Lessons From Japanese Family Homestays

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Introduction

A dramatic increase in the numbers of students undertaking in-country exchange programmes between Australia and Japan has occurred over the last few decades. These exchange programmes are normally based on formal agreements between institutions. Most exchanges are organised by secondary schools, universities, government bodies and private organisations such as Rotary. Even primary school pupils have had opportunities to participate in exchanges or study tours in recent years.

Student exchange programmes are generally assumed to be an effective way to develop international competencies for students.[1] Furthermore, it is commonly believed that the best way to learn foreign languages is to immerse oneself in the language and culture of that language targeted[2] However, while the beneficial effects of time spent overseas are generally assumed, it is still not yet fully understood whether learners really acquire linguistic and socio-cultural competence, or how it occurs, while on exchange programmes.

Participants in student exchanges usually stay with one or more families during their time in-country. Even when there are choices (e.g. dormitory or shared units for university students), a homestay is generally acknowledged as the best option if students are to be immersed in the language and culture of the country.[3] Indeed, most students surveyed in a study conducted by Hashimoto considered their host families to be the most or second most helpful factor in their language acquisition.[4]

I have a similar view on the value of homestay when learning both a target language and a culture. This belief stems from my own experience as a learner and as an educator who has observed numerous students. I had a three-week homestay with a family in the United States of America when I was 16. In Australia, I had informal homestay opportunities because I lived mostly in an on-campus dormitory during my one-year exchange as an undergraduate. Over recent years, I have been informally talking to students who experienced homestays in Japan. They report not only a great time, but also a genuine belief that the host family experience had accelerated their understanding of both Japanese language and, in particular, culture. As I reflected on all these stories,

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[1] Nelson, 'Engaging the world through education', p. 25.
[2] Huebner, 'The effects of overseas language programmes', p. 171.
[3] Campbell, 'home(stay)', pp. 109-110.
[4] Hashimoto, 'Language acquisition', p. 211-212. In this survey, the cultural component was not asked explicitly.

I became curious as to the nature of the claimed cultural experience. It felt necessary to systematically examine exactly what it was that students gained or more broadly experienced during even short homestays.

The present study describes some aspects of the intercultural experiences that emerged during homestays with Japanese families. This was based on triangulated data collected from two groups of undergraduate students. I acknowledge the limitation of the study as the sample is restricted to 12 students. However, this is the beginning of my PhD project, in which I intend to investigate the effects of short exchange visits to Japan on learner's linguistic and non-linguistic development.[5] It is intended that the future data collection will be enhanced. This study highlights the two themes of 'food matters' and 'gift-giving' that emerged in this initial investigation.

Previous Studies

A body of research on issues around exchange or study abroad programmes has developed in recent years. A perusal of the relevant literature indicates that it can be divided into two broad strands: 1) studies examining the impact or outcomes of programmes on students' growth or development; and 2) studies focusing on various factors that affect students' decisions on whether or not to participate in exchange. This section outlines previous studies in the first outcome group as they are more directly relevant to the present study.

Both the study by Clyne and Rizvi[6] and the study by Marriott and Enomoto[7] encapsulate overall outcomes of student exchanges. The former study was based on questionnaires collected from former undergraduate exchange students. The nominated outcomes included 'increased self-confidence and maturity', 'an appreciation and under-standing of other cultures' and 'an international network of friends'.[8] It should be noted, however, that most went to the USA and Europe, while those who went to Asia were relatively few in Clyne and Rizvi's study.

On the other hand, the latter study examined students who went on secondary exchanges in Japan. This study drew upon data gathered from a national survey as well as information gleaned from interviews with a sample of 19 students. It categorised some outcomes as 'socio-psychological gains', others as 'cultural enrichment' and yet others as 'gains in communicative competence'. Marriott and Enomoto also underscored the view that participation in an exchange programme favourably influences students' subsequent

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[5] I am currently in the process of honing the research questions for my PhD proposal. Any suggestions or comments are appreciated to m.parry@qut.edu.au.
[6] Clyne and Rizvi, 'Outcomes of student exchange'.
[7] Marriott and Enomoto, 'Secondary exchanges with Japan'.
[8] For example, see Freed, 'Assessing the linguistic impact', pp. 153-158, for a list of studies; Freed, 'What makes us think'; Lafford, 'Getting into, through and out'; Matsumura, 'Learning the rules'.

continuation of Japanese language study.[9]

Meanwhile, various other studies across different target languages focused on specific aspects among potential outcomes of exchanges.[10] The varying scope included 'improvement in fluency', 'acquisition of specific morphemes' and 'changes in communication strategies'.

Regarding learners of Japanese, Huebner's study was a comparison between groups of total beginners studying in Japan and in the USA. The acquisition of a highly important socio-linguistic aspect, politeness, was investigated by both Marriott[11] and Siegal.[12] Hashimoto's case study of an Australian student studying in Japan describes in detail how the Japanese host family can be a source of linguistic acquisition by the use of natural recordings of interactions.[13] On the other hand, Hashimoto's more recent study,[14] through in-depth interviews, highlighted cultural identity issues by showing how undergraduates better recognised Australia's multicultural aspects after a year- or semester-long exchange in Japan. Finally, students' processes of adaptation to Japanese culture were the focus in Okazaki-Luff's study.[15] Based on survey results from former Rotary exchange students and supplemented by some interviews, this study describes the students' evaluation of difficulties as well as positive aspects experienced during their time in Japan.

Findings in all these studies captured exchange experiences from various angles and suggested that studying abroad, whether at beginner, intermediate or advanced level, somewhat positively impacted students' development in some ways.

Implications From Previous Studies

A review of the literature shows that diverse research has been undertaken, but there is still a paucity of research into students undertaking exchange to or from the Australia–Pacific region.[16] As Marriott pointed out, studies on the evaluation of outcomes are vital if policy makers, educationalists and administrators are to properly plan exchange and study programmes.[17] Another point that emerged from the literature review was that most studies concerned exchanges of one or two semesters. Research into shorter programmes, despite being more accessible for many students, seemed to be lacking.[18]

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[9] Marriott and Enomoto, p. 77.
[10] For example, see Freed, 'Assessing the linguistic impact', pp. 153-158, for a list of studies; Freed, 'What makes us think'; Lafford, 'Getting into, through and out'; Matsumura, 'Learning the rules'.
[11] Marriott, 'The acquisition of politeness'.
[12] Siegal, 'Individual differences'.
[13] Hashimoto, 'Language acquisition'.
[14] Hashimoto, 'The impact of study abroad'.
[15] Okazaki-Luff, 'The adjustment of Australian exchange students'.
[16] Daly et al., 'Comparative predictions', p. 3.
[17] Marriott , 'Changing trends', p. 70.
[18] Exceptions include Bodycott and Crew, 'Language and Cultural Immersion'; and Parry, 'Short exchange to Japan'.

Background on the Sonoda Short Exchange Programme

The Sonoda programme allows six undergraduate students studying Japanese at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) to go to Japan for five weeks over the Christmas holidays and study at the Sonoda Women's University near Osaka. The programme is offered each year and has been running since 1992. Although Sonoda is a Women's University, male students are also eligible to apply.

The programme incorporates 30 hours of Japanese language tuition, homestay with two families, school visits and cultural trips.[19] According to Marriott's categorisation of exchange and study abroad programmes, the Sonoda programme belongs to the 'Limited Exposure' category,[20] allowing participants to experience limited exposure to the host language, culture and society.

Profile of the 12 students

The subjects of this study were 12 undergraduate students who participated in the programmes run over the Christmas holidays in 2004–05 and 2005–06. They were selected from a total of 23 applicants. The selection criteria included their interview performance, their grade point average (GPA), their likely benefit from the programme and their potential diplomatic abilities. Ten participants were females and two were males, with ages ranging from 18 to 25 years. The average age was 20.1 years. Participants were of four nationalities and five were international students.[21] Three students had just finished their first year of university, five were in second year and four were in third year.[22]

Regarding their Japanese proficiency level, ten students had just successfully completed Japanese 4 at QUT (approximately equivalent to Level 3 in the Japanese Language Proficiency Test) and two had just successfully completed Japanese 6 (equivalent to Level 2 in the proficiency test). Most students had never been to Japan before, but three had been on a previous three-week trip.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to capture each student's experience. This approach offers intricate details of phenomena difficult to convey with quantitative methods, captures the individual's point of view and makes the world of life experience directly

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[19] This programme is partly funded by the Japan-Oceania Society for Cultural Exchanges.
[20] Marriott , 'Changing trends', pp.63-69.
[21] The group consisted of seven Australians, three Taiwanese, one Bruneian and one Malaysian.
[22] Their degree courses varied. They included Arts, Business, Education, Arts and Applied Science, Arts and Business, Arts and Education and Creative Industry and Education.

accessible to the reader.[23] Chen and Isa also contended that conceptual development was better where it was built on a solid understanding of variables inductively and directly generated from a vast array of qualitative data.[24]

Four kinds of data sets were used: 1) diary entries; 2) students' post-trip reflective reports of 1,500–2,000 words; 3) questionnaires; and 4) semi-structured follow-up interviews.

1) Diary entries

Two students from the 2003–04 group voluntarily kept diaries. They commented how helpful the practice was to reflect on their in-country experience. The diary component was then formally introduced to the 2004–05 group. The students were asked to record any experience or observations, whether cultural, linguistic or general. No limits were imposed on the frequency or length of entries. There were, therefore, some individual differences in the quality and quantity.

2) Post-trip reflective essays

Students submitted an essay of 1,500–2,000 words after they returned to Australia. They were asked to reflect on their overall experiences in Japan and to report on their activities, evaluate their experiences, write any observations or discoveries about Japan and Japanese people, give advice to future participants and so on. No strict rule was imposed on the format.

3) Questionnaires

Based on the findings of outcomes in both studies by Clyne and Rizvi and by Marriott and Enomoto, I created a questionnaire. It aimed to allow students to formally evaluate the degree of potential benefits in various categories and to comment on any difficulties or problems encountered.

4) Semi-structured follow-up interviews

For the interview, it was anticipated that being interviewed with peers who shared the exchange might generate more descriptive accounts of their experiences and observations

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[23] Denzin & Lincoln, 'Handbook of qualitative research', p. 10.
[24] Chen and Isa, 'Intercultural communication and cultural learning', p. 78.

than might individual interviews. For this reason, students were divided into groups of three. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted about two hours for each group. They began with general questions that asked the students to assess their time in Japan, followed by more specific questions that sought to clarify and amplify both their spoken responses and written accounts (i.e. diaries, essays and questionnaires) of in-country experience. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the participants' consent.

Thematic analysis was employed in order to interpret the data sets. A theme can be noted in discourse when three criteria are present.[25] These are recurrence, repetition and forcefulness. The two themes of 'food matters' and 'gift-giving' were prominent with most students.

Theme 1: Food Matters

During homestays, students were provided with at least two meals a day, breakfast and dinner, as well as lunch on weekends. Because it was an everyday activity, the topic was naturally brought up repeatedly in various ways by all participants. The experiences were broadly divided into two types: factual discoveries, and observations derived from inter-actions with family members.

Factual discoveries included learning what was eaten on a day-to-day basis (not just sushi) and how to use chopsticks. The participants all commented that homestay enabled them to observe and learn what and how Japanese people ate in real life on a daily basis. One Australian student said:

> I was a bit concerned about meals with a Japanese family because I don't eat fish much and I thought Japanese people eat fish a lot, well, that's what textbooks said anyway. My host family served many meat dishes like *butadon*… they were all different from what I am used to but they were surprisingly nice. It was good to learn what they really eat in everyday life.

This is an example of factual learning though it is necessary to acknowledge some diversity among different households.

Meanwhile, students also encountered various interactions with families that forced them to ponder certain Japanese cultural patterns. Cultural patterns are defined by Lusting and Koester as 'shared beliefs, values, and norms that are stable over time and that lead to roughly similar behaviours across similar situations'.[26] They provide a basic

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[25] Owen, 'Interpretive themes'.
[26] Lusting and Koester, 'Intercultural competence', p. 91.

set of standards that guide thought and action in given cultures and they are uncon-sciously experienced as a byproduct of day-to-day activities.[27]

One example of such a situation was when students were questioned about their food preferences. This may sound like a simple question and answer interaction, but it appeared that it became a lengthy interaction at times, as illustrated by the following testimony:

> We often went shopping together for ingredients for dinner. They asked me what I wanted to eat and what I normally eat in Australia. You know, I was prepared to try anything… really, I wanted to. So, I said so but the host mum kept saying something like 'Don't be silly. *Enryo shinaide*. [Literally, do not hesitate.] I will cook what you usually eat.' It was nice of them ... but…

According to this student, this was not a one-off incident. She tried hard to convince the host mother that she was genuinely interested in trying what they usually serve. The negotiation process often continued for considerable time before reaching a final decision or agreement. The student reported her concerns as to whether or not her persistence was considered rude:

> I was really worried if I was not polite. You know Japanese people are such polite peo-ple… this politeness business scared me sometimes. I hope they did not think I was impolite but I wanted to eat what they eat and I did not want them to change because of me. I had to repeat myself to get my message across.

There seems to be at least two dimensions to this experience. First, how do sociolinguistic rules apply? According to a model by Neustupny,[28] a set of sociolinguistic rules should be applied at a contact situation[29] including rules of setting (i.e. where communication takes place) and rules of personnel (i.e. who communicates with whom). Given their relation as both host–guest and temporary family members, the process of determining the best response for the student to make was indeed a complex one.

Second, is it a common practice for host families to offer to adjust their meals? This point was made by Iino, who conducted interviews with Japanese host families. He pointed out in his study that Japanese families who hosted American students lived an 'unusual' or at least a 'different' life from their daily lives during their homestay programme, which affected too the daily meal menu.[30] Zuengler referred to such signifi-cant adjustments as 'overaccommodation'.[31] The extent to which overaccommodation is

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[27] *Ibid.*, p. 91.
[28] Neustupny, 'Communicating with the Japanese'.
[29] *Ibid.*, p.9. It referred to a situation in which members of two or more cultures interact.
[30] Iino, 'Norms of interaction', p. 159.
[31] Zuengler, 'Accommodation in native-nonnative interactions', p. 239.

prevalent is debatable, but it will be useful nonetheless to students to be aware of such a possibility prior to their trips.

It is also worth exploring some comments made among students about the phrase of '*enryo shinaide*'. During the follow-up interviews, a lively discussion was had on the frequent usage of this phrase. Some recalled situations where their host mothers used the phrase repeatedly, typically when continuing to offer foods long after satiation. According to Wierzbicka, an interesting Japanese cultural value is reflected in the word *enryo* (reserve or self-restraint).[32] Fundamentally, it tends to stop people from saying clearly not only what they think, but also what they want.[33] Wierzbicka also contended that the Japanese place a taboo on the direct expression of one's wishes. An assumption that emerges from this theoretical viewpoint is that what one says may not necessarily be the persons' true feelings because of hesitation. While the author has no intention of endorsing a stereotype, the frequent use of the expression is potentially indicative of such assumption.

To summarise, interactions with host families in relation to food matters brought about more than factual observations. While some students seem to have occasionally felt uncertain about their hosts' and their own responses, the interactions simultaneously became enriched opportunities for the students to make some observations on linguistic, pragmatic and cultural aspects.

Theme 2: Gift-Giving

The Japanese are often portrayed as being deeply engaged with gift-giving. Indeed, many Japanese textbooks contain information on the importance of the custom.[34] But, for learners, knowing of culturally important behaviour is one thing and putting complex etiquette into practice is another. Many students voiced the fact that experiencing the cultural aspects firsthand was overwhelming at times. One student summarised a series of events she experienced as follows:

> Although I had brought presents from Australia for all the family members, they all gave me presents in return, and so it would cancel out the presents which I gave them. So, I would buy more presents, only to get more in return as well. This was a very amusing situation.

Similar accounts of events were given by many other students.

What can be gathered from the data is that the students were equipped with

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[32] Wierzbicka, 'Japanese key words', pp. 243-248.
[33] *Ibid*., p. 244.
[34] For example, see Tohsaku, 'Yookoso!', p. 99.

the knowledge on the basic importance of giving gifts. However, the custom of return gift-giving, or *okaeshi*, was not clearly explained or totally understood. Befu referred to gift-giving practices, or *giri* (obligation)[35], in traditional Japan 'as a central motivational value in maintaining the custom' and as 'reciprocity as a principle of interaction'.[36] A concept of 'reciprocity' was exemplified by Japanese conventional gift-giving practice requiring *okaeshi*.[37] The reasons for the practice are complex. For example, Befu explained the emphasis on returning gifts as satisfying the urge to repay the debt derived from *giri*.[38] On the other hand, it was argued that obligation was only a partial interpretation and kimochi (feelings) or a wish to keep good relations may be behind the custom.[39] Clearly, rules of giving and returning gifts in Japan require intricate knowledge. Without an explicit knowledge on these aspects, some students felt confused and uncertain as reflected in comments such as:

> I brought presents because they let me stay in their house. If you return 'thank you' gifts, it loses the point of 'thank you,' doesn't it? When do you stop?

> My host family was very generous. We went shopping together and my host parents bought me lots of stuff... a jumper, gloves, scarf, you know. They were so generous. But, when I looked at the price tag of the jacket, it was so expensive. I brought one from Australia so I had one. So, I said, '*iranai* [I do not want it]' and '*kattewa ikenai* [You should not buy it]'. I didn't want them to waste their money. But, they bought it anyway. I guess I did not mind … I was thankful, but it got to the stage when it was a bit irritating actually. I sort of learnt to try and go with the flow.

It should be noted, however, that many repeatedly used terms such as 'kind' and 'generous' in their stories. This evidenced that these experiences were not perceived in a negative sense. It is also worth noting that comments of confusions mainly came from Australian students. For example, Taiwanese students commented: 'Perhaps we often think and act in the same way as Japanese people'. A possible explanation for this may be the distance between cultural norms. It is likely that the norms to which each student was accustomed differently affected their perceptions towards some characteristics of Japanese gift-giving practices.

To summarise this theme, all the participants were aware of the importance of gift-giving in Japanese culture in theory, but considered theory alone to be insufficient. Perhaps an explicit knowledge of the custom of *okaeshi* would have helped the students to make sense of their experience. While conscious attempts were made to conform to the norm, the extent to which it was practised in real life in Japan was overwhelming at

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[35] For the extensive explanation on the term, see Wierzbicka, 'Japanese key words', p. 254.
[36] Befu, 'Gift-giving', p. 167.
[37] Lebra, 'Japanese patterns of behaviours', p. 96.
[38] Befu, 'Gift-giving', p. 166.
[39] Trias i Valls, 'Wrapped gifts'.

times for many learners. One student commented, 'we never know what this custom is really like until you are in it'. These interactions concerning gift-giving may have been great opportunities for observations through the cultural immersion, but what should be underscored is the requirement of more detailed briefing and follow-up sessions.

Concluding Remarks

This case study examined and described two themes of in-country experiences by undergraduate students from an Australian university during their short homestays with Japanese families in Japan. The study was limited to 12 participants, but multiple data sets enabled an in-depth examination of the experiences. It has shown how the students made some observations on certain cultural patterns through interactions with host families. The well known 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do' principle in intercultural situations was perhaps easier to say than do. The data indicated that the process sometimes entailed uneasiness or puzzlement or amazement.

Whether or not the students understood that the discussed concepts of *enryo, giri* and *kimochi* possibly underlie the customs and cultural values is questionable. While the intercultural experience enabled them to make some observations on hosts' behaviours and languages, it did not automatically lead to understanding and appreciation of cultural values. Therefore, the importance of adequate briefing and reflection sessions must be emphasised in order to maximise the depth of gain in cultural understanding from homestays.

Nonetheless, a reality is that not all the necessary cultural aspects of language use can be teachable because the dynamics of situations often override the normalised ideal culture.[40] Learners can normally confront opportunities for such pragmatic demands only by being immersed in the culture. Hence, it reinforces the claim that homestay with Japanese families does indeed provide learners with rich opportunities to be engaged in meaningful cultural learning. As Neustupny pointed out, studying the Japanese language on its own is not sufficient to communicate with Japanese people. Learning about society and culture is essential for effective cross-cultural communication.[41] Homestay, while a challenge to organise,[42] can play a key role in providing opportunities to learn about the target society and culture. With all stakeholders' constant endeavours, homestay schemes should continue to make a positive contribution to an enhancement of cross-cultural understanding for both countries.

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[40] Iino, 'Norms of interaction', p. 172.
[41] Neustupny, 'Australia and Japan'.
[42] Klepinger, 'The Australian/Japanese homestay programme'.

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