

# *A Chance and a Challenge: Students' Reflections on Online Study Abroad Experiences*

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**Abstract:** *COVID-19's severe impact on the travel industry has had a ripple effect on both international travel and study abroad (SA) programs. This made long- or short-term planning immensely complicated, and as a result, some students either did not know when and where they might be permitted to sojourn, or some SA programs were put entirely on hiatus. With the advent and widespread uptake of ICT, "online study abroad" (OSA) courses were offered as alternatives to location-based study abroad programs. In this paper, I reveal the findings of a discourse analysis of OSA testimonials given by 75 tertiary level students in both private and public institutions. The overall findings reveal that although OSA programs are not exactly ideal due to time differences and the lack of cultural immersion, the smaller class sizes provided students with more opportunities to speak up and interact with others. As well as highlighting the perceived advantages and disadvantages of OSA programs, I argue that retaining such programs in a post-pandemic era will not only promote inclusivity by providing options for students with financial difficulties or disabilities, but it will offer senior students occupied with job-hunting obligations a last chance to study abroad before entering the workforce.*

**Keywords:** *Online study abroad, ICT, Covid-19, Japanese students*

## Introduction

At any given point in time or geographic location, there is bound to be a mixture of complicated or concerning economic, social, or political circumstances which might hinder or deter students from studying abroad. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, concerns about studying abroad shifted from whether one should go abroad to whether one could go abroad. That is, with the closing of international borders and rigid restrictions in countries such as Australia and New Zealand, studying abroad was no longer permitted or even a viable option. Furthermore, the emergence of new COVID variants and the frequent and sudden changes to town, prefectural, and nationwide restrictions, made making concrete plans to travel abroad for non-essential reasons challenging. With few options left but to “*sutei hoomi*” (stay home) due to institutions’ decisions to cancel SA programs, Japanese students with pre-existing plans to study abroad, as well as those who were simply eager to study abroad, had to accept these circumstances and explore other alternatives. One of these alternatives was online study abroad (OSA) programs. While such programs may not be the most appealing alternative for students and language instructors alike, former president and CEO of the Forum on Education Abroad, Brian Whalen argues that rather than considering education abroad as students crossing national borders, we ought to think of a kind of education that “promotes the mobility of students’ minds,” which includes opportunities like online learning, online study abroad, and so on (2020).

In response to the ongoing travel restrictions impacting the study abroad sector, Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology’s (MEXT) Tobitate Japan-initiated The Age of “New Normal Study Abroad” survey was conducted in March 2021 with 2,475 participants from the ages of 15 to 69. The aim of this survey was for the Ministry of Education to gain insight into students’ attitudes towards OSA, SA and global citizenship. The research questions and results from the survey published by MEXT in 2022 are as follows:

### New Normal Study Abroad Survey Research Questions

Is student motivation to study abroad decreasing?

Do students think differently about the unforeseeable future based on study abroad experience or lack thereof?

What kind of online SA programs are students interested in?

What do students perceive as advantages and disadvantages of studying abroad, and what are their priorities?

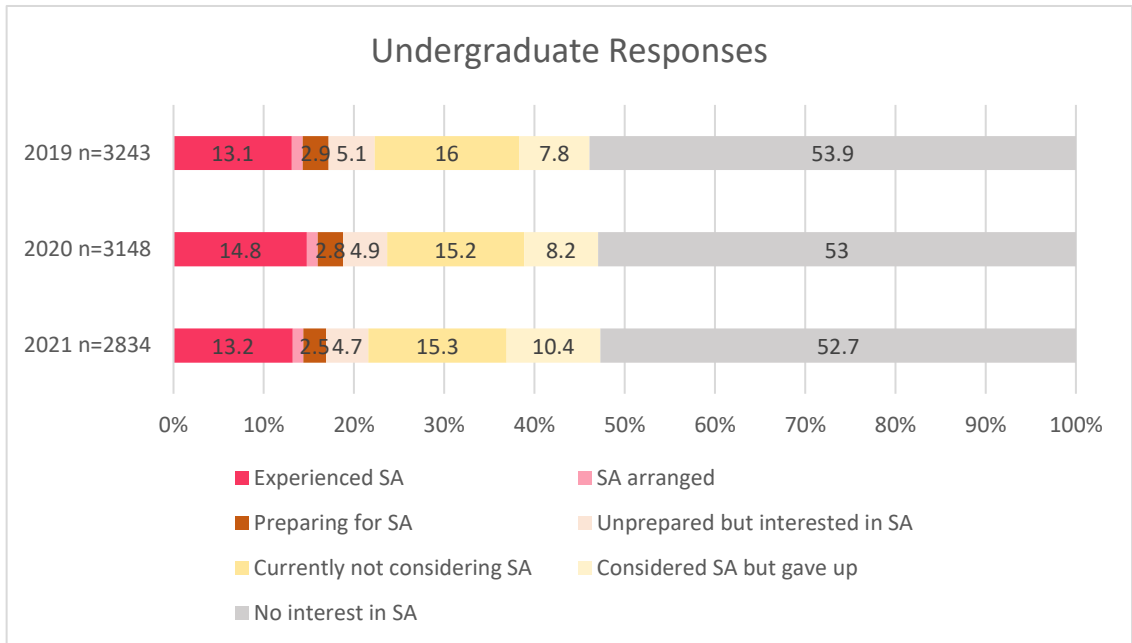
What do parents and school teachers think about sending their students abroad during a pandemic?

How are high school teachers promoting SA and global citizenship education?

The results of the first question showed that despite ongoing restrictions, overall interest in SA is on the rise. Figure 1, for example, illustrates that students’ interest in SA has been steadily increasing since 2019, and even during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. Furthermore, the pale-yellow area that represents students who considered a study abroad program but gave up in years 2019 (7.8), 2020 (8.2) and 2021 (10.4) reinforces that although students are interested,

they perhaps regarded the situation as futile and eventually gave up.

**Figure 1. New Normal Study Abroad Survey Results:  
Interest in SA 2019~2021 (Source: MEXT, 2022)**



Regarding the online SA programs that MEXT’s respondents were interested in, around 70% were naturally interested in language courses (MEXT, 2022). The top three perceived advantages of online study for university students were to save on expenses, continue studying and working in Japan while doing online courses, and also maintain their daily lives in Japan and eat Japanese food (MEXT, 2022). However, the greatest disadvantage was not being able to have cultural experiences abroad followed by the difficulty of making friends online due to the time differences between Japan and the host country. Overall, these findings indicate that students are perhaps desiring new cultural experiences and the opportunities for intercultural communication that naturally accompanies studying a language abroad. However, most of the respondents believed that these needs are not being or cannot be met by Online Study Abroad or OSA courses. One issue with MEXT’s study is that it primarily involved students with little or no study abroad experience and thus some of the participants’ attitudes towards studying abroad were based on second-hand knowledge or assumptions rather than personal experiences. To gauge genuine sentiment towards OSA or study abroad in the context of a pandemic, is simply relying on preconceived ideas reliable?

## The Study

### Purpose of the Study

In contrast to MEXT’s study, which largely relied on mere impressions or assumptions from

a significant number of students who had no SA experience, this study aims to examine evidence exclusively provided by former OSA students to provide first-hand insight into OSA and the various benefits and burdens associated with it. This study focuses on and analyzes students' attitudes towards OSA after they have completed an actual OSA program. Identifying the common program flaws will serve to improve the quality of OSA programs in the future.

### **Research Questions**

Although the cost and time-difference issues raised by the university-level respondents in MEXT's survey are legitimate concerns for students considering an OSA program, there are other content-related issues regarding OSA programs that need to be examined. The following is a list of research questions which pertain to this study. They are as follows:

- i. To what extent is there a lack of cultural immersion and spontaneous or natural communication in online language courses?
- ii. Can students improve their language (in particular, communication) skills in an OSA program?
- iii. What are the actual advantages and disadvantages of OSA programs upon the completion of a course?

Anyone with experience facilitating group discussions in Zoom classes knows that the breakout room function allows for greater and more intimate conversations between speakers, so it is hard to argue that natural conversations and some instances of cultural exchange are completely nonexistent when participating in Zoom breakout rooms or similar online interactions. Anything from what beverage one is drinking, the items in one's Zoom room or the ambient noise coming from beyond the room has the potential to convey some information about a particular individual and their culture. As insignificant as these interactions might seem, some of these impressions and instances can have a lasting impact so we cannot deny their potential to provide insight into another culture.

As OSA courses are limited to class time/course duration rather than encompassing the learning that occurs through extraneous daily life experiences and interactions, is it possible nevertheless to improve one's communicative ability in a meaningful way or to a satisfactory level? It can be argued that it is problematic to discern the advantages and disadvantages of OSA without the necessary experience. Nevertheless, some logistical disadvantages such as time differences and undiscounted course costs (with many OSA course fees remaining the same price as regular SA courses) can be identified without any OSA experience. Scholastic and cultural factors, however, need to be more closely examined.

### **Participants**

To gain insight into OSA experiences a discourse analysis was conducted of OSA testimonials given by 75 tertiary level students in both private and public institutions across Japan. These were mostly sourced from official university websites or MEXT's Tobitate page (Tobitate, 2021). Of the 75 respondents, 52 belonged to public universities, 22 were from private

universities, and one was undisclosed although it was noted that the individual was a university student. Although these numbers do not reflect the overall OSA situation, one might presume that more public university students were opting for OSA courses because they were more affordable at these institutions. Also, while the number of testimonials may not be large enough to be representative of general trends, they nevertheless provide some insight as they are personal testimonials from experiences based on students' feelings. It is within these testimonials that students often explained why they tried an OSA program, as well as the advantages and disadvantages.

## **Methodology**

In order to address the aforementioned research questions, this study collected 75 samples of web-published OSA testimonials from pages hosted by Japanese universities in the month of March, 2022. While some of the testimonials date back to the earlier phase of the pandemic in 2020, all the samples refer to courses that were taken prior to Japan's gradual easing of outbound travel restrictions in early to mid-2022. The raw data was extracted from the websites and placed into one file, and a discourse analysis was conducted using the User Local's text mining software. As well as a sentiment analysis of the overall data, the analysis primarily examined word frequency and co-occurrence patterns. Thereafter, an analysis of the data was interpreted to identify key findings.

## **Procedure**

As noted, this study collected 75 samples of web-published OSA testimonials in the month of March, 2022. Given that the responses were testimonials, both qualitative and quantitative data were obtained in order to isolate and identify meaningful responses regarding OSA. Each testimonial was placed into a single file and personal information such as the name of the individuals were removed. Since the sample was relatively small, quantitative data such as course destinations and durations of courses were manually categorized and summarized in the forthcoming charts in the results section. Qualitative findings, such as the students' reasons to take part in an OSA and their retrospective thoughts on the advantages and disadvantages of OSAs, were also manually analyzed and coded into various categories. For example, frequently cited reasons or comments regarding tech or time difference issues were coded into individual categories.

As noted, through utilizing the online data analysis tool, User Local, a discourse analysis of the sample was thus performed to examine the word frequency, co-occurrence patterns, and a sentiment analysis. These findings will henceforth be outlined in the following section with accompanying charts and tables.

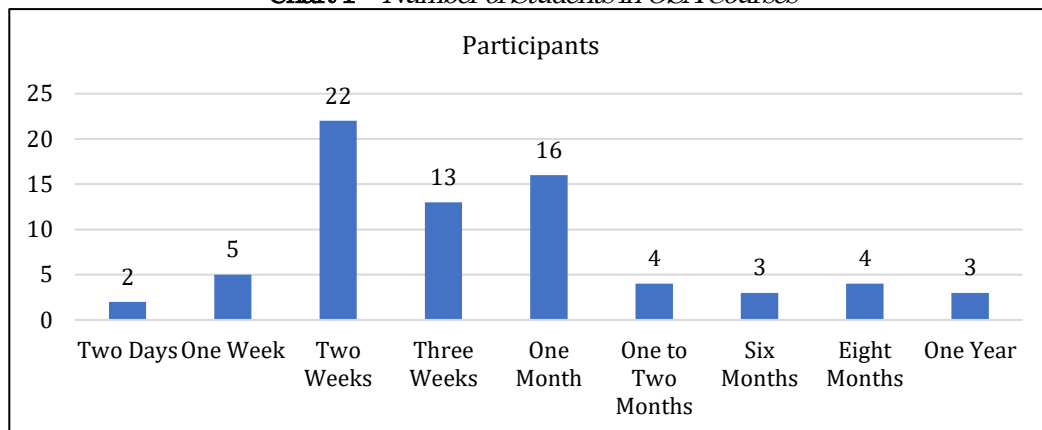
## **Results**

### **Profile of Study Abroad Participants and Countries**

Before discussing the key discourse analysis findings, it is worth briefly mentioning some basic trends regarding the OSA course lengths and the countries in which the OSA programs were based. Firstly, let us consider the duration of the courses in Chart 1. Overall, most students participated in OSA courses that were not too short or too long. For instance, OSA courses that were two (22) or three (13) weeks or one month (16) long in length were nearly two to three times more popular compared to OSA courses that were a week or less or more than a

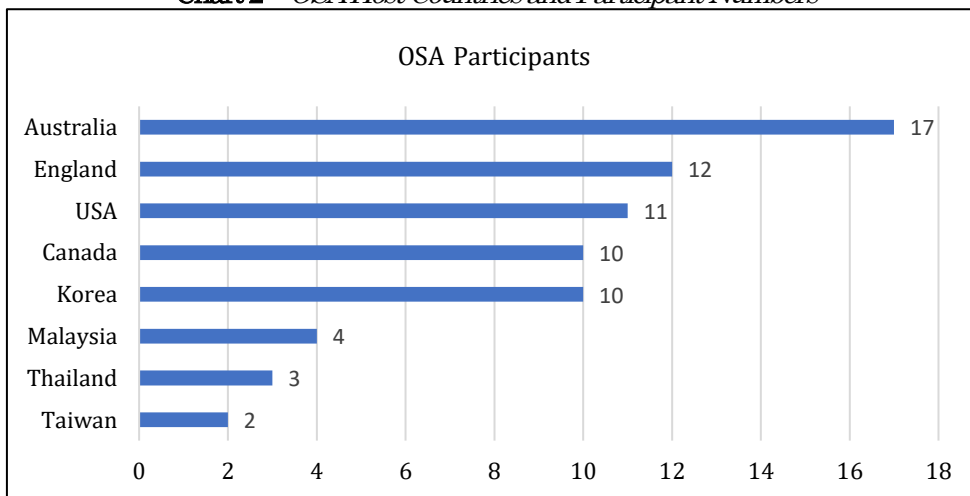
month.

**Chart 1** *Number of Students in OSA Courses*



Second, Chart 2 reveals the number of students who participated in OSA programs hosted by different countries.

**Chart 2** *OSA Host Countries and Participant Numbers*



OSA programs from Anglosphere countries were the most popular for students. For instance, OSA courses in Australia (17) were the most popular. This was followed by England (12), the United States (11) and Canada (10). Although Korea (10) was somewhat popular, the number of participants who attended OSA programs in English-speaking countries was two to three times higher than Asian countries and this can be attributed to the fact that several students expressed that they wanted to interact with or learn from so-called “native speakers” of English.

### **Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis**

To break down and identify the key findings, the Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis was

compartmentalized into three separate categories. Tables 1, 2, and 3, for instance, reveal the Frequently Used Nouns, Verbs, and Adjectives that were used by participants in terms of their score and frequency of appearance.

**Table 1** *Most Frequently Used Nouns*

| 名刺 Noun          | スコア Score | 出現頻度 Freq. of Appearance |
|------------------|-----------|--------------------------|
| 授業 class/lesson  | 1703.60   | 518                      |
| 留学 study abroad  | 2101.24   | 430                      |
| 英語 study English | 1181.74   | 380                      |
| オンライン online     | 1555.18   | 358                      |
| 参加 participation | 360.21    | 253                      |

**Table 2** *Frequency of Verbs*

| 動詞 Verb                | スコア Score | 出現頻度 Freq. of Appearance |
|------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|
| 出来る can/to be able to~ | 228.82    | 462                      |
| 思う to think            | 71.56     | 366                      |
| 話す to speak/talk       | 109.34    | 140                      |
| 感じる to feel            | 73.81     | 128                      |
| 学ぶ to learn            | 305.93    | 122                      |
| 受ける to receive/take    | 129.50    | 120                      |
| 考える to think           | 26.82     | 101                      |
| 聞く to listen           | 14.20     | 78                       |
| 行く to go/proceed       | 10.77     | 76                       |
| 知る to know             | 10.52     | 66                       |

**Table 3** *Frequency of Adjectives*

| 形容詞 Adjective | スコア Score | 出現頻度 Freq. of Appearance |
|---------------|-----------|--------------------------|
| 良い good       | 12.54     | 98                       |
| 多い (too) many | 22.35     | 91                       |
| 楽しい fun       | 5.65      | 50                       |
| 難しい difficult | 10.72     | 38                       |
| 強い strong     | 3.72      | 30                       |
| よい good       | 1.74      | 29                       |

As revealed from the tables, the findings varied considerably for each part of speech. For example, in the word cloud, Figure 2 (see appendix) and the most frequently used nouns in Table 1, it comes as no surprise that 授業 (lessons - 518), 留学 (study abroad - 430), 英語

(English - 380), オンライン (online - 358), and 参加 (participation - 253) were the most common nouns given that the testimonials centered on OSA. This indicates that not only was participation in OSA classes the focal point of most testimonials, but the specific emphasis on studying English reflects the value placed on English as a Lingua Franca in Japan and a desire to improve one's skills rather than to simply go abroad and take content classes or otherwise.

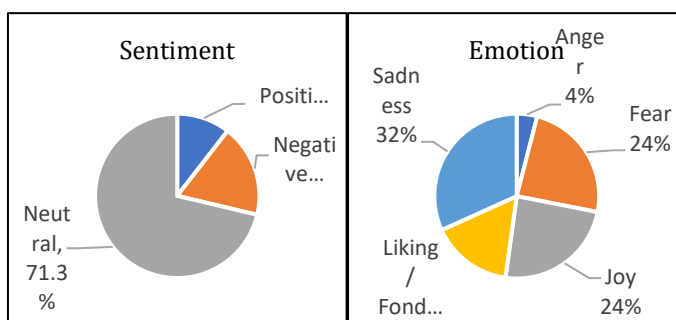
Next, the verbs in Table 2 such as できる (to be able to - 462) and 思う (to think - 366) were about six times more frequent than 行く (to go/proceed - 76) and 知る (to know - 66). Since 'to be able to' and 'to think' were quite pronounced, one could infer that perhaps many of the respondents viewed OSA as a viable opportunity and in a positive light. Overall, given the positive tone of the top five most frequently used verbs, in terms of learning and communicating in a SA program, these are favorable results.

Finally, adjectives in Table 3 such as 良い (good - 98) were over three times more frequent than 強い (strong - 30). However, as indicated in the table, there was a fair share of terms with potentially negative connotations such as 多い (many), 難しい (difficult), or 強い (strong). This result might indicate that although polysemic adjectives like strong can be potentially negative, when looking at the co-occurrence of terms in Figure 3 (appendix) that were paired with "strong", they were usually "will", "popularity", and "accent". In addition, "many" was often paired with "chances to speak." Even without doing a sentiment analysis, one might infer that the general sentiment towards online SA is rather mixed based on such word frequency findings.

### Sentiment Analysis Findings

As noted, the somewhat mixed sentiment towards OSA was reinforced in the co-occurrence findings and sentiment analysis in the illustration in Figure 3 (see appendix) and charts 4a and 4b.

Chart 4a: Sentiment and 4b: Emotion



The large cluster on the top left side of the co-occurrence cluster map in Figure 3 shows that 話す, 機会, and 多い (basically, "many chances to communicate") were frequently paired as well as 留学, できる, 思う, 良い, 感じる (I think or positively feel that I can study abroad) at the very bottom. However, the overall sentiment analysis of the corpus reveals that although most utterances were evaluated as neutral, the ratio of sentences which were negative in tone outweighed the positive ones. For example, Chart 4a (Sentiment) indicates that only 10.5% of



the sample was evaluated to be positive in tone, whereas 18.2% was negative. For Chart 4b (Emotion), sadness was the greatest emotional mood indicated from the corpus at 79.5%, followed by both joy and fear at 24% respectively.

### **Reasons to take an OSA course**

As discussed in the procedure section, the analysis of the testimonials involved isolating and coding common responses regarding reasons to participate in OSA. The most frequent reasons are displayed in the table below.

**Table 4** *Reasons to take an OSA course*

| Reasons Given for OSA   | Frequency |
|---|-----------|
| Could not go abroad due to COVID-19 so took opportunity to do OSA | 22        |
| Wanted to improve language skills                                 | 22        |
| Wanted to make use of the semester break                          | 12        |
| Interested in the host country / being taught by native speakers  | 10        |
| Wanted to try something new / had always wanted to do SA          | 10        |
| Interested in a specific course                                   | 9         |
| Got scholarship or subsidy for OSA                                | 6         |
| Senior student, last chance to do SA                              | 6         |
| Original SA course shifted from onsite to online halfway          | 6         |
| Affordability   | 2         |

Overall, students listed ten different reasons for studying abroad. As evidenced in the table, the top two reasons equally at 22 mentions were “Couldn’t not go abroad due to COVID-19 so took opportunity to do OSA” and “Wanted to improve language skills” (22). Other relatively popular reasons were: “Wanted to make use of the semester break” (12) and both, “Interested in the host country / being taught by native speakers” and “Wanted to try something new / had always wanted to do SA” (10). Finally, the least frequently mentioned reasons were “Got scholarship or subsidy for OSA”, “Senior student, last chance to do SA”, “Original SA course shifted from onsite to online halfway” (6) and “Affordability” (2). Although speculative, this perhaps accounts for the joy and regret associated with not being able to go abroad, and the desire and motivation to study abroad somehow. What this might indicate is that students who nevertheless undertake OSA courses might be more motivated to study abroad since they are exhausting every possible means to do so instead of simply giving up on the idea.

### **Advantages of OSA**

The testimonials often included students’ perceptions of the pros and cons of OSA. Firstly, the findings concerning what students perceived as advantages of OSA are reflected in Table 5 below.

**Table 5** *Advantages of OSA*

| Advantages of OSA                                | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Had the chance to communicate / express opinions | 32        |
| Cultural learning                                | 31        |

|                                      |    |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| Improved skills                      | 26 |
| Supportive staff                     | 25 |
| Cultural exchange                    | 23 |
| Small classes                        | 19 |
| Extra-curricular / social activities | 18 |
| Made friends                         | 17 |
| Motivation grew                      | 15 |
| Cost efficient                       | 15 |

In contrast to MEXT's Tobitate survey, which did not specifically target students who had tried OSA, as reflected in Table 5, the greatest advantages based on this study's sample were: having the chances to communicate or express opinions; opportunities for cultural learning or exchange; and the improvement of speaking skills. By comparison, the greatest advantages of OSA cited in MEXT's study was cost-efficiency. In this study, however, cost-efficiency was mentioned half as much as "having chances to communicate." In fact, respondents cited making friends as an advantage more than the cost efficiency factor.

### Disadvantages of OSA

As noted, the disadvantages of OSA were also highlighted and analyzed in the testimonial samples and are summarized in Table 6 below.

**Table 6** *Disadvantages of OSA*

| Disadvantages of OSA                              | Frequency |
|---|-----------|
| Tech issues                                       | 21        |
| Concern about L2 abilities regarding improvement  | 17        |
| Cannot explore the location / lifestyle           | 11        |
| Time difference                                   | 11        |
| Hard to make friends or have casual conversations | 10        |
| No extra-curricular or social events              | 7         |
| Difficulty of contents                            | 6         |
| Cannot experience full immersion                  | 5         |
| Lack of support                                   | 2         |
| Motivation issues                                 | 1         |

As for the disadvantages, referring again to MEXT's survey, the lack of cultural experiences, the time difference issue, and the problems associated with making new friends were the greatest disadvantages perceived by the respondents. While the results from this study mirror some of those issues, the major disadvantages cited in Table 6 are quite different. In contrast to MEXT's findings, tech issues including poor sound quality or unstable connections, were the greatest disadvantages in this study. This was followed by students' concerns about their L2 abilities (either not improving very much or having trouble communicating their thoughts).

The issues regarding time difference, the lack of cultural experiences, and making friends were not insignificant, but they were secondary.

Overall, there are three findings based on the trends from the above tables. First, the reasons students listed for studying abroad (Table 5) suggest that the students were more concerned about improving their language skills and overall education than financial factors. Second, the advantages students expressed for participating in OSA (Table 6) were having the chances to communicate or express opinions, opportunities for cultural learning or exchange, and the improvement of speaking skills. Third, the disadvantages students expressed for participating in OSA (Table 7) were mainly tech issues, the students' concerns about their L2 abilities and whether they could improve through an OSA.

## **Discussion**

Although interpretation is a highly subjective process, in order to improve OSA programs it is nevertheless possible to gain useful insight from the data regarding course duration trends, positive utterances, and negative tones.

First, beginning with the results regarding the course duration and host countries, students preferred courses shorter in duration. For example, 58 of 75 of the students (about 77%) opted for courses that do not exceed one month. This might be attributed to the types of courses offered by partner universities. Other factors to consider are the costs and risks. That is, since most university course fees worldwide did not change despite the shift to online learning, some students may have thought that the cost-performance of a long-term OSA was not worth the investment. The associated risk is investing in an unsatisfactory or poorly prepared and executed online course for a whole semester or even a year. Long-term courses based in countries with large time differences might be unappealing for some students. These findings might reflect why short-term courses in Australian and South Korean universities were popular. However, since many students expressed a desire to interact with and learn from "native [English] speakers," this was possibly a key factor contributing to the large number of OSA course enrolments in universities based in Anglosphere countries. These findings might suggest that short-term OSA programs might be suitable as a "trial" before committing to a long-term study abroad program. From a logistic perspective, running these courses during semester breaks in Japan might be an attractive option for students with financial difficulties or willing to improve their language skills while being based in Japan. If this assumption is true, program coordinators might consider how to enhance their short-term programs to make the investment in long term programs more appealing.

A second finding was found based on the corpus-based discourse analysis from the types of nouns, verbs and adjectives students used. For instance, nouns such as "lessons", "study abroad", "English", "online", and "participation" had the greatest frequency. Given the content of the testimonials, these findings can be expected. The emphasis on English as opposed to Chinese, Korean or other languages used in the Asia-Pacific region might be attributed to Japan's ongoing association with the English language being a global lingua franca. Another point to consider is that the majority (two thirds) of the students took courses based in Anglophone countries. When considering verb frequency, words such as "can", "think", "speak", "feel", and "learn" occurred the most. Because students used these verbs often, it is possible to

infer that the students held positive attitudes towards improving their communication skills. The word “can”, for example, topped the list and might indicate either a possibility or an ability. In any case, it can be considered in a positive light. Likewise, the most frequently used adjectives, “good”, “many”, and “fun” also have positive connotations. Although “many” can have negative connotations, as evidenced in the co-occurrence findings, it was often paired with “chances to speak”. Overall, results from the corpus-based discourse analysis suggest that OSA is generally viewed in a favorable light and may suggest it has the potential to foster beneficial or positive learning experiences.

A third finding was that although words with a positive connotation occurred more frequently, there was a higher ratio of sentences that had a negative tone. In fact, this ratio was nearly double the positive utterances and might suggest some dissatisfaction or disappointment associated with OSA experiences. For instance, sadness was the greatest emotional mood of the corpus (79.5%) compared to joy at 59.5%. Therefore, OSA program coordinators might want to consider comments with positive connotations as well as those with negative tones in order to improve their courses.

As highlighted in the results from the study’s sample, the greatest advantages of OSA courses are the chances to communicate or express opinions; opportunities for cultural learning or exchange; and the improvement of speaking skills. Thinking about these findings in the context of a pandemic, it makes sense. Students were stuck at home and isolated for the most part of the year, SA seemed like a long-shot or near impossible, so having the opportunity to at least communicate with anyone abroad, experience cultural exchange, and even make friends was probably refreshing and even therapeutic. For the students to overlook factors like cost-performance and convenience, reveals a lot about their motivations— they clearly wanted to improve their L2 skills and explore another culture regardless of the means or cost. As one respondent who joined a program at Australia’s Monash University noted:

In spite of the remote nature of the class, I was able to enjoy and concentrate on the learning process. I could also participate in club activities with local Monash University students and in the Monash University Japan Club (MJC), which is a kind of Japan-loving club. It was a great experience for me to introduce Japanese culture in English and to teach Japanese in English. It was such a fulfilling cross-cultural exchange experience that I could hardly believe I was home. (Fujita, 2020)

While some students reported positive experiences, tech issues such as poor sound quality or unstable connections were perceived as major disadvantages. When classes are disrupted or cancelled due to poor connectivity or sound, as full fee-paying students, this kind of reaction is within reason. Interestingly, and in contrast to MEXT’s findings, the issues regarding time differences, the lack of cultural experiences, and making friends were not insignificant, but they were secondary. In fact, the second most cited disadvantage in this study’s sample was related to the students’ concerns about their L2 abilities (either not improving very much or having trouble communicating their thoughts). This once again highlights that the students who gave OSA a chance were possibly highly motivated and determined to improve their L2 skills before either doing a real study abroad program or before it was too late. Another possible factor contributing to their concerns might have been that some students had high hopes or

expectations of the OSA program and were disappointed in themselves for not improving their English skills. Moreover, it is quite likely that students were ill-prepared for a one-off short course and this was a shocking wake-up call. The disadvantages regarding L2 abilities and tech issues were so prevalent that even concerns about not making friends, inconvenient class times, and the lack of cultural experiences/immersion were not perceived as major disadvantages. An example is the following student who joined an online OSA in the US. They wrote:

I realized that I had inadequate speaking skills. I thought I would join this online study abroad program to find my weaknesses. I realized that in addition to my poor speaking skills, I lacked vocabulary and wasn't used to the speed of native English speakers. I also realized that my lack of confidence in English led to a decline in my communication skills. I feel bad about all the things I did, but I'd like to take it as a positive that I've found my future goals (Okuwaza, 2021)

Although this may appear as a disadvantage or feelings of regret at first, what is important to note is that the student recognized their flaws and became more motivated to improve their skills. What this might overall indicate is that several students came into the courses quite motivated or became even more motivated after the courses when realizing that their L2 skills were not up to scratch. Taking cases like this into account, as a trial before the "real thing," I believe that OSA programs are not perfect simulations of real SA programs, but nevertheless excellent motivational pulls, and humbling experiences for novice learners. Considering the major advantages and disadvantages outlined above, in order for OSA programs to improve student satisfaction levels and the quality of their courses several amendments need to be made. Firstly, fixing any existing or recurrent technical issues is a good start and when classes are cancelled due to such trouble, arrange make-up lessons to compensate for the inconvenience. Secondly, creating and emphasizing lesson objectives and can-dos, while scaffolding each task to ensure students achieve those goals might mitigate students' concerns/disappointment regarding their fluency or lack of improvement. Another option is to implement a "buddy" system or tandem partner opportunities to ensure that students have more opportunities to communicate outside of class (in lieu of the experience of cultural immersion). Under the circumstances of an unprecedented pandemic and the sudden shift to online learning, it was inevitable that some lessons or courses were poorly prepared or inadequately executed. However, now that students and instructors alike have grown relatively accustomed to some level of online learning and most instructors have some experience of doing it, customizing and preparing OSA courses to somewhat simulate a real SA experience can arguably be achieved with some success.

### **Limitations**

Although the findings from this study provide some insight into the advantages and disadvantages of OSA and whether students can improve their L2 abilities or participate in cultural experiences through online learning, there are some major limitations to this study that ought to be acknowledged. First, the data from this report was interpreted subjectively.

Explanations of the data might be explained differently if there were additional authors. Furthermore, given the small sample size, it is difficult to make general inferences about OSA trends and attitudes towards it. In addition to the small sample size, the timespan of the testimonial samples was between 2020 and early 2022. Due to this, any testimonials published thereafter have not been taken into account. It is likely that programs have improved since the beginning of the pandemic. In order to paint a more accurate picture of OSA trends a much larger sample size combined with follow-up or longitudinal studies would be optimal. Finally, the use of multiple raters to review and interpret the data is essential to mitigate possible bias that may occur.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to ascertain the advantages and disadvantages of OSA programs based on student testimonial data and to identify important aspects that program coordinators might need to improve. The findings from the discourse analysis of 75 OSA testimonials revealed that although OSA programs are not exactly ideal due to time differences and the lack of cultural immersion, the smaller class sizes provided students with more opportunities to speak up and interact with others. Furthermore, students reported that not only did their language skills improve, but the programs fostered cultural learning or opportunities for cultural exchange.

Despite the unfavorable perceptions of OSA, another survey with 37 private university students in Tokyo similarly found that the overall level of satisfaction for OSA participants was 100%, with 35% reporting to be “very satisfied,” while the remaining 65% were “satisfied” (University of the Sacred Heart, 2022, p.5). An overwhelming 97% of the participants stated that they joined the programs to improve their L2 abilities (2022, p.5). Although debatable, this might reinforce the idea that students who attempt OSA programs are perhaps highly motivated and more determined to improve their L2 skills by whatever means possible. In any case, although such OSA programs are hardly substitutes for the real thing due to lack of cultural experiences or immersion, the small class sizes provide students with greater opportunities to speak up and interact with other students. This reflects the “disappointment” and “joy” findings in the sentiment analysis. That is, students were dejected about not being able to go abroad but were happy to be given the chance to interact and exchange ideas with others in a simulated SA context. A report published by Ritsumeikan University in late 2021 similarly argued that:

While some students insist on going abroad, others are choosing to ‘do what they can’ by studying abroad online. This kind of ‘transitional instability’ is something that those of us in the working world also face. Some people may argue that study abroad is not study abroad unless you visit a foreign country, and it goes without saying that in-country experience is invaluable. However, taking a stance of proactively adopting new values in step with the changing times is what will create the new values of the post-COVID era. (The Five Value Propositions, 2021)

Naturally, students participating in OSA programs may feel disappointed and encounter struggles regarding language barriers or their own inadequacies, but I argue that this becomes

a motivational pull for them to either dedicate more time and effort to their language learning or to prepare themselves for future SA programs or trips abroad. Nevertheless, the personal interpretation from the data in this study suggests that OSA programs can offer opportunities for students who are financially and or logistically challenged to have a last chance to study abroad before entering the workforce.

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## Appendix

**Figure 2** *Word Frequency Results [Word Cloud]*



Figure 3 Cooccurrence Cluster Map

