

# Promoting Intercultural Competence of American University Students at IES Abroad Tokyo Center

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This paper deals with the challenges of managing a study abroad program for American university students, the focus is on the broader objectives of study abroad programs, namely, to enhance the students' so-called "intercultural communicative competence". As the Director of the IES Tokyo Center in the past two years and a non native speaker of Japanese myself, I shall report in this paper the holistic approach and core elements which have been developed in the Center in order to help foster intercultural integration of the students in Japanese society and enhance their intercultural competence from the following aspects: ongoing orientation, Japanese language learning, English taught area studies courses, field placement and seminar in social organization in Japan, housing program, field trips and cultural activities, E-pal program, student health and safety.

**Keywords:** American university students, study abroad, intercultural communicative competence, Japanese language, IES Abroad Tokyo Center

## 1. Aim of this paper

Living and studying abroad is often one of the most exciting experiences in a young person's life. It is a time of tremendous academic and personal growth when young people develop new self-confidence and maturity by meeting the challenges of learning a foreign language and living in a different country. However, once the process has begun, the development of intercultural competence normally involves an on-going and lengthy process, and the students who are studying abroad experience ups and downs as they work to adapt to their new environments and experience the roller-coaster of cross-cultural tran-

sitions. Different students will have different goals and will attain varying degrees of competence. For some, a goal might be to achieve native-like behavior; and for others, it may be to gain acceptance in the host culture.

It is important to clarify that while this paper deals with the challenges of managing a program of teaching Japanese as a foreign language to American university students, the focus is on the broader objectives of the study abroad programs, namely, to enhance the students' so-called "intercultural communicative competence" (ICC or "intercultural competence", as referred to in this paper). The contact with other languages and cultures provides an excellent opportunity to foster the development of intercultural competence. Language learning is at the core of the intercultural growth of the students as it provides a window of insight into the Japanese culture but while the students are learning the Japanese language they are simultaneously learning how to cope with life in unfamiliar surroundings without many of the everyday support systems that they have grown up with.

This paper is written primarily on the basis of my experience as the Director of the Tokyo Center for a little over two years. At the same time, it is also based on my own interaction with the Japanese language and culture during the long period of 32 years that I have lived in Japan as an educator and an official of the United Nations University. I should also add that while growing up in India, I had to cope with more than one Indian language plus English for higher education and work. This experience was further enriched when, working for the United Nations in different parts of the world, I had to learn to cope with other foreign languages, and I began to appreciate the advantages that come from learning a foreign language in understanding cultures other than one's own.

Based on my experience, an attempt is made to review the challenges the American university students face in learning Japanese language and getting acquainted with the Japanese culture.

## 2. Intercultural Competence

Although the term “intercultural competence” is in increasing use today, because it is still a recent notion, there is no consensus yet about what it is. People use this term with various meanings. Some stress global knowledge, others sensitivity, while others stress certain skills. Obviously it is a complex phenomenon with multiple components which may include a variety of characteristics or traits such as flexibility, patience, openness, interest and suspending judgment among others. It also involves the ability to establish and maintain relationships and the ability to communicate and collaborate. The ability to communicate in a second or foreign language is important for the development of intercultural competence. Grappling with another language challenges how one perceives, conceptualizes and expresses oneself, and in the process, it opens the possibility of developing alternative communication strategies on someone else’s terms. A common result is that individuals will modify their initial perspectives and understanding of the world (Fantini 2001; Byram *et al.* 2001; Holliday *et al.* 2004; Byram and Feng 2006).

In a research study on identification and assessment of intercultural competence, also referred to as Adelphi study (Deardorff 2006) that involved US institutions administrators of internationalization strategies and a panel of nationally and internationally-known international experts on a definition and components of intercultural competence, nine definitions of intercultural competence, culled from intercultural literature, were provided to the administrators. The definition deemed most applicable to institutions’ internationalization strategies was one derived from Byram’s work (Byram 1997) on intercultural competence. It was summarized as follows: “Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one’s self. Linguistic competence plays a key role” (ibid 1997). There was even greater breadth of definitions among in-

tercultural experts. Based on the data generated from the study, the top-rated definition was one in which intercultural competence was defined as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Byram and Feng 2006: 232-256).

In order to promote intercultural competence, the providers of study abroad programs face special challenges as they must ensure that while the students are learning a foreign language, they are also exposed to cross-cultural learning experiences through interactions with people in the host country. Past surveys have shown that non-academic elements of a program such as local friends, home stays, travel, and cultural exposure are essential in bringing about a systemic change in the individual’s intrapersonal awareness and intercultural development.

### **3. Background of IES Abroad**

The Institute for the International Education of Students (IES Abroad) is a not-for-profit organization based in Chicago providing students opportunities to study abroad. It is comprised of an academic consortium of more than 175 leading U.S. colleges and universities. The IES Abroad began its programs in Europe in 1950, and now has more than 80 programs in 31 cities around the world. It is dedicated to broadening its global reach and continuing its commitment to offering students outstanding academic options coupled with opportunities for cultural immersion (<https://www.iesabroad.org/IES/home.html>). For this purpose, it has developed the IES MAP for Study Abroad (IES Abroad 2003), which serves as an innovative educational tool for designing and evaluating study abroad programs ([https://www.iesabroad.org/IES/Advisers\\_and\\_Faculty/iesMAP.html](https://www.iesabroad.org/IES/Advisers_and_Faculty/iesMAP.html)).

The language and culture programs offered at the IES Abroad Tokyo Center (hereafter referred to as the Tokyo Center) are described in detail on the website of the IES Abroad ([40](https://www.iesa-</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

broad.org/IES/Programs/Japan/Tokyo/tokyo.html). They are also contained in the annual booklets issued by IES Abroad (IES Abroad 2008). Detailed information about the Japanese Language and Culture Program offered at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) is shown in the annual pamphlet issued by KUIS and in the research reports published by the KUIS Japanese Language and Culture Program (Fan 2006; KUIS Ryugakusei Bekka 2006, 2007).

#### **4. The IES Tokyo Center**

The Tokyo Center has been in existence for nearly a decade, and offers to the American university students a more challenging program as compared to the programs in Europe because of the cultural differences and because the Japanese language is in a completely different group and requires the learning of thousands of Kanji as well as phonetic characters. Japanese language has been reported to be one of the most difficult languages for Americans to learn, according to a survey conducted by the Foreign Service Institute in the US Department of State.

One of the most interesting and exciting features of Japan is that it is fast-changing and modern, yet it is tradition-bound. Through a range of language and cultural studies, the students can explore many aspects of Japanese society, both new and old. Our experience has shown that the classroom study of the Japanese language by itself is not enough and the students need to have a wider variety of opportunities for language immersion through interaction with native speakers and participation in events which are typically Japanese.

The Tokyo Center continually evaluates and reviews its programs in an effort to respond to the wider ranges of learning objectives of the American university students. Traditionally, the semester program in Japan has been the one in which the students split their time between learning Japanese language and taking college-level area study courses in English. From its inception, the Tokyo Center has been

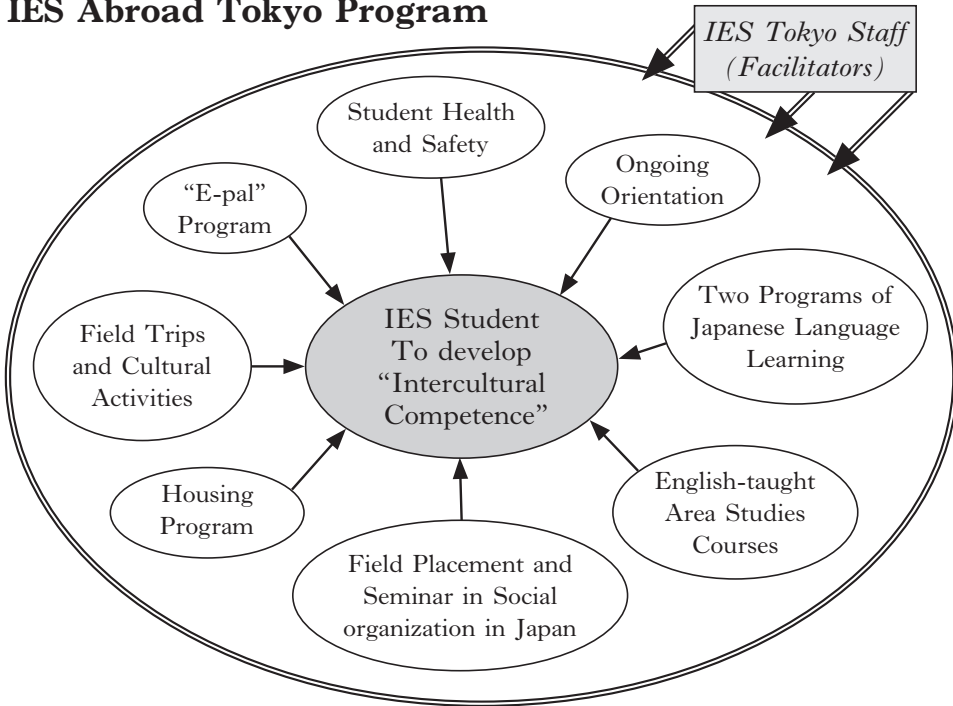
providing a mandatory 6-credit Japanese Society and Culture Program, also referred to as the “Japanese in Context” Program, at KUIS. Subsequently, there were students who wished to study Japanese language more intensively, and with a view to meeting the needs of such students, an additional 6-credit elective course of more comprehensive Japanese language was added at KUIS. After some experience, it became clear that there was a continuous need for such a course, and it was decided to establish a separate comprehensive Japanese Language Program of 12 credits (later reduced to 10 credits) at Meikai University, while continuing the Japanese Society and Culture Program at KUIS. The Japanese language program at Meikai University was started from Fall 2006.

An effective and successful study abroad program is one that helps the students not only in improving their language skills but also enhancing their competence in adjusting to different cultures. In achieving this objective, the Tokyo Center adopts a holistic approach, as is shown in the chart below. The Tokyo Center Manuals for Students provide full details about the academic and non-academic programs of the Tokyo Center which include: rigorous Japanese language programs at two Japanese universities, seven English-taught area studies courses on contemporary issues relating to Japan; field placements, home stays, cultural programs, field trips, and an “E-pal” program and other opportunities that are provided to the students for contacts with Japanese students and native speakers.

The Tokyo Center offers two semester programs: Fall program from end-August to mid-December, and Spring program from end-March to mid-July. Besides these two semester programs, a 6-week Summer Program is held in Tokyo every year during June-July. The Tokyo Center also hosts Customized Programs, which take place during the summer or in January-February.

In the following sections, an explanation is given on how each component illustrated in the chart is administrated and how problems

## **IES Abroad Tokyo Program**



related to their administration are managed with a view to achieving the objectives of developing the intercultural competence of the students.

## **5. Study abroad program for the development of intercultural competence**

### **5-1. On-going orientation**

The process begins with a welcome orientation program for the incoming students as they arrive in Tokyo for the IES Abroad program. Many American universities provide pre-departure orientation to study abroad students but in most cases it is not country-specific. Upon arrival in Tokyo, the students are given a thorough briefing on all aspects of living in Japan and particular attention is paid to medi-

cal and health issues, safety, transportation, communications, money matters, immigration and emergency protocol. The objective is also to ensure that the students get to know each other and the IES staff and also get acquainted with the Makuhari area where the IES Center and KUIS are located as well as Urayasu City where the Meikai University is located. An extensive use is made of audio-visuals, and each student is provided with a Student Manual that contains useful and essential information on living in Japan.

During the session on academic orientation, the students are provided with more detailed information about the language programs and area study courses that are offered, and each student is provided with an Academic Manual containing course descriptions and information on IES Abroad academic policies and registration process. The registration for the courses is completed during the first week of orientation and it is our practice that as a part of this process, the Center Director meets each student individually to review and discuss the student's goals during the program.

There is a separate briefing session about the field placement program where the students are given an explanation of how this program works and what kind of placements might be feasible. This is followed by a one-to-one meeting with the Coordinator of the Program at which the specific placements of the students are discussed and finalized.

There are also separate briefing sessions on housing for the home stay and dormitory accommodation. The general briefing is followed by one-to-one meetings with the Housing Program Coordinator at which each student is informed about their specific housing assignment. Particularly the home stays call for continued monitoring and a regular follow up is maintained during the semester.

A special component of the orientation program is an interactive cultural workshop that is organized, under the guidance of a faculty member, during which students learn about the challenges of coping



with a new culture. The Tokyo staff members continue to stress the importance of intercultural competence throughout the semester and help the students in getting better acquainted with the Japanese society and culture.

The process of orientation of the students is an ongoing one. During the latter part of the semester, a workshop on “Career Integration” is organized, which is of particular interest to those students who plan to come back to Japan in the future.

Towards the end of the semester, a re-entry workshop is organized to help the students cope with the reverse culture shock that they are likely to encounter when they return to their home country upon completion of the program in Japan.

## **5-2. Two programs of Japanese language learning**

In planning the Japanese language programs, the Tokyo Center works very closely with the two partner universities that support the learning of Japanese language by the IES students: KUIS and Meikai University. Both the universities are dedicated to the pursuit of excellence in international studies, particularly in the area of foreign languages, cross-cultural communication, and Japanese linguistics. All faculty members in the two programs have advanced degrees in teaching Japanese as a foreign language and all have considerable teaching experience.

The IES Japanese language program at KUIS is organized through the KUIS Japanese Language and Culture Program (*Bekka*) that was established in 2000. Over the years there have been two main kinds of American university students coming to the Tokyo program: (a) those whose goal was to learn about the Japanese society and culture through Japanese language study and English-taught area study courses; and (b) whose primary goal was more comprehensive Japanese language study. And it became clear that trying to serve these two kinds of students with one-size-fits-all program was not the best

option.

Accordingly, in order to meet the needs of these two different types of students, the Tokyo Center created, in 2005, a two-track program of Japanese language courses at KUIS:

Track I: Japanese in Context (*Jissen Nihongo*) course as part of the Japanese Society and Culture Program; and

Track II: Comprehensive Japanese (*Sogo Nihongo*) course.

The first track was a mandatory Japanese language course for all IES students, and the second track was optional for those students who had a prior study of Japanese language for at least three semesters and were interested in pursuing Japanese more comprehensively.

After trying out this two-track system for two semesters at KUIS, it was decided to develop two distinct types of programs of Japanese language study for the two different kinds of students. While the 6-credit Japanese Society and Culture Program was continued at KUIS, a new, more comprehensive Japanese Language Program of 12 credits (subsequently reduced to 10 credits) was established at another Japanese university, Meikai University, in Fall 2006.

Students looking for more of a balance between the language learning and area studies, as well as those with little or no prior study of Japanese language, opt for the Society and Culture Program at KUIS. And the students with at least three semester of prior study of Japanese language and those who are looking to focus more on their language skills opt for the Japanese Language Program at Meikai University. The students are asked to make the choice of the program at the time of initial application. An important factor that influences the students' motivation for the Japanese language study and their choice between the two Japanese language programs is whether or not their Japanese language credits will count towards their major/minor and graduation.

As will be noted from the descriptions of the two Japanese language programs given below, each program has its own workload and

course schedule.

### **5–2–1. IES Japanese Society and Culture Program at KUIS**

The IES Japanese Society and Culture Program, also referred to as the “Japanese in Context” course (*Jissen Nihongo* in Japanese) is offered at KUIS ([https://www.iesabroad.org/IES/Programs/Japan/Tokyo/Society\\_and\\_Culture/tokyoSocietyandCulture.html](https://www.iesabroad.org/IES/Programs/Japan/Tokyo/Society_and_Culture/tokyoSocietyandCulture.html)). It is a 6-credit course and is designed to provide students from American universities, with or without previous Japanese study, opportunities to learn Japanese language and to get acquainted with the Japanese society and culture. As shown in the IES course descriptions (ref: [www.IESabroad.org](http://www.IESabroad.org)), the classes are structured to develop the students’ competence in the following three aspects:

**\*Linguistic competence:** Competence for expressing and understanding the language according to Japanese linguistic rules, e.g. knowledge of Japanese sentence structures, vocabulary, pronunciation, writing system;

**\*Sociolinguistic competence:** Competence for using the language according to Japanese communication norms e.g. to learn to choose appropriate topics, timing, knowledge of Japanese polite language, strategies for handling expressions and comprehension problems; and

**\*Socio-cultural competence:** Competence for achieving a communication goal by using the language so as to present themselves as a member in the Japanese society; e.g. understanding facts about Japan such as in-group and out-group relationship, cycles in daily life, patterns of entertainment, hierarchy in family, work domain, and social organization of contemporary Japanese society.

In this program, Japanese is taught using the communicative approach that puts emphasis on learning the language as a means of communication. The program aims to provide Japanese learners training to be able to actually interact with the Japanese people in

Japanese. In order to achieve this goal, various types of contact situations possibly confronted by the students during their stay in Japan are systematically analyzed and integrated into the program, and teaching and learning activities are encouraged for the acquisition of competence for actual interaction in such situation with the Japanese (KUIS Ryugakusei Bekka 2007).

This method is based on situations (or topics, as they are referred to at KUIS), and the course covers four or five different topics of interest and importance to the students in one semester. For instance, in several lessons, “shopping” or “eating out” may be the topic. Through that lesson, vocabularies, Kanji and sentence formats related to shopping and eating out will be covered. At the end of each topic, the students participate in Performance Activities (PA) in order to apply what they learned through the topic and to strengthen their competence for interaction with the Japanese. There is an elaborate system of inviting Japanese students, retired professors, and volunteers from the local community to the PA sessions which provide an excellent opportunity for the students to interact with native speakers of different types. In addition, arrangements are also made for the IES students to visit schools and attend joint classes with Japanese students at KUIS.

The IES students also benefit from a student support system. Through this program, the students are eligible to get a Japanese learning tutor who is registered in the support network as a volunteer. Students who appear to be behind in the learning schedule are introduced to a study partner who can help in learning Japanese outside the class time. Since there is no prerequisite of prior study of Japanese for this course, some of the students are absolute beginners, and during the first week of orientation, special classes are held for such students to learn Hiragana and Katakana. It is highly recommended that all students including those entering at the elementary level should acquire some knowledge of Hiragana and Katakana before

coming to Japan.

The “Japanese in Context” course offers study of Japanese language at five levels (levels 1, 1.5, 2, 3 and 4), and the appropriate level for each student is determined on the basis of a placement test that all students must take at the beginning of the semester. The classes take place at KUIS campus where the IES students have full access to the language laboratory, library, computer and other campus facilities, and they can take part in the student clubs and other student activities.

For a more complete description of the “Japanese in Context” course and its development, reference should be made to the Course descriptions provided by the KUIS *Bekka* program ([http://www.kandagaigo.ac.jp/kuis/subject/pdf/summary\\_09e.pdf](http://www.kandagaigo.ac.jp/kuis/subject/pdf/summary_09e.pdf)) and papers written by teaching staff of the *Bekka* program (e.g. KUIS Ryugakusei Bekka 2006, 2007; Fan 2008). Other papers in this volume also provide insights into problems about the development of this course.

### **5–2–2. IES Japanese Language Program at Meikai University**

The IES Japanese Language Program at Meikai University was established in 2006 for students who have previous Japanese learning experience and want to gain more credits in Japanese. This program is also referred to as the Comprehensive Japanese Language Program (*Sogo Nihongo* in Japanese) which features a rigorous Japanese language curriculum including a 10-credit course. The focus is on writing, listening comprehension, communication skills through practice and skills to conduct an intellectual discussion. Much use is made of audio and visual materials during the classes.

Unlike the Japanese Society and Culture Program, the students in this program are required to have had at least three semesters of Japanese at the home institution (or equivalent) as a prerequisite. There are four levels of the course and the appropriate level for each student is decided on the basis of the placement test that all students take at the beginning of the semester.

In order to promote contacts between the IES students and Japanese students at Meikai University, each IES student is assigned a Japanese student as Kaiwa (conversation) partner during the semester. Together with the Japanese students, the IES students take part in skits and programs for presentation at functions organized at Meikai University, which helps improve the students' confidence and ability to speak Japanese.

The classes are held at the campus of Meikai University where the students have full access to all the campus facilities, and they can take part in the student clubs and other student activities.

It should be added that those IES students who are registered for the IES Japanese Society and Culture Program at KUIS are able to register for area studies courses offered by KUIS on the understanding that they must register for at least one IES area studies course. This option, however, is not available to the students registered for the IES Japanese Language Program at Meikai University and they can only take IES area studies courses.

### **5-3. English-taught Area Studies Courses**

The dominant IES Abroad model for a resident program of one or two semesters' length in Japan has been the one in which the students are learning Japanese language and taking college-level area study courses in English. This model appeals to many students as it offers enough language studies and also enhances their intercultural development by offering area studies courses with field trips and other cultural activities. From a practical perspective, students and their home college advisers appreciate the ability to transfer back non-language course credits so that they can keep pace towards meeting their graduation requirements while acquiring knowledge of a foreign language.

The Tokyo Center offers seven English-taught Area Studies courses every semester in addition to the mandatory Japanese language

courses organized at KUIS and Meikai University. These courses concentrate on contemporary Japan in a variety of fields such as anthropology, arts and society, politics, international relations, economics, marketing, history, urban studies and sociology. All the area studies courses maximize the value of the Tokyo location by including field study trips where students visits key institutions, museums or components of the area being studied. The students are required to take these IES area study courses toward the fulfillment of the credit requirement of a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 19 credits per semester.

Every effort is made to ensure the highest quality of the academic program that is designed to enhance the student engagement in the social, cultural, political and intellectual institutions of Japan. Careful attention is paid to the selection of well-qualified and experienced faculty to teach the IES courses. The teaching is monitored regularly through student evaluations, the results of which are discussed with the faculty members. Moreover, the academic program and the syllabi of the courses are reviewed and updated in order to reflect the rapid changes taking place in the Japanese society.

#### **5-4. Field Placement Program and Seminar on Social Organization in Japan**

A hallmark of the Tokyo program is its Field Placement Program. The Tokyo Center offers a 3-credit seminar course called Social Organization in Japan, which places students in Japanese organizations where they work as participant-observers for one full day each week of the semester. These placements allow students to explore the issue of social organization in Japan as it is naturally exhibited, without imposing a particular theoretical framework. In the seminar, students collectively share and reflect on their field placement experiences as a basis for recognizing and understanding the greater social organization of Japan. Students develop basic skills of ethnographic inquiry, learn

to describe social interactions, and discover the implications these interactions have for the individuals and groups under study.

All students are invited to participate in the Field Placement Program. Interested students must apply before the start of the program and provide an online form including a resume and a research statement indicating a general area of interest. Field placements, which depend upon availability, the student's background and skills and the student's proficiency in Japanese, may be arranged within educational, religious and political organizations, in the non-profit sector and in corporations. Examples of past placements include working with Tokyo's homeless people, working backstage at the National Kabuki Theatre, designing a website for a large publishing firm, teaching English in a school, assisting with anime production, conducting market research, doing architectural design, and assisting a National Diet member.

At the end of the semester, students submit their professional portfolios and conduct classroom presentations discussing one aspect of Japanese social organization. The process of assembling the portfolio provides a framework through which students reflect on their learning in the field placement; it also serves as a tangible, organized record of their unique experience in Japan.

### **5-5. Housing Program**

One of the cornerstones of the mission of the Tokyo Center is to foster intercultural understanding by integrating students into the local culture as much as possible. This mission is supported in part by providing students the opportunity to participate in local activities, field experiences and live in home stays or dormitories with local families or students.

Since the student numbers fluctuate from one semester to another, housing arrangements are made for each semester depending upon the number of students. Extra care is taken by the Tokyo staff in arrang-



ing home stay or dormitory accommodation for the students according to their preferences and in matching students and families for home stay. Another issue is that most of the housing accommodations involve a long commute by train but this is normal in Japan, and the students soon get used to it since, fortunately, the transportation system in Japan is excellent.

There can be no better way to understand the Japanese culture, customs and manners than by staying with a Japanese family. Participating in the Center's home stay program can be an enriching and unforgettable experience for the students. However, continuous attention is required on the part of the Tokyo staff to ensure that there is harmonious relationship between the students and host families. In Japan families are not accustomed to hosting foreign students, and even after host families have been identified, there is still the complex process of matching the specific requests of the students with those of the host families. Several factors have to be taken into account such as medical condition, allergies, smoking, food preferences, children, common interests, special requests, etc.

Host families are carefully selected through an established screening process and orientation is given to the families about the IES program through a housing meeting before and after the arrival of the students. Arrangements are also made for the host families to participate in an intercultural workshop where they can learn about how to host foreign students. At the same time, the students also participate in a housing session during the welcome orientation and a follow-up session two weeks after joining the host family. It is explained to the students as well as to the host families that adjustments are required on both sides in order to make the home stay happy and meaningful.

## **5-6. Field trips and cultural activities**

At the Tokyo Center, immense value is placed on the role the

Center and staff plays in contributing to the development of the students' intercultural competence. Students come to Japan with their own preconceptions of the Japanese culture, and a new level of understanding of the Japanese culture comes through learning and experience by the time they complete their program.

While language learning is at the core of intercultural growth of the students, the Tokyo Center routinely arranges cultural events, guest speakers and outings. As part of the Center's art and culture series, various classes and demonstrations are held throughout the semester for students to experience first-hand the arts of traditional Japan. These may include *ikebana* (flower arrangement), *shodo* (calligraphy), *koto* (Japanese harp), *origami* (paper folding), *sado* (tea ceremony) and martial arts.

During the semester, the Tokyo Center organizes a variety of field trips as an integral part of the program. These trips include visits to historical and cultural sites in and around Tokyo and destinations outside of Tokyo, such as Kamakura, Nikko, Mt. Fuji and Kawagoe. The Center also organizes every semester a long field trip to enable students to experience life in other parts of Japan. Previous destinations for such long field trips have been Kyoto, Hokkaido, Okinawa, and Nagano.

Students are also encouraged to take part in local community service activities. This enables the students to be knowledgeable about Japanese customs and traditions and encourages exchange between students and members of the local community. Guest speakers are regularly invited to the Tokyo Center to make presentations on different aspects of contemporary Japan. This enables the students to contemplate diverse opinions on the Japanese society and culture.

The Tokyo Center staff work closely with the Student Council that is elected by the students each semester and support and help them in organizing various social and cultural events. These events bring together not only the IES students but also "E-pals" and other Japa-

nese student volunteers from our partner universities.

### **5-7. “E-pal” Program**

One unique feature of the Tokyo Center’s program is its “E-pal” program, and this program is made possible only because of our close relationship with KUIS and Meikai University. Under this program, the IES students are offered the option to have a Japanese student from one of the two partner universities to be their “E-pal”. Announcements of the IES “E-pal” program are made at both the universities and Japanese students are invited to act as “E-pals” to IES students. An orientation session is organized for the selected Japanese students who register for the program. Japanese students are assigned as “E-pals” to those IES students who express an interest in joining the program.

The IES students and their “E-pals” are introduced via email and are encouraged to carry on an email “conversation” prior to departure from U.S. Sometimes, an “E-pal” will meet and greet the IES student at the Tokyo airport on arrival in Japan. The program is meant to do three things: better prepare the IES students prior to departure; jump-start the cultural integration challenge of meeting local students; and provide the IES student with an on-site language partner to help the student’s language development.

Many students who take advantage of this program derive immense benefits from this program and make life-long friendships. They keep in touch after the end of the program and there have been cases of students and their families visiting each other. The experience has shown that not all IES students register for this program but often they regret not having done so later on.

### **5-8. Student Health and Safety**

The health and safety of the students is of the highest priority at the Tokyo Center. The Center staff is well-trained and knowledgeable

about the safety procedures and protocols. It must be understood that the situation in Japan is quite different from Europe where English language is generally understood. In Japan, because of the language difficulty, the Center staff must accompany each student whenever he or she falls ill and has to be brought to a doctor or a hospital. IES Abroad requires that all its students have international health insurance so they are adequately covered while abroad.

The IES Abroad has an established international policy for crisis management and emergency procedures for all its centers including Tokyo, including a plan for evacuation in the event of a natural disaster, political unrest or terrorist action. Locally in Tokyo, an emergency telephone tree is maintained where the Tokyo Center staff members take the responsibility to serve as custodians of a number of students in case of an emergency. Whenever students travel outside Tokyo, they are required to provide information to the Center about their whereabouts.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Studying abroad is a rewarding adventure with many academic and personal benefits for the students. But as exciting as living and studying overseas can be, it also requires work on the part of the students as they are immersed in a culture that is very different from the culture they have experienced at home. It can be an emotional time for students. They may find that they have both more freedom and more responsibility than at home. They have to keep a closer eye on money and learn to behave responsibly in an environment with different social constraints and expectations. Adapting to a new culture can initially bring uncertainty and simple tasks as traveling by train or bus can be strange and confusing. Schoolwork may require adjustments because each culture approaches education differently. Moreover, Japanese language is considered to be one of the most difficult to learn.

Adjusting to life abroad brings challenges and stresses, ups and downs. Encouragement, patience and support are very important during this process. The staff members of the Tokyo Center are highly experienced and specially trained to help the students with adjustment difficulties. They serve as a valuable resource for the students during this transition and continue to support them throughout the semester.

As has been explained in the preceding sections, the Tokyo Center organizes numerous activities, both of academic and non-academic nature, as part of the semester program with a view to developing the intercultural competence of the students in a holistic manner. Firstly, it ensures that the students have a high quality education in Japanese language that is organized at two universities, which are well-known for their Japanese language departments for international students. At the two universities, the students also get ample opportunities to meet and interact with Japanese students. Particularly at KUIS, the course aims to impart not only knowledge of Japanese grammar but also skills necessary for tackling problems in real life interaction with Japanese people through practice of language use in authentic situations.

The English-taught area studies courses enhance the knowledge of the students about the social, cultural, and political institutions in Japan. Those students who join the field placement program get the opportunity to observe and participate, on a first-hand basis, in the social organizational systems in Japan. A number of other activities are organized to foster an intercultural integration of the students in Japanese society. For example, by participating in the cultural activities, the students get acquainted with Japanese traditional arts and crafts. Home stays offer the students a deeper immersion in Japanese society and a better understanding of the Japanese manners and customs. Field trips enable the students to explore other parts of Japan. Our experience has shown that such non-academic activities, combined with rigorous language learning, have a strong impact on the

development of the intercultural competence of the students.

The IES Abroad conducted a survey of its 50 years of alumni in order to learn how its alumni perceive their study abroad experience and whether it had an impact on their careers, on their international experience, and on their worldviews (IES Abroad 2000). The survey attempted to evaluate the primary benefits of study abroad; the impact of study abroad on international experience and the contributing factors to developing intercultural competence. The experience of studying abroad significantly affected most participants' personal life, and to a lesser degree their political and social views. The three most often cited benefits were: personal growth, increasing open-mindedness / openness to diversity and improved language skills. Participants reported that the greatest contributors to achieving intercultural competence were local friends, home stays and travel. These components show that the experience of study abroad is unique from the academic learning on a US campus in that its non-academic offerings offer a benefit not possible while studying on a US college campus. All of these results support the view that study abroad has a significant and long-lasting impact on participants' personal lives, on their careers, on their world-views, and on the development of their intercultural competence.

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