

Incorporating Host Families in Foreign Exchange Learning

Susan E. Caisse
Portland State University

In short-term study abroad programs, teachers can assign activities that extend learning outside the classroom. One framework by Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2010) involves providing host families with interaction tasks, including specific vocabulary, before students arrive. Later, study abroad students are taught relevant vocabulary, which they use in interactions with their host families. Based on this framework, this paper describes how host families in a localized two-week study abroad program act as cultural informants, test audiences and in-class teaching assistants. Insights from this program are described and classroom and programmatic suggestions are given.

Susan Caisse (susancaisse@gmail.com) obtained her MA TESOL degree from Portland State University. She has taught survival English, English for study abroad, and English as a foreign language. Her culminating experience project involved recommendations for English medium instruction during her internship in Spain. She enjoys teaching pronunciation and using technology in the classroom.

Students studying abroad usually look forward to staying with their host families. They hope to integrate into the family and imagine themselves eating meals together, talking frequently and engaging with one another daily (Rodriguez & Chornet-Roses, 2014; Ingram, 2005). They imagine using the host family as a conduit through which to understand this new culture and help them learn the language (Rodriguez & Chornet-Roses, 2014). However, according to Rodriguez & Chornet-Roses, half of students participating in a short-term study abroad program reported that their expectations about their host family were not met. For a variety of reasons, exchange students did not engage with their host families as much as they originally anticipated. The reasons included difficult or conflicting schedules, reticence or discomfort on the part of the host student or family, and student choices (e.g., prioritizing travel over family engagements). When mismatches such as these occur, both language and culture learning can suffer (Freed, 1995; Rivers, 1998; Rodriguez & Chornet-Roses, 2014).

Study abroad program coordinators have a responsibility to carefully match host families and students to ensure that expectations are met on both sides. Teachers can assist students in developing closer relationships with their families through carefully crafted coursework that creates opportunities for interaction and sharing between student and host family (Rodrigues & Chornet-Roses, 2014). At the same time, students may improve their cultural learning and increase their language proficiency through host family interactions. The question then becomes how teachers can best utilize the host families of study abroad students, even those in short-term programs, to improve outcomes and give students a richer and more fulfilling experience.

This paper describes the efforts to enhance the language learning environment of urban middle-class Japanese teenagers studying in a rural setting an hour outside of Portland, Oregon on a short-term two-week study abroad program. It describes excursions students took as part of the program and addresses challenges students faced day-to-day. Five three-hour lessons were spread over two weeks of homestay. Limited by the two-week time frame, activities were created to foster interaction with host families in direct and explicit ways.

Additionally, challenges that led to the current investigations are presented. Secondly, this paper discusses the roles that host families can play: cultural informants who guide students and can help them interpret and make sense of the study abroad experience; test audiences who help study abroad students hone performances and projects by providing needed feedback on language; and teaching assistants who participate during class activities. For each role, suggestions and experiences from the classroom are presented.

Roles of host families

One approach that connects study abroad students and their host families, by Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart (2010), includes a set of procedures that attempt to encourage exchange student and host-family interaction by creating mandatory conversation and interaction tasks that must be performed weekly. Host families are notified in advance of interaction activities. Instructors teach relevant and important vocabulary to students. Students then engage the host family in the task. The next day, the class conducts a discussion in which they compare and contrast the information gathered from the host families. Both the host family and the student are aware that these tasks are mandatory, and the in-class discussions increase the likelihood that students will make time for the interactions. Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart found that

participation in post-interaction discussions was 100%. Because of the need to discuss the interaction tasks with classmates, students were held accountable for their homework (p. 75).

Cultural Informants

Cultural informants can be anyone from the host culture; however, host parents and host siblings are closest to the exchange students and are best placed to act as sources of information for exchange students. The interaction in a daily routine affords many opportunities for exchange students to ask questions or clear up any uncertainties they may have.

The role of the cultural informant (Leroy, 2012) is probably the most traditional of all roles that a host family can play. Leroy defines cultural informants as “partners from the culture that is being observed who are able to shed light on ethnographic questions” (p. 4). Increased intercultural sensitivity as a direct result of the host family and study abroad experience has been heavily documented by Brecht and Ingold (2000), Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2010), and Nagahashi (2013). Host families clearly have a role to play by being comfortable and familiar representatives of local culture. They can discuss a range of topics and may offer a number of perspectives. Students can be tasked with discussing a variety of topics ranging from typical table manners to gun control. The selection of topics should be guided by student age and proficiency level. In their investigation of university study abroad students, Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2010) found that students preferred topics they had the language for and avoided controversial topic that they deemed “difficult” (p. 73).

Practical applications. This is a personal preference, but I suggest that short-term study abroad programs avoid controversial discussion topics such as religion, politics, and women’s rights. Students may not have enough experience to adequately evaluate and discuss such topics from a perspective other than their own. With the students in my class, I asked 14- to 16-year-old students to find three differences and three similarities between table manners in Japan and the United States. Students could also be asked to discuss holidays, such as Christmas, that are celebrated in Japan and US in very different ways. Finding differences and similarities in cultural practices can help students begin thinking about culture. In these discussions, students can begin to see their own culture and may continue to notice it more even after they return home.

Test Audiences

In addition to interaction tasks, teachers often ask students to do performance tasks (e.g., speeches, dialogs, and question sets). Host family members can act as test audiences because there could be a need for technology that the exchange student may not have, or the student may need feedback on an upcoming performance task, such as a speech. Host families can be invaluable in helping create topics, helping students understand differences in register, and helping students polish performances by providing an audience and providing feedback. Zhang & Rahimi (2014) found that both high- and low-anxiety learners requested and valued feedback on oral performance. Therefore, the use of the host family as a test audience may be an effective way to discover and correct errors affecting comprehensibility.

Practical applications. The first day of class, my co-teacher and I showed introductory videos that we made about ourselves, including our names and our hobbies. The videos were subtitled to help students compensate for gaps in listening skills. The exchange students were then asked to go home and create one-minute videos about themselves. They could talk about their natal families, their hobbies, their favorite classes, or their future plans. The only

requirement was that a host family member had to be the videographer. Host students are more likely to view the host family as a lower anxiety-inducing audience than the classroom audience and, therefore, are able to accept feedback more readily from the host family.

After completion of the videos, the students then emailed, texted or brought in their final projects on flash drives. For the students, there was a tremendous amount of language planning involved in these short videos. They were written, practiced, and finally videotaped. The project and the videos were a huge hit with the students and especially with the families. One host mother reported that she learned more about this student in one minute than she had learned about all the previous students from past years combined (host mother, personal communication, August 15, 2015).

Teaching Assistants:

Teaching assistants assist with some element of classroom interaction or classroom management. Utilizing the children of host families as teaching assistants is another way to incorporate the host families.

In many short-term study abroad programs involving children, host children (and more rarely a host parent) will accompany their new host sibling to class and on class excursions. Since most host children are fluent English speakers, in class they are typically positioned around the classroom in order to break up homogeneous language groups and ensure that the target language is used in group work. This is a helpful role because it reduces the use of the L1 among the study abroad students and encourages the use of English in class.

Practical applications. There are additional ways to incorporate the host sibling. These students can be tasked with creating interview questions for the exchange students to ask their host parents. Suggestions from the children in this program included: How did you two meet? What is your favorite thing about your job? What is your hobby? What was different when you were a kid? Because questions are created in advance for students to ask, it frees the study abroad children from their own cultural or behavioral constraints that may prevent them from otherwise asking questions (Knight & Schmidt-Reinhart, 2010).

According to Knight and Schmidt-Reinhart (2010), adult students studying Spanish in Spain and Mexico exhibited the ability to step outside of culturally conditioned behavior in order to complete classroom requirements when they were assigned interaction topics that they would have typically deemed too personal. One student reported, "It made it OK to talk about certain things. I wouldn't just go up and ask them about politics and religion. It was like a safety net because I *had* to ask them. We engaged in conversations that we would not have had otherwise" (p. 75).

Host family children can also be team captains or team advisors. In a game conducted during the Portland program, study abroad students ran to the board in a relay-style race and wrote words from particular categories such as animals, emotions, or colors. The team advisors helped the Japanese exchange students come up with ideas, spell words correctly, and avoid duplication between teams. After a lesson on money and shopping, host children also acted as shopkeepers selling items to the exchange students to practice routine conversations around shopping and using money. In preparation for a visit to a farm, students received a lesson on local fruits and the vocabulary to describe them (e.g., sweet, sour, etc.). Host children were blindfolded and the exchange students tasted the fruit and described it using the newly learned

vocabulary. The host children then had to guess the fruit based solely on the descriptive words used by the exchange students. In preparation for an end-of-program farewell party, host children assisted by conducting video-recorded interviews of exchange students, advising on the comprehensibility of the interviews, and staging and taking photographs during the event. The result was a collaborative video that was impressive, humorous, and a tremendous learning experience for all of the participants. They were all immensely proud of the final product.

Other Considerations

Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2010) found that many university-aged study abroad students did not tell their host families about interaction type homework that they had been assigned because completing it would be difficult. In my context, I found a similar pattern. At a recent farewell party for a short-term study abroad program for Japanese teenagers, I overheard several mothers talking about the various homework assignments that my co-teacher and I had assigned. One host mother reported that she repeatedly asked her Japanese study abroad children if they had homework and was repeatedly told *no* (host mother, personal communication, August 13, 2015).

The host families had been told to expect their students to have homework, but had not been told precisely when it would be assigned or what the assignments would be. One way to prevent this problem in the future would be to have a schedule of activities and homework available at host family orientation night, before the exchange students have arrived. This way, activities can be planned. For example, the evening that the exchange students were asked to talk about table manners, the host mother reported that she was serving spaghetti and it was a mess. She told the students they could talk about table manners the next evening. Had she known in advance of the assignment, she would have prepared a different meal (host mother, personal communication, August 13, 2015). Advanced notification of tasks helps host families plan in advance for activities and meals and whatever else may be necessary to perform the activity.

Conclusion

A study abroad experience is “inherently so powerful, often life-changing, that often there is too little effort invested to make it as rich in outcomes as it could be” (Brecht & Ingold, 2000, p. 37). What this looks like in our students is that cognitively and physically tired teenagers don’t make the extra effort to engage with their host families or other native speakers. Likely it is just hard, but they miss out on benefits provided by interaction and negotiation of meaning (Gass and Mackey, 2007) and the additional motivation (Nagahashi, 2013) that interaction can provide.

As teachers, we can use specific activities designed to help study abroad students and their host families engage in meaningful ways that may pave the way for a richer and more worthwhile study abroad experience. The students benefit from extending learning beyond the confines of the classroom and being able to experience new learning opportunities with increased negotiation and interaction as they more fully utilize the short window of opportunity that they have to learn and use English in authentic contexts with fluent speakers.

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