

2406156 Ako Uno EC SO5004 Assessment 1

This Reflective Journal will be based on Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle. According to R., Becker et al. (2018), Gibbs' (1988) model provides strategies for reflection, building on Kolb's (1984) four-stage experiential learning cycle. This reflective model is widely used in nursing and other professional education fields to promote reflection. However, some scholars believe that "a broader, more critically reflective approach is needed" (Finlay, L., 2008).

1. Description

I studied abroad in Wales, UK, for about a year, taking a course in Advocacy at the university. At my home university in Japan, I belong to the Faculty of Cultural Policy, Department of International Culture, where I have studied a wide range of topics including international issues, culture, and languages. Since many students have international backgrounds or are exchange students, I often had opportunities to use

different languages and interact with people from various nationalities in my daily life.

However, the *Advocacy* course I took in Wales was quite different from the subjects I studied in the Department of International Culture. Topics such as welfare for people with disabilities, contemporary society, and politics were areas I encountered for the first time in a formal academic setting after coming to Wales.

I was an exchange student at this university, but I found that there were fewer international students than I had expected, with a majority of local students. I was the only student from Japan, and there were almost no people around me who spoke Japanese. Although there should have been students from my university who had studied at this university in the past, due to the impact of COVID-19 and the challenges of studying abroad in the UK, it seems that no students from my university had studied at this university in the past five years. The professors who had knowledge of the situation from five years ago were not present, and there were no senior students to turn to. My study abroad experience took place in a setting with very few Japanese people, and even fewer Asians.

The main purposes of my study abroad experience were to earn academic credits at the host university and to improve my English language skills. Throughout the year, my key experiences included attending classes alongside local students and living in a shared

university residence with other international students.

In the dormitory, I lived with a total of seven students: three exchange students from the United States, one from Canada, and two local students from the UK. None of my flatmates were enrolled in the same course as me; each of them was studying in a different academic field.

One particularly memorable aspect of my experience was noticing various differences between Japanese and British approaches—both in academic settings and in daily life. The way classes were conducted in the UK was notably different from the typical Japanese style; there was much more active participation, and students were often expected to express their own opinions clearly.

In our shared living environment as well, I frequently encountered differences from Japan—not only in terms of having to communicate in English, but also in areas such as food culture and daily routines.

2. Feelings

With little experience of traveling abroad and no prior experience of living alone in a foreign country, I felt a profound sense of loneliness when I first arrived in the UK and became acutely aware of being a minority. According to Strombom (2023), students

studying abroad may experience feelings of isolation due to the lack of support from friends and family in their home country, and such emotions are considered relatively common.

When I was in Japan, I was filled with a sense of challenge and optimism, and I now realize that I was under the illusion that everything would go smoothly once I started my life in the UK. In reality, I had to build relationships and engage in academic work from scratch, without the support of family or friends. English is my second language, and since I had few opportunities to speak it in Japan, I was afraid of making mistakes in front of others. Furthermore, I often felt emotionally unsettled due to the anxiety of not having anyone to consult in my native language when I faced difficulties.

In my first classes as a study-abroad student, everything was different from what I had experienced in Japan. I had to comprehend the course content entirely in a foreign language, and I quickly realized that most of the other students were not there to learn English. This made me feel very anxious about my future life and studies in the UK. Strombom (2023) also states that culture shock is defined as the “sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation.” It can be assumed that being continuously exposed to a new environment led to feelings of confusion and anxiety.

As I had never written an academic paper in a foreign language before, I was filled with anxiety about whether I would be able to achieve one of my goals—to earn academic credits at a university overseas. However, as I gradually became more accustomed to the classes and began to understand English better, I felt an even stronger desire to improve my speaking skills before returning home. This motivated me to take a more proactive approach to independent English study.

As my study abroad experience progressed and the level of the classes increased, I found that expressing my own opinions and participating in discussions became increasingly important. Comparing my language skills with those of other students made me realize how challenging language learning truly is, and at times, this left me feeling somewhat discouraged. While understanding the course content itself was difficult, what I struggled with even more was formulating my own thoughts and expressing them in a foreign language. I often felt frustrated and disappointed with my inability to do so.

Moreover, because speaking up in class made me feel like a more active participant and a member of the learning community, I sometimes experienced a sense of isolation when I was unable to express myself effectively in English.

However, whenever I was able to express my opinions during class, open up even a

little to my classmates, or take the initiative to speak in a new class, I began to feel more confident in both myself and my English abilities. In particular, when I spoke up in class—even if my grammar or expressions were not perfect—the positive reactions I received from teachers and classmates, such as smiles and respectful responses, became a great source of encouragement for me.

At the beginning of my study abroad experience, I held the assumption that simply going abroad would naturally make me a more outgoing person. However, as I began living in the UK, I came to realize that no matter where I am, I remain fundamentally the same person—and that change requires active effort. As a result, I came to realize the importance of taking initiative and made a conscious effort to be more proactive throughout my study abroad experience.

I first moved into the dormitory, I hoped to build friendly relationships with my flatmates, most of whom I was meeting for the first time. I believed that making friends would enrich my study abroad experience, and I approached each opportunity with an open mindset, determined to accept every invitation and try new things in order to connect with more people. As I gradually made friends throughout my time abroad, I began to gain confidence and feel that my English was improving. Because I always accepted invitations to go out and socialize, my circle of friends naturally expanded, which further

boosted my confidence.

At first, speaking English required a lot of energy and courage, but over time, my focus shifted from how to speak to what I wanted to express. I came to see English more as a tool for communication rather than a barrier. In the beginning, I often felt lonely and isolated, especially since it was a long-term program with no clear end in sight. However, as I became more comfortable with daily life and began spending time with friends—talking, going out, and sharing experiences—I started to feel like a part of the community. The sense of loneliness that had weighed heavily on me at first gradually faded.

3. Evaluation

One of the positive aspects of my study abroad experience was that living alone in a foreign country allowed me to develop a stronger sense of responsibility and improved my ability to solve problems independently. According to Gan and Kang (2022), based on the work of Anderson et al. (2006), study abroad experiences can enhance not only language proficiency but also other skills such as problem-solving, independence, flexibility, and a sense of responsibility. Through this experience, my increased sense of independence and responsibility encouraged me to take more initiative, engage more actively in conversations, and cultivate a greater willingness to take on new challenges.

Living alone overseas without family or friends who spoke my native language made interpersonal communication essential for everyday life. This meant I had to take the initiative to ask questions and start conversations in English. This shift in attitude was also evident in my interactions with fellow exchange students in the dormitory. Since there were rules we needed to follow—such as those regarding shared kitchen usage, trash disposal, and laundry—discussing and resolving issues together became a regular part of communal life. Being in an unfamiliar environment, where I initially understood very little, naturally forced me to engage in conversations and become more proactive.

At the beginning of my stay, I rarely spoke during class and struggled to express my thoughts. However, by the end of the program, I found myself more capable of forming and sharing my opinions and even asking questions during lectures. I also became more comfortable initiating conversations with new classmates. The environment demanded active participation, which ultimately pushed me to grow.

Another positive aspect was that I accepted every invitation from my friends and actively explored new places with them, allowing me to accumulate a wide range of experiences. As a result, we developed mutual support systems, where we helped each

other solve problems or discussed issues when necessary. This sense of community prevented feelings of isolation and allowed me to feel more connected, even in a foreign country. Expanding my social circle also led to a wider range of activities and experiences that I would not have encountered on my own. For instance, using public transportation or visiting shops and tourist attractions exposed me to different types of English, which contributed to the development of my language skills.

The frustration and regret I felt from not being able to express myself freely in class became a motivating factor for further independent English study. Spending more time with friends and building broader social networks naturally increased the amount of time I spent speaking English. Over time, I became more comfortable discussing a variety of topics. In particular, I had difficulty with listening comprehension at the beginning of my stay, but through continued interaction and exposure to English, I gradually developed the ability to understand it more naturally. In this way, becoming more proactive led to new friendships, which in turn provided more opportunities for communication and ultimately improved my English speaking skills.

However, one negative aspect of my experience was that I was not always able to participate actively in class discussions. Compared to my university in Japan, classes at

the host university encouraged much more student input, which provided opportunities for me to speak English in a more logical and public way. Despite this, I often failed to take full advantage of these opportunities.

Another downside was that, especially in the early stages of my stay, I tended to isolate myself in my room and struggled to initiate conversations with my flatmates. I often couldn't understand what they were saying, which made it difficult to join in conversations. This experience made me realize that I was not adequately prepared linguistically before my departure.

4. Analysis

Development of Responsibility and Independence

According to a 2017 survey conducted by the Institute of International Education (IIE), studying abroad contributes significantly to the development of intercultural competence, curiosity, flexibility and adaptability, self-confidence, and self-awareness. In addition, improvements in interpersonal and problem-solving skills have also been observed. Furthermore, Jon and Fry (2021) state that many former study abroad participants reported becoming more actively engaged in promoting the global common good as a result of their experiences abroad.

Transformative learning is also believed to play a role in enhancing autonomy and proactiveness. Mezirow (2008) describes transformative learning as a process through which problematic frames of reference are transformed into ones that are more reflective and emotionally receptive to change. He explains that our frames of reference, shaped by preconceptions, often determine our behavior and lead us to reject new ideas that do not align with those preconceptions. In other words, transformative learning involves becoming aware of such preconceptions and engaging in self-reflection to become more open to change. Therefore, it can be assumed that living alone in a foreign country—an unfamiliar environment without the support of family or friends—encouraged students to reflect on and reconsider their previously passive attitudes. This process naturally fostered a sense of responsibility and problem-solving skills, ultimately promoting personal growth.

Swinger (1985, pp. 9–11) lists ten benefits of studying abroad, one of which is personal flexibility. This refers to the improved ability to accept different lifestyles, approaches to problem-solving, cultural perceptions of time, and family structures through the experience of living abroad (Swinger, 1985, pp. 9–11). Additionally, according to Kelley and Meyers (1995), students who experienced high levels of stress during the transition period and in interactions with the host culture, but nevertheless remained in the program,

achieved the greatest personal growth. In short, those who lived in a foreign country for an extended period, enduring the stress of cultural and linguistic differences, experienced significant personal development, particularly in problem-solving and intercultural understanding.

Growth of Communication Skills in an Intercultural Environment

One significant factor contributing to the development of communication skills through studying abroad is the necessity of overcoming language and cultural differences. Living without the use of one's native language was a completely new experience, and it became essential to actively engage in conversation in order to live cooperatively with flatmates.

According to Rayyan, Zidouni, Abusalim, and Alghazo (2023), “*The concept of self-efficacy was introduced by Bandura (1977),*” and it is defined as an individual's belief in their ability to organize and execute the actions required to achieve specific tasks. Self-efficacy is considered highly important in effective communication. During study abroad experiences, exposure to different cultures and languages can enhance self-efficacy, which in turn can lead to improvements in language proficiency and the ability to build relationships across cultures (Rayyan, Zidouni, Abusalim, & Alghazo, 2023).

In intercultural environments such as study abroad, language barriers can become

obstacles to communication. However, in shared living situations, it becomes necessary to express opinions and engage in mutual understanding. Therefore, it can be argued that life in such environments naturally encouraged active dialogue, contributing to an increase in self-efficacy. Rayyan et al. (2023) also state that as self-efficacy increases, students develop problem-solving skills and learn how to interact as members of society.

In other words, being placed in an environment where communication was unavoidable fostered proactive problem-solving and independence, and likely increased the motivation to overcome challenges associated with communicating in English.

Changes in Friendships and Perspectives on Life

Through studying abroad, building friendships with people from diverse cultural backgrounds likely led to a shift in intercultural understanding and personal values, ultimately transforming one's perspective on life. According to Jon and Fry (2021), many individuals who studied abroad became aware of alternative, non-materialistic ways of life and began to reconsider the meaning of life and their own lifestyles. They also report that participants realized, through exposure to other cultures, that there is not just one correct way of doing things.

Similarly, Couper (2001) notes a direct correlation between self-awareness and

cultural awareness, emphasizing that students learned a great deal about themselves during their time abroad, and that both the experiences of traveling and returning home served as opportunities for growth. Thus, encountering diverse cultures and ways of life through study abroad and relationships with people from different backgrounds likely led to changes in personal values and worldviews after returning home.

Moreover, Luo (2024) states that students who are extroverted, confident, and open to learning in new environments tend to experience faster academic development. In contrast, emotionally reactive and anxious individuals are likely to absorb less input (Luo, 2024). At the beginning of the study abroad experience, feelings of loneliness and anxiety due to having no friends made it difficult to speak English confidently, especially when grammatical errors were involved. However, as friendships were formed, the unfamiliar environment gradually transformed into one of comfort and emotional safety, rather than stress. This sense of security is believed to have supported further personal growth.

According to Gong, Cheung, Wang, and Huang (2012), *psychological safety* encourages learning behaviors such as trial and error or making improvements, as it helps reduce excessive anxiety caused by fear of negative responses from others. Additionally, Edmondson (1999) and Leana and Van Buren (1999) argue that when trust is established, individuals are more likely to engage in creative activities that involve risks, as they have

positive expectations that others will not exploit their weaknesses even in case of failure.

In other words, the sense of security fostered through building trusting friendships during the study abroad experience may have helped reduce the fear of making mistakes while speaking English. This led to increased extroversion and created more opportunities for growth. Moreover, the absence of negative responses or judgment when making grammatical errors or struggling to speak English further reinforced this psychological safety, encouraging greater proactiveness and autonomy.

Process of Improving English Proficiency

The formation of new friendships and the development of close relationships during the study abroad experience likely created a safe and supportive environment, which in turn increased opportunities to speak English.

Yue and Lu (2022) explain Self-Determination Theory, referencing Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, and Lynch (2007), who argue that when students believe studying abroad will benefit their future careers, their decision to go abroad is based on identified motivation. According to Yue and Lu (2022), identified motivation can be categorized into extrinsic regulation and introjected regulation. The latter refers to actions driven by feelings of guilt, shame, or a desire to meet others' expectations. While the decision to

study abroad in this case was made voluntarily, it is undeniable that expectations from family and friends played a role.

Additionally, feelings of frustration and regret about being unable to freely express opinions in class may have led to more focused efforts in independent English study and attempts to formulate thoughts for class discussion. Considering this, it is plausible that the inability to speak up despite studying abroad, along with the lack of visible progress in English, led to guilt toward family and shame about one's language skills, which then motivated efforts to improve through personal study and classroom participation.

Hernández (2010) notes that many researchers emphasize frequent and sustained interaction as a key predictor of language development in study abroad settings, particularly highlighting that contact with native speakers contributes significantly to language improvement. Therefore, living with and interacting frequently with native English speakers likely played an important role in enhancing language skills.

Hernández (2010) also points out that students who had limited interaction with locals during their study abroad showed little language improvement. In the early stages of the experience, feelings of anxiety led to spending much time alone in the room and minimal interaction with local people. This suggests that without proactive engagement with native speakers, language development might not have occurred. However, Magnan and

Back (2007) found that the quantity of social interaction did not predict speaking ability, and Freed (1990) reported no relationship between motivation, interaction with native speakers, and speaking proficiency. These findings imply that living with friends or interacting with native speakers does not necessarily lead to improved language skills.

Additionally, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994, p. 284) define Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety as “the classroom related apprehension and stress,” especially during foreign language tasks such as speaking. According to Merve Savaşçı (2014), “reluctance to speak English” is a commonly observed issue among learners in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. Savaşçı identifies a lack of self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, and cultural background as key reasons for students’ reluctance to speak. These factors may have contributed to the difficulty in speaking up in class during the study abroad experience.

Savaşçı (2014) also emphasizes that the causes of learners’ reluctance to speak English vary from person to person. In this case, classes were attended alongside native English speakers, with few, if any, other international students or learners for whom English was a second language. This absence of peers in a similar linguistic situation may have increased anxiety about making mistakes and contributed to reluctance in speaking English.

5. Conclusion

Through this study abroad experience, I came to realize how passive I had been in the past. While a few people showed interest in my identity as a Japanese student or naturally became friends with me, the majority treated me equally and without special attention. Although I view this as a positive aspect, it also highlighted the reality that relationships and language skills do not develop unless I take initiative myself. I had believed that simply going abroad would make me more outgoing, but I quickly realized how naive that assumption was. In a foreign country, without the support of family and friends, I could only assert myself by taking action.

However, due to the language and cultural differences, I often felt anxious and isolated, and I was not able to express myself as freely as I could in my home country. Even so, by facing those challenges and making efforts to become more proactive, I gradually gained confidence—especially as I noticed improvements in my English-speaking ability. This process also helped me develop perseverance and problem-solving skills.

Particularly meaningful moments included being able to express my opinions in class and expanding my social circle through active engagement, which led to the formation of trusting friendships. These experiences enhanced my sense of psychological safety and

self-efficacy. I came to understand that these were not merely linguistic issues, but were deeply connected to cultural values and interpersonal relationships. Through this process, I developed the ability to respond with cultural awareness and sensitivity.

In this way, I gradually learned how to build relationships, engage in academic discussions, and live cooperatively within a different cultural environment. My study abroad experience, therefore, was not limited to improving my language proficiency; it also became a valuable opportunity to cultivate intercultural adaptability, autonomy, and problem-solving skills—abilities that will continue to be useful throughout my life.

6. Action Plan

Through this study abroad experience, I realized that I tend to take a passive attitude and struggle to be proactive in unfamiliar environments. I also became aware that I had not adequately prepared for the linguistic and cultural barriers I would face. I came to understand that values, perspectives, and relationships can only be changed through taking initiative and actively engaging with others, rather than relying on the environment alone. Therefore, I believe it is essential to adopt a more proactive attitude.

This experience highlighted not only the difficulties I faced in expressing myself in English, but also the challenges related to assertiveness and a lack of self-efficacy. Based

on these reflections, I have developed the following concrete action plan.

First, to overcome my anxiety about speaking in English and my tendency to remain silent during discussions, I believe it is important to incorporate English into my daily life even after returning from the study abroad program. At my home university, I will be participating in a seminar where most conversations take place in English. In preparation, I plan to organize my opinions on the seminar topics in advance and deepen my understanding of the course content so that I can express myself more confidently. I believe that by making this a habit, I can reduce my fear of speaking in English and participate more actively in discussions.

In addition, I plan to keep an English journal where I record successful experiences in expressing myself. Reflecting on these positive moments will help me build confidence and increase my sense of self-efficacy as well as my language proficiency.

Through studying abroad, I learned that simply changing my environment does not lead to personal growth; true change only comes through my own actions. It is through making decisions and taking initiative that growth becomes possible. Moving forward, I intend to apply this mindset by considering what I can do in each situation and acting on it, regardless of the environment I find myself in.

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