, 1991). Hamp-Lyons (1999) claimed that because of this training there is a tendency among score users "to take TOEFL scores from Japan and Korea with a very large grain of salt. The folk wisdom holds that TOEFL scores from Japan tend to be 20-30 points above the test taker's actual language ability. This seems to be about the amount that practice and preparation materials can raise scores without boosting mastery of the language" (p. 273).

Washback is "the power of examinations over what takes place in the classroom" (Alderson and Wall, 1993, p. 115). Washback was a specific concern in the development of the new TOEFL (ETS, 2008, §Test Use; Huff et al., 2008, pp. 188, 219; Stoyhoff, 2009, p. 13; Taylor & Angelis, 2008, pp. 48-49; Wall & Horák, 2006, pp. 1, 3, 8 ff., 14-15); Huff et al. (2008) claimed that one of the goals for the new TOEFL was "to have a positive influence on teaching and learning...By designing a test with more academic-like tasks, test preparation would become more consistent with communicative approaches to teaching and learning" (p. 219). There has been much research on the washback of high-stakes tests (see e.g. Bailey, 1999; Cheng, 2005; Cheng, 2008; Cheng & Curtis, 2004) but the results have been mixed. Spratt's (2005) thorough

review of 13 empirical studies of washback in the ESL/EFL field found the results to be inconclusive or contradictory: “the empirical studies reviewed indicate strongly that an exam cannot of itself dictate what and how teachers teach and learners learn” (p. 27). In any case, considering only test preparation courses, the test’s format and content serve to inform rather than subvert the syllabus. What the test’s washback might be doing to the curriculum as a whole is another story.

What is needed:

- (6) In-depth and localized studies of the ethics of test preparation.
- (7) Studies of what qualifications and training teachers of test preparation courses should have.
- (8) Studies of what test-wiseness skills should be taught.
- (9) Studies of the nature of washback specifically on test preparation courses.
- (10) Studies of the washback, if any, on the language instruction curriculum and/or teaching methods.

## 6. Conclusion

The above is a brief (if dense!) review of some of the research that has been done on high-stakes test preparation, particularly for the TOEFL iBT. It is my hope that teachers involved with Study Abroad programs will take the opportunity to build on this previous research and provide new ideas and knowledge about this important topic.



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2. Ryugaku Forum (short articles and interviews): Maximum 1500 words
4. Classroom Ideas: Maximum 1500 words
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6. Study abroad program reviews
7. Study abroad experiences from students: Let's hear what our students have to say!

Format for submissions:

1. Attached Microsoft Word document
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