

Japanese Students in North American Universities : Academic Challenge and Strategies for Success

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Abstract

Eleven Japanese students who studied for a year or more in North American universities were interviewed about their study abroad experiences during the various stages of the sojourn, from preparation for departure through arrival and adjustment and then return and reentry. This paper will examine the insights of the interviewees into the many differences between academic life in their home country of Japan and in the host culture. From the students' personal experiences also comes a variety of useful strategies for adjustment to academic life in North America.

Introduction

During the cross-cultural sojourn and its attendant adjustment process, international students face the daily challenge of communicating effectively in a foreign language and understanding and coping with differences in culture and lifestyle in their host countries. At the same time, most international students feel great internal and external pressure to succeed in their academic endeavors.

Hansel (1993) suggested an eight-stage model to describe the adjustment of international students studying in the USA. According to this model, student sojourners usually experience the same adaptation stages, in roughly the same order, starting with preparation for departure and arrival in the host country, then "settling in," "deepening contact with the host culture," and possible culture shock or conflict, followed by "culture learning," preparation for departure, and "reentry" and readjustment to the home culture. Cox (1995) investi-

gated the experiences of two Japanese university students studying for a year in the USA and found that their experiences conformed to Hansel's model.

One of the major challenges which all international students face in their adjustment is the difference in academic life in the host country as compared to the home country. Coping with the differences in academic life is a further challenge that international students must contend with, in addition to their general cross-cultural adjustment, in order to succeed in their study abroad. Successful international students must identify points of difference in the new academic system and develop a repertoire of strategies and support systems to cope with the challenge of academic life in the new culture.

This paper will focus on the academic differences between North American and Japanese university systems as identified by eleven Japanese students who studied in North American universities as undergraduates. The academic challenges they encountered while studying in North America and the strategies and support systems which they identified as helpful in their studies abroad will be reported and described in the students' own voices. The eleven research subjects spent two semesters or more in universities in the USA or Canada between 1998 and 2003 in regular academic course programs, sponsored by their Japanese universities. The students were interviewed within a few months of their return to Japan using an interview protocol which focused on their personal experiences and insights during the various stages of their cultural contact and adjustment, following Hansel's eight-stage model.

The eleven interviewees will recount their personal observations (in English translation) regarding one critical area of their cross-cultural adjustment, academic life: specifically, the differences they found between North American and Japanese university study, and the coping strategies and support systems they made use of while living and studying abroad. From the interviewees' personal experiences and insights into cross-cultural academic differences, practical advice can be extrapolated for the purpose of advising Japanese students going to North American universities in the future.

Pressures and Expectations

Japanese who choose to study abroad in programs supported by

their home universities face far greater internal and external pressures than the average university student in either the home country or host country. First of all, they face the challenge of studying in a new culture and in a foreign language. Furthermore, in addition to the need to succeed in their studies abroad and accrue credits toward graduation, they have personal expectations about the life-changing impact of the study abroad experience. Also their classmates, teachers, and university administrators at home are expecting the *ryugakusei* (overseas students) to do well and uphold the reputation of the sponsoring Japanese university. Finally, the families of those studying abroad hold hopes and expectations for the students' success in their studies and for the practical advantages this may bring in the future in the form of job placement after graduation, etc. The resulting pressure on foreign students must be immense. Here are some of the interviewees' comments on this subject :

S 1 : I think it's quite tough to study overseas unless you have a clear idea of what you want to do. . . . I could not afford to fail my courses there. . . . So unless you have the drive and determination, I don't think you can keep going. . . . I had the idea in my head all the time that if I had any spare time, I should be studying. There was nothing at all that gave me a break.

S 4 : Before you go, you may have some pressure, because the returnees . . . will tell you about the meaningfulness of the trip. When I think back on my feelings before leaving Japan, I was nervous since I was wondering if I could have such good experiences as the former returnees, and I felt like I was under pressure to make my stay in the US significant enough to tell others about the greatness of my trip after coming back. I was afraid I might disappoint myself as soon as I started my school life there [in the USA] . . . because Japanese university students are often criticized about their abilities. I was afraid the education I'd had in Japan might not be good enough to compete with people from elsewhere in the world. Furthermore, I was uneasy about my abilities to lead my life in a totally unknown place. When I thought about these things, I could not have any confidence in myself before leaving here [Japan]. But now I am full of confidence.

S 8 : I had my own plan and I felt that I had to graduate without

fail in two years, so in the first semester, I was concerned about how many credits I needed to get towards graduation. From the first semester, you have to think about classes, and even if you don't want to overdo it, you feel that if you don't take a certain number of classes, it will delay your graduation.

S 10 : I was extremely tense all through the first semester, because I didn't know what to expect and the classes were tough right from the start.

S 3 : The classes are tough and you're thrown deep into an alien culture. Some people, if they get homesick or depressed, tend to stay clammed up on their own.

The differences in academic life identified by the eleven student interviewees can be divided into three categories : 1) differences in academic systems and teaching practices, 2) language skills challenges, and 3) culture-based academic challenges.

Differences in the Academic System and Teaching Practices of North American Universities, as Compared to Japan

In the research interviews, returned Japanese *ryugakusei* (overseas students) cited a number of differences in the academic systems of North American universities as compared to the Japanese institutions they had previously attended. These differences required the Japanese *ryugakusei* to adjust during the study abroad experience. The interviewees' comments below have been organized into six general topics (although there is sometimes an overlap): curriculum, student workload, student attitudes toward study, diversity on campus, teaching style, and student support systems on campus.

The Japanese students interviewed found ways to use many of these differences in the North American system to their advantage, as will be discussed later under Strategies. Interestingly, by the end of their sojourns, the interviewees came to evaluate many of the differences in the North American system as positive and generally seemed to prefer the North American university system as better or of a higher level than the Japanese university system.

1. Curriculum

The breadth and flexibility of the North American style curriculum is an example of a difference that became a plus for many Japanese students. Besides the availability of a wide choice of courses, the

registration system in most North American universities allows students to add as well as drop courses within certain time limits, and registration is done semester by semester, rather than once for an entire academic year.

S 1 : The thing that was the same as Japan was picking your classes and arranging your timetable, but the number of classes to choose from was entirely different. In America, you can change your major, and an Arts student can take general science classes, for example. In Japan, we don't have the same wide range of options.

S 7 : The biggest difference I found was the wide range of classes you could choose from outside your special subject area. [. . .] In America, I majored in English Literature, and as a minor, I took British Culture. In addition, each semester, I was able to take two music-related classes. In that sense, I was able to get much more of a proper education than in Japan, and I'd recommend taking advantage of the system and working hard to get the widest possible education.

S 8 : Compared with Japanese universities, the system in America and the way you take classes is very flexible. At [my college in Japan] there are a lot of restrictions. Students in English Literature are never allowed to take classes in other faculties, for example. But my roommate in America was forever changing her major. You can change your major subject at any time, and if there's some subject you're interested in, even if it's in a different faculty, the system allows you to take the classes. So although it's very important to make some decisions about what to study before you go, if you find once you get there that there's something that interests you more, American universities have a system that makes it very easy to make changes, so you can take advantage of that flexibility and widen your studies. . . . I was an English Literature major, and I took Business as a minor subject. I'm impressed that you can study things in America that you can't study anywhere in Japan.

It is worth mentioning that in the period since these interviews took place, reforms have been made in the Japanese curriculum system to allow more freedom of class choice than before.

Another notable difference in the American style curriculum is

the frequency and number of classes. Most university classes there meet for three hours per week, totaling about twice as many hours each term than for a class in the Japanese system. Thus more material can be covered, in greater depth. North American students also take fewer courses each semester than Japanese students do. The result is a more intensive feel to North American university courses, and also more homework each week, as will be discussed in the next section.

S 10 : Something that's very different from Japan was that classes there are on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, or on Tuesdays and Thursdays. In Japan, you have class once a week for an hour and a half . . . so after the class, you don't get round to the homework because you have a whole week until the next class, and you've forgotten what the class was about an hour or so afterwards. But in America, . . . if you don't do the homework the same day, you might not get it done before the next class, only two days away. Doing the homework while the class was still fresh in your mind, with the content of the class very strong (*kooi*), it was easy to understand and remember. The classes I've taken in Japan have not made that much of an impression, but the classes I took at the university in America made a big impression and even now, I can recall many of them clearly, so I think they are more effective. I thought Japanese universities should adopt the same system.

This comment leads to the next main difference in the two university systems, student workload.

2. Student Workload

The Japanese student interviewees all commented on the greater amount of homework in North American universities, as compared to when they studied in Japan, and especially on the greater amount of reading and the large number of reports they were required to submit for each class. This heavier workload for preparation and homework is a separate issue from the language "gap" the students faced in classes (listening comprehension, note taking, speaking) and in doing homework (reading, writing reports, etc.). Academic challenges related to language skills will be discussed later in the section on Language Skills Challenges.

The workload in North American universities is related to differ-

ences in teaching style. Classes are often more interactive compared to the predominance of large lecture format classes in Japan. When classes are smaller or interactive, it is easy for teachers to do continuous assessment of student performance in addition to grading based on test results, but students must be well prepared in order to perform well in such classes. Student interviewees also commented that North American teachers gave different types of homework assignments (in addition to reading) than the Japanese students were accustomed to, and that the style of tests was also different.

S 6 : At university in America, students have to prepare a lot for their classes. In this point, American universities are greatly different from Japanese ones. Generally speaking, in the States, university students were assigned three to four textbooks for one class. They have to buy them. When they first attend the class, the professor hands them a schedule which says what they will study on which day. For instance, they have to read a certain book from page 1 to 30 and another from page 20 to 30 for one class meeting. In each class, they have similar assignments. Sometimes they have to read 60 to 80 pages in preparation for class. On the other hand, in universities in Japan, it's rare that students have to read in preparation for a class.

S 10 : The amount we have to read [in North America] is entirely different [from Japan] and I think Japanese students could do more, because here [in Japan], if you are asked to read only a small part, then that is all you read. The teachers can set only a little homework and with such large classes, the teachers can't pay attention to everyone individually, so nobody bothers to do the homework and it's just a vicious circle. . . .I'm an English Literature major, so in America, people would ask me, "Do you know this?" and mention a lot of books. I really didn't know any of them, and I had to say, "I don't know" all the time, and it was really embarrassing . . . people would wonder how I could be an English Literature major. . . . That was how different the amount we had to read was between here and America.

S 8 : One of the big differences in terms of classes was the large amount of homework there was. And you also had to prepare properly. [. . .] You had to prepare beforehand, because the classes in many cases were not lecture classes, but rather the sort

where you're asked to give your views. And then there were reports. At Japanese universities, you usually get by doing just one per semester, but [in America] we had to submit many papers and then various types of project work. So the amount of studying is different from what's usual at Japanese universities.

S 3 : . . .the toughest thing of all was the preparation, so that I could follow the class, and reviewing afterwards. For instance, the teacher would set homework that involved reading 100 pages, so life was reading, and reading, and more reading! The quantity of the reading, plus the fact that if you went to class without doing the reading, you couldn't follow it, made me feel there was really a lot of homework.

S 2 : When I actually got there, I found the assignments were very different from Japanese universities . . . also the tests were given in a different way . . . I would have had a better understanding of those sorts of things . . . with more preparation while I was still in Japan.

S 6 : . . .discussion, presentation and papers. I mean homework, writing ten or twelve page papers in English, by referring to books. There were such harsh situations that I've never experienced in Japan.

S 11 : Homework was really a hard task. So many reports had to be done, yet in English, so I worked pretty hard.

3. Student Attitudes toward Study

Japanese students in North American universities commented that in general, American students took their studies more seriously than students in Japan, were more motivated to learn, and prepared harder for classes.

S 10 : I found the students motivation entirely different. They start university because they are really keen to study.

S 11 : First of all, I was aware of the difference in the attitude in class, or for studying. American students listened in class very seriously and got through their assignments, but Japanese students are not really serious enough.

S 1 : It's often said that in Japan, it's hard to get into university, but easy to graduate, whereas the opposite is true in America, and that was my experience. During the week, everyone studies well into the night, but on weekends, they go out and have fun. I

was surprised at the clear distinction they make between study and play.

S 9 : I thought there was a very different attitude to taking classes. [. . .] Credits were important and tests were also important, and of course attending class. In Japan, you just have to turn up for class, . . . but in America, it's not like that. You don't just sit and listen ; you express yourself. It's as if you're saying, "This is what I really want to do ; that's what I'm here for!" instead of the Japanese attitude of taking in simply by attending.

This student describes the change in her own attitude towards study during her time in a North American university :

S 4 : If I got a good mark in university in Japan, I wasn't particularly pleased, but when it happened in America, I got a real sense of satisfaction. I was always looking forward to getting my marks. The feeling I had towards study, of really wanting to work, was I think because in the Japanese university, depending on the class, your marks don't always reflect the amount of effort you put into the work. For example, though you might not go to your seminar, you could study all night the night before and get close to full marks on a test, whereas even though you consistently prepare and go to all your classes, sometimes you don't get good marks. Somehow I felt it wasn't fair. But in America, the harder you work, the better your marks get, and people who don't work hard don't get the credits. I was happy because I felt my efforts were rewarded.

The presence of mature students at North American universities may contribute to the impression held by the Japanese interviewees that American students study harder, on average, than do Japanese university students.

4. Diversity on Campus

One difference that several Japanese student interviewees reported was the diversity, both in age and ethnicity, on North American university campuses. There are more mature students in North American universities because the system there makes it easier for students to enter university even if they are not coming directly from high school. Mature students often have clearer objectives for their university study, and thus tend to study harder. In the Japanese uni-

versity system, such *shakaijin nyugakusei* (entering students who are “members of society”) are rare, and only a small number of students transfer into Japanese universities from junior colleges, whereas the latter process is quite common in the United States.

S 3 : The student body was different. In Japan, the students in one year are all about the same age, but the university I went to [in America] was very large, and the people who came to class included some who had their own children and even elderly men and women. Seeing them, I was left with the feeling that people like that never lose their sense of wanting to be active.

S 10 : There were students as old as my mother, who finally had some time because their children had grown up. They’d decided they wanted to study some subject and had come to college. So there was a wide range among the students, but they were all very keen and they spoke out in class. That really made me think. I realized that was the proper way to approach studying, and since that experience, I myself have got into studying a lot more.

S 7 : Before going, I had all the other students bunched together in my mind as “Americans,” but once I got there, I found that there were American students who came from the local area, and there were others who came from all parts of America, and there was a difference between them. [. . .] Then there were age differences. There were those who came to university straight from high school, and those who had taken a job and then decided to go back to school, so there was quite a range of different people. Among those who had come straight from high school, there were some who were really keen to study very hard, but you could see in the personalities of those who had fully grown up and decided to come back to school that they were serious about their studies. They were the ones I became close with.

S 5 : Canada is called a multiracial nation and also a multicultural nation and there are people from many countries such as Chinese, Portuguese, Indian and so on, and the nation has a high regard for the culture from each country.

5. Style of Teaching/Class Style

Interviewees have already mentioned in previous sections that university classes in America were different than those in Japan in

terms of class size, class contents, and what was expected of the students while in class. Two main causes for these perceived differences are the interactive, less teacher-centered style of many American instructors, and the important role which discussion and individual student opinion play in classes. To some extent, this teaching style is derived from the Socratic method of asking questions to provoke thought and learning, which is part of Western culture. Furthermore, Americans are from a democratic cultural tradition, which values individualism and self-assertiveness. These American values may contribute to the popularity of discussion style lessons and interactive learning.

Another point of difference that Japanese students commented on was the relatively greater accessibility of instructors in North America. This topic will be dealt with more in the later section about "Strategies for Academic Success" in the North American university system.

Here are interviewee comments and comparisons regarding class style in North America and Japan :

S 9 : The way classes are run there is completely different from Japan.

S 11 : The way the classes were given was very different from [my Japanese university]. And of course the lessons were given only in English. . .

S 5 : Classes are student-centered over there [in America], but I felt [Japan] is teacher-centered, and the relation between teachers and students is weak compared with university over there.

S 1 : The classes were completely different from Japan. In Japan, it's lecture style, so the teacher does the talking and the students listen and that's it. In America, the teacher talks, but the students interrupt and press the teacher with questions like, "Why is it like that?" and so on. I'd never experienced anything like that in Japan, so I was amazed. But if I asked something, teachers would ask me back, "What do you think?" and I was sometimes stuck for an answer. . . .trying to do things just the way you would in Japan is impossible. Because I couldn't just accept that, I tried to do everything the way I did in Japan, and there was a gap.

S 6 : The major difference was that in Japanese classes, the teachers give the lectures one-sidedly, don't they? The relation-

ship between professors and students is distant. From my experience, it's very rare to have discussions [in Japanese classes], and for so-called presentations, I read something, but never did any real research. But in America, more than half the class consists of discussion. . . .

S 2 : I was extremely conscious of the difference in the way classes are conducted in Japanese and American universities. In America, the students participate fully in class. If the students don't offer any opinions, then the class doesn't proceed. There were hardly any classes like ones we have in Japan, where you just sit and listen to the lecture. [. . .] The way they ran the classes, the teachers would get the students to give their views and then steer the class into reaching some conclusion. It was really tough. But I wanted to join in, and found it interesting in a way that you never experience in Japan.

S 9 : Instead of the Japanese attitude of . . . being passive, you have the reverse [in America], people saying, "I'll do it myself," "That's what I want to do," and so on. I realized there's a great difference in attitude and it came out in the way classes are run.

S 10 : I should have been more relaxed about [asking questions in class]. I just thought in the Japanese way that I shouldn't interrupt during class.

S 6 : I want to mention that classes in America don't only teach knowledge, but attach importance to how you put the knowledge together and construct your own opinion or how to apply the knowledge. What I learned was the knowledge and the ability to see things objectively, and how to approach things. I felt like I hadn't had any opportunity to learn like that before, but had always passively studied what I was given.

S 4 : The teachers are much more enthusiastic about teaching something, and I found they were very cooperative. For instance, in a small class, you can understand it, but even in a large lecture hall, the teachers make it very easy to ask questions. And if you go and talk to the teachers afterwards, you don't feel any awkwardness. In a lecture where there are 200 or 300 students, you might think it makes no difference whether you are there or not, but I always felt that the teachers were aware of everyone, and the teacher's presence was very strong in class.

6. Availability of Academic Support Systems

American universities and colleges, even the smaller institutions, provide a variety of academic support systems which are not always offered in Japan. For example, professors in North America often have Teaching Assistants ("T.A.s"), who are usually their graduate students. T.A.s help the instructors with classes, often leading weekly discussion sessions on the course content, meeting with students during office hours, grading student reports in some cases, and administering, correcting, and sometimes even creating tests. For students (both American and international) who need help with academic writing, many universities have a Writing Center staffed by professionals, graduate students, or student volunteers. Many universities also have a mentor system whereby a senior student advises a younger student or international student. Foreign language departments and teacher training faculties may offer student tutoring by members of their programs. Finally, the international offices at many universities provide a variety of support services and social activities, although these may not be targeted specifically at academic skills. Interviewees mentioned drawing on a number of these support systems during their sojourns at North American universities, and some of their experiences and recommendations will be discussed later in the section on Strategies.

Language Skills Challenges

In addition to the generally higher academic workload characteristic of American universities, as compared to Japanese institutions, the workload for a student whose native language is not English is sure to be even heavier, perhaps double or more the academic workload borne by a native English speaking student.

S 9: There were people who went to bed at ten o'clock, when I had to begin studying. As an international student, I had to do twice as much studying to follow the classes.

S 1: You have always to remember that of course you will have a problem with the language. That trying to do things just the way you would in Japan is impossible . . . there was a gap. [. . .] For me the language barrier was the major thing.

Interviewees mentioned academic difficulties involving all four language skills areas of English (listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing) as well as cultural differences which inhibited

their academic performance.

1. Listening Comprehension

Many interviewees mentioned that they had great difficulty understanding classes and lectures and taking notes, especially in the first semester. However, as the first semester progressed and they moved into the second semester, Japanese students in North America found several useful strategies to help cope with the listening comprehension problem. These strategies will be discussed later in this paper.

S 3 : It was extremely difficult getting used to the speed of English in the classes.

S 1 : First of all, my English wasn't as good as I'd thought. It was really tough that I couldn't understand what the teachers were saying. No teacher was going to speak slowly just for me, and it sounded to me like just a lot of noise. For instance, if everyone [in class] suddenly started doing something, I'd think, "Oh, what are they doing?" and while I was in a flap they'd all finish and hand something in to the teacher. I didn't know what to do . . . I felt as though I was always left behind on my own. . . . I couldn't follow the classes, and it was really unpleasant, like being a visitor in the classes.

S 2 : What was difficult, of course, was the language problem, even though I'd tried to get used to it while I was in Japan. I had to deal with native speakers' speed in daily life, too, and that was tough. . . . I got used to listening first, in about a month,

S 1 : It's a sort of discussion format, so you have to listen, otherwise you can't join in. So it's tough when you can't follow.

2. Speaking

Students' descriptions of their difficulty speaking out in class during discussion periods show a cultural bias (perhaps fear of being "the nail that sticks out") as well as concerns about linguistic limitations.

S 10 : In class, you're afraid people will think you're stupid if you speak out, or you wonder whether you'll be able to ask your question properly because it's in English.

S 9 : You have this very Japanese feeling that you want to ask, but you can't. I didn't know whether I'd get my meaning across. I should have answered, but I was thinking a different way and that's why it happened. I felt I should have spoken more on my

own initiative, and if I had spoken more widely I could have improved.

S 2: . . . when it came to speaking, I felt shy and embarrassed. As a Japanese, I felt unhappy about making mistakes, . . . so it was tough to overcome that and get to speaking out and saying what I thought.

S 6: When I first attended a discussion in the class, I was the only student from abroad, surrounded by American students, and needless to say they were all native speakers [of English]. . . . I had no confidence to give my opinion facing a large number of people. Because everyone stated their own opinion powerfully, as if to push everyone away, I was timid getting involved and was afraid that maybe they wouldn't understand my insufficient English, and they would laugh at me. When I looked back later, I realized that it didn't matter. The most important thing was that I must have my own opinion and since I am Japanese, it was to be expected that I had a language handicap.

S 2: I had a handicap with my English, so overcoming that and giving my opinion [in class] without worrying because it was in English was pretty difficult for the first month or so.

S 11: Asking questions during a class [was difficult]. At some classes, when we had to read something, in such cases it was really difficult to ask questions.

3. Reading

The difficulty Japanese university students in North America had with the university class reading load has already been referred to above in the section on academic workload. As students interviewees have said, university students in Japan do not face regular weekly reading assignments of 50–100 pages per course, so the students who went to North America had to adjust their expectations about homework. Interviewees acknowledged that the reading assignments were difficult for all students, but the reading was even more demanding for international students because of their limited reading skills and reading speed. Thus it took the Japanese students at least twice as long to do the reading assignments compared to their American peers.

S 6: I had the same class three times a week [in America], so I had to read the textbooks everyday. I could not have free time for the first month. I just kept reading and I was surprised at the

amount of reading. Assignments at the American university were much harder than I had expected.

S 3 : I was thorough about the preparation. [. . .] To read 100 pages in the beginning was as much as I could manage, and I was crying while I did it. Then slowly but surely, my reading speed increased, and I was able to grasp the important points as I was reading. . . . I thought I had to be a hard worker.

Although the Japanese students developed some strategies which helped them to deal with the challenge of reading large amounts of material (skimming and scanning skills, for instance), nevertheless they had to commit much more time to reading for classes than did their American peers.

4. Writing

Besides the challenge of lengthy reading assignments, the biggest skills problem for Japanese university students in America was academic writing. Papers had to be longer and were submitted more often than the interviewees were accustomed to in their studies in Japan. However, by far the most difficult aspect was learning a new approach to organization, rhetorical style and format.

S 3 : I had problems, because the way you write reports [in American universities] is entirely different. We didn't have training in that at university [in Japan] . . . so when I was told to submit a report, I was stuck because I didn't know how to write it. You can't easily find out from books about the academic aspects-how you're supposed to submit reports, or what form the tests will take. So I wished I'd asked foreigners those sorts of things [in Japan].

S 11 : It was really a hard task. So many reports had to be done, and in English, so I worked pretty hard. [. . .] At the end of the course, we had to hand in a longer report, and that was terribly difficult. To do the report, it wasn't just writing ; I also had to read books. Besides, the style of writing reports was completely different from the Japanese way. In Japan, there's no particular instruction when we write reports but in America there are certain rules, though once you learn it, things get much easier. I realized after I learned it that I could sort out things by myself and it was easy to do. But that time was hard.

S 9 : I had problems hearing, speaking, and writing in English,

but I expected to manage by doing things the way we did them in Japan. So when I had to write a paper or something for homework, I approached it the way I'd done in Japan, even though I was in America. But when I was told my approach was fundamentally wrong, I felt that the teacher wasn't sufficiently understanding. I rewrote the assignment, but I wasn't really convinced it was necessary, and that disagreement inside made me irritated and that was a problem. It wasn't a matter of changing the basic grammar or correcting the vocabulary. Everything I'd learned, all the stuff I'd internalized, changing that is pretty tough, because it was all a part of my being Japanese and my past experience.

S 10 : I noticed in particular about the way of writing papers. I'd done a lot of rhetoric and so on in Japan, but what was considered correct there, I found was unsatisfactory in America. Other international students from Europe were used to it, for example starting paragraphs with "Firstly," then "Secondly," and putting a conclusion at the end of the paper. [. . .] Also when you write a paper in America, and quote someone famous, you say "So and so said . . ." . . . to lend weight to the citation and my argument. [. . .] I did not like changing the way I'd been taught to do things, and I resisted at first, but then I realized there was nothing else for it, and decided to write my papers that way.

Culture-based Academic Challenges

Previous discussion has already introduced the idea that there are cultural components to the academic challenges faced by Japanese students in North American universities. First of all, the North American education system itself is a product of Western culture, as are the teaching methods and many of the course subjects and materials studied. Secondly, cultural differences such as the North American emphasis on individualism, independence, self-reliance and self-assertion affect classroom interaction. These different classroom styles require a great deal of adjustment and change for students from Japan, a culture where tradition, group harmony and mutual dependence are prized. Speaking out in class to ask a question or to express a personal opinion is behavior that goes against the cultural norms of Japan.

A less obvious example of the connection between education and

culture is in the content of courses and the choice of discussion topics. Japanese interviewees gave several examples of cases where they felt shut out from class discussion, from making a presentation, or from understanding the teacher's lecture, because of lack of background knowledge about Western culture (specifically, religion and folk tales), and also of current pop culture (TV and movies) and politics and current events.

S 10: In class, TV related topics would come up. For instance, if everyone was watching "The X-Files," then it would come up in class. I took a public speaking class and we had to make impromptu speeches. [. . .] For those on the spot speeches, we drew topics out of a hat. We were in pairs and had to turn the topic into a skit. . . . I got a topic about Oprah Winfrey on TV telling Americans not to eat beef because of mad cow disease, and farmers complaining as a result because no one was buying beef. At the time it was a major topic on TV, but I couldn't even afford to own a TV, and I had no idea what this was all about! [. . .] It was a big shock. Everyone watches TV, and in that class the teacher would also talk about popular movies. Everyone followed and gave their views.

S 9: I took a class in journalism and . . . three or four times during the semester we had a test on current events, so if you didn't watch TV or read a newspaper, you couldn't understand the questions on the tests. I watched TV avidly, but there was a lot I didn't understand, because the news readers spoke so fast. The topics were about political problems or such things, and I had a hard time. There were questions like who is the Vice President or about the Senate and so on, for which I thought you needed to have background knowledge (*yobichishiki*). . . . I didn't get any extra points at all.

S 3: I took political science classes. . . . for example, one that studied only Bosnia-Herzegovina. [. . .] They all involved a lot of history. I had studied history in the Japanese language, so I didn't recognize the names that appeared in the reading texts. Even in Chinese history, we learned the Japanese readings of names, so when a Chinese person's name appears in the Chinese pronunciation in English, you wonder who it can be. Your study starts at that sort of level.

S 9 : Then some stories like fairy tales one hears in childhood came up and I only understood it very superficially, but everyone else knew what the teacher was talking about and I was dissatisfied that I was excluded. When you don't understand in those situations, you can say you don't understand, or you can say, "Well, in Japan we have such and such."

S 10 : Another issue is that most people in America are Christian. I was taking classes in English literature, and a lot of topics related to Christianity came up in the classes. Everyone else understood, but I had no idea what they were talking about. . . . the other students all had long contact with Christianity and they all had their own opinions. I couldn't join in and felt a great gulf in culture.

Strategies for Academic Success

After Japanese students arrive in North America and begin their university studies, they at first feel overwhelmed by the challenges they face in academic life, as shown by the comments in the previous section of this paper. However, by the second semester abroad, most students have developed a wide repertoire of strategies for coping with the challenges of academic life in North America, both the challenges created by their limited language proficiency and the differences in the new academic system. Before going abroad, Japanese students who plan to study in North America in the future can benefit from a review of the strategies discovered by their predecessors.

Student interviewees identified more than 19 different strategies which helped them in academic life, or which would be helpful to future *ryugakusei*.

1. Have a clear goal in mind before going abroad.

S 8 : Those who are now preparing to go overseas should appreciate before they go that English is just a means. Everyone has different objectives in going to study overseas, and some people do so in order to improve their language skills, but English after all is just a means of communication. . . . Work out what you really want to do, and keep hold of your objective, retaining as wide a viewpoint as possible. . . . balance [your] language study with some other objective while [you] are living overseas to study.

2. Do as much as possible to improve English language skills before

going to study abroad.

S 1: It's a long stretch of time, and you are going to have to read books and write reports. The tests are paper tests, not spoken tests, so it's not good enough just to be able to speak English and understand spoken English. If you can't read and write well, you're going to have problems.

S 2: I think it's vital to get used to the speed of native speakers before you go, because once you arrive, you'll be taking the same classes as the ordinary American students.

S 11: [Before going] I brushed up my English so as to be able to catch what's going on in the classes [in America]. There was an examination for people who aim to study abroad and I studied in that special [TOEFL] class. . . . I studied English intensively at university [in Japan] and that helped me to understand English gradually, although not perfectly, so that I would be able to study abroad.

S 8: When you go overseas to study in a country where there are native English speakers, by living there your English improves. But actually you have to study a large range of different subjects when you get there, so rather than thinking that I'd improve my English after I arrived, I thought I should work on my English and reach some sort of reasonable standard before I left so that I would be able to follow the classes. . . . I think that studying overseas is not just learning English, but studying subjects through the medium of English. Students ought to reach a basic minimum in English skills before they leave Japan.

S 9: Before going, I went to English conversation classes and I chatted with Americans and other foreigners. But even getting used to that, I found when I went to America, there were things that I couldn't figure out. So to some extent you can find things out here, if you put in the effort . . . I think you should certainly try.

S 10: Preparation . . . the only thing I did was to always watch overseas movies and dramas in English on TV. I decided not to listen to the Japanese, but only the English. I was worried about my listening ability, so that was the only preparation I did. . . . when I watch movies now, I notice all sorts of cultural things that I experienced while I was there, so I think you also can learn

about cultural differences from watching movies and so on.

S 6: I really think you should study English before you go. You may think you'll become a good speaker of English once you go to the States, but this is not true. In my case, after I decided to go, I studied English hard. I tried to enrich my vocabulary. I think you should study English before you go by making full use of the materials around you, like TV or radio English programs. If you study a lot while you are in Japan, your English will really improve during your stay overseas.

S 7: I made an effort to take foreign teacher's classes at school here [in Japan]. They gave me a lot of writing assignments, so I thought I'd get used to writing and that would also help boost my English language skills . . . I told the teacher I was very anxious to improve my English and I asked for my work to be corrected very strictly. . . .

S 8: In universities overseas, there are a lot of reports or papers to write. You also need to read regularly—newspaper articles or quite difficult books—and then practice writing comments on what you've read. This is not something you can suddenly start once you've arrived overseas.

I went to a sort of English cram school . . . that trains students to pass the Eiken test. . . . We were taught how to write our own opinions properly in English, . . . with an introduction, body and conclusion.

S 7: Many people see it as a language learning experience, but you need to have the basics already, to some extent; otherwise, the speed at which you can learn in America will be very different. [. . .] So I think it's better to go once you've done the basic learning in the language.

3. Get advice about course choices from teachers and returnees before going.

S 9: The way classes are run there [in North America] is completely different from Japan. I heard from seniors in my school who had studied in the USA how classes were run there and which were the good classes, and I was very glad that I knew that.

S 8: I think it's a good idea to decide beforehand to some extent what you are going to study and check with your advisor [*sodan-*

yaku] that the course you want to take does exist, and the sort of classes they'll be running for that course. You need to have made something of a plan. [. . .] The universities overseas have so many classes. Unless you have made some kind of plan, you won't know what you are doing. If possible, make a plan, and then you won't have so much fuss after you arrive.

4. Bring dictionaries and Japanese texts related to your subjects.

S 10: I took classes in English literature, and I thought it would be good to understand the material in advance, so if you take the Japanese translation [of a work] to class, it's extremely helpful. . . . if you know what books you are going to study beforehand, you can take the translations with you. [. . .] I had thought beforehand which classes I wanted to take, so I took with me some reference books etc. related to those subjects. Some specialist terms in English don't appear in the dictionary, so I took some [Japanese] textbooks in those special subjects, and I was glad I could follow the classes smoothly.

S 3: I had given some thought beforehand to what classes I wanted to take, and I took some Japanese reference books on those subjects with me. There are some special terms in English that don't appear in the dictionaries, and as I had some textbooks on those subjects, I think that's why the classes went more smoothly for me. The other advice I would give is to take a compact computer CD-ROM dictionary, because there's a lot of reading, and if you use an ordinary dictionary, it takes a very long time. But with a CD-ROM dictionary, you can complete the preparations for class surprisingly quickly. Also, if I had taken a laptop computer with Japanese language software installed, I could have accessed Japanese web pages [from the US].

5. Make use of university orientations, both those for general students and those offered especially for international students.

S 8: They had a sort of Freshmen camp in the college with a lot of orientation sessions, so although I was a third year student, I went to as many of the Freshman orientations as I could. It was a great chance to make friends, native speaker friends. [. . .] I'd recommend making the effort and taking part if you have such an opportunity.

S 7: In America there are a lot of students who have graduated

from university or high school and taken a job and then returned to college. There was an effort to make a special orientation for those types of people. I think it's a very good idea to choose a university that can provide you with that sort of special attention.

6. Choose classes/subjects carefully and don't take too many classes.

Some of the interviewees' previous comments have already given advice about how to choose subjects for study once in a North American university, including the importance of having an overall goal, planning with one's Japanese academic advisor, and learning about the curriculum in general and about specific classes at the target institution from students who have already studied there. In addition to these points, returnees have suggested a pre-registration meeting with course instructors, choosing subjects that are already familiar, choosing smaller size classes, and exploiting the flexibility of the North American curriculum to take a wide range of courses, including some just for fun. Moreover, international students should be careful not to take on too heavy a class load in their enthusiasm.

S 2 : I found out what sort of options I had. There were large, lecture type classes, but I decided not to take that sort of class, but to choose as far as possible the smaller classes. [. . .] I think it's better to avoid too many lecture classes. [. . .] The first meeting of many of the classes is an orientation type of lecture that touches on everything

If students want to do more of their own special subject, then it's good to choose the classes that mostly third and fourth year students take. They're discussion type classes in small groups, so you get to know your classmates well, you understand the teachers, and the teachers understand your situation.

S 3 : My advice about classes is first of all to choose the ones you know something about. If you go to classes in subjects you know absolutely nothing about, but that look interesting because you've never studied that subject before, it won't be simply a problem of not being able to follow the class. You'll be in a situation where you understand *nothing* at all, and *everything's* in English. So initially, you should start off with classes that give you a foundation in the subject or some preparation. Then you can branch out to other classes.

S 7 : I think that you can only put in all the effort if you funda-

mentally like the material. Of course you also have to think what [classes] will be useful for your future, but basically I think you should consider what you would most enjoy studying.

S 8 : One instructor was called my Academic Advisor, and at the beginning of the semester, the academic advisor recommended starting with easy classes because my English wasn't so good. I think that's very important. I took art and music, lots of classes that weren't related to English or language.

S 3 : Once the second semester started, I felt much more relaxed, both physically and mentally. [. . .] I then got overconfident and took on too many classes. I wasn't able to get through all the preparation, . . . so it became a struggle once again.

S 4 : Since I put my study first, I took too many classes. [. . .] I think before you decide which classes to take, you should go to talk to the teachers, explain you're a foreign student, and discuss what you want to do. If you go and talk to them, you'll feel reassured that they understand your situation.

The comments above about getting to know one's instructors will be expanded upon in the next two sub-sections.

7. Identify yourself as a foreign student to your instructors and to fellow students and university staff.

In multi-ethnic countries like the USA and Canada, it's not immediately obvious who is a native or a citizen of the country, and who is a visitor or an international student. Japanese friends of mine laughingly recount being asked for directions by an American while visiting San Francisco because the Americans could not readily identify the Japanese as "foreigners." Because North American countries do not have the ethnic homogeneity of Japan, international students may easily be mistaken for Canadians or Americans by their university instructors, staff members and classmates unless the Japanese make an effort to clarify their status. Therefore it's wise for international students to do a kind of *nemawashi* (preparing the ground) with their instructors ; perhaps this kind of approach comes naturally to Japanese because of their cultural background.

Instructors and staff will usually make allowances for international students' special needs if they are aware of the situation. Also international students may feel more like speaking out in class if they know their classmates understand their background and potential

limitations.

S 1 : The teachers weren't aware that I was a foreign student until I actually went myself and told them. It left a strong impression on me that I had to ask if I wanted some help. (*Note : see point #11*) [. . .] There were a lot of Japanese-American students at the college, so most of the teachers either didn't know that English was my second language, or they weren't concerned about me and they thought I was fluent in English. When I told them, many were surprised. . . . If I went to see the teacher before or after class, they would remember me and come and see if I was okay during the class.

S 4 : I always went to see the teachers at the beginning [of the semester] to explain that I was an overseas student, and that was reassuring. As long as your teachers understand your situation, I think it's all right [in class].

S 6 : There was the English handicap ; my teacher spoke fast and I couldn't keep up. But every class, I tried to let him know that I was a Japanese student studying abroad, and every time after finishing the class, I went to the teacher and got him to teach privately. He was very kind and seemed very enthusiastic in his teaching, too.

S 5 : When you tell your professor and others that you're an international student, they'll naturally show the understanding that you are handicapped by English, but more than that, by showing the attitude of, "If you have a question, I'll help you."

S 2 : On the day of the first class, I always introduced myself to the instructor, saying something like, "I'm an exchange student. I have some difficulty with the language, but I chose this class because I'm interested in it, and I'll try hard. If there's something I'm not sure about, could you please explain it?" So after the class, if there was something I didn't understand, I used to go straight to see the teacher. The American teachers were extremely kind in explaining things to me, and that way I made up for my language difficulties.

S 9 : When classes started, I talked to the teachers . . . and I said things like "I'm Japanese" so that they would understand, . . . and by keeping in steady contact with them, if I had some problem or if there was something I didn't understand, I asked the teacher,

though you can ask friends, too. By actually presenting myself to the teachers, I managed the classes.

S 4 : Even when you register for classes, it's better for you to go and see teachers in charge so as to talk face to face, rather than just going to the registrar's office.

These comments lead into the next piece of advice, which is to get to know the instructors and use them as resources.

8. Make regular contact with your professors and teaching assistants through office hours, email, etc.

The Japanese student interviewees found that North American university professors and teaching assistants were generally very willing to help them and would often make allowances for the special situation of international students. Students found it helpful to talk to instructors after class and to visit them during office hours. Getting to know the instructors and using them as a resource was a strategy that nearly every interviewee suggested.

S 9 : I got some advice from the teachers, and in addition, some teachers would actively ask how I was doing. So I think regularly going to see your teachers is a good idea. [. . .] My English teacher had a lot of international students, and told us to come and talk anytime. That teacher was also interested in Japan, . . . so we had some contact outside the classroom. . . . In my case, by going to see the teachers all the time, I tried to make the classes go well.

S 11 : I had a personal appointment after the class with the teacher of each class and asked questions, consulting about the lessons and so on. [. . .] Assignments or reports were terribly hard but had to be done. Thus you need to ask the teachers or friends for help ; you should know this. . . . don't try to do it just by yourself, but instead ask help from your teachers and friends. I think that's the best way.

S 3 : If there was something I didn't understand, I went to ask the teachers. Then after I went home, if there was some problem that came up, . . . I would send an email message to the teacher, and most of the time I'd get a reply within about two or three days. So my life there was based on the precept, "If you don't understand, ask." (*Note : see point #11 for more comments in this vein*).

S 7 : It's good to get on personal terms with the teacher, and then you'll want to listen to what the teacher has to say.

S 5 : I went to teaching assistants' rooms several times to ask them to teach unclear points to me personally. There were teaching assistants for each class, and students could go to their rooms during office hours. [. . .] If you appeal, in a good way, that you are an international student and you are handicapped by this and that but want to try, then they will actually help you and you must take advantage of the people around you. Friends, T. A.'s and professors are around you ; utilize these resources as much as you can and make something out of this.

S 9 : In the fall semester when I took English, the teacher had a sort of assistant instructor who helped the international students with any problems. She was a Thai student . . . and she understood the problems I had as an international student. . . .

9. Ask for extra credit work.

S 1 : Because I often couldn't get enough points, no matter how hard I studied, I always went to ask if they [the instructors] would give me extra credit. Some teachers said that although I had a language handicap, they couldn't do that because it would be unfair. With those teachers I went again and again to ask them what would be on the test, and somehow I managed to pass. It was my first experience of life overseas, so if I explained all that in detail, a lot of the teachers helped me by letting me submit [extra credit] reports.

S 9 : I gradually got used to the toughness of my situation, . . . but my marks went on being low. When I got a bad mark, I went to see the teacher again. In a sense, I got to be very pushy, and some teachers would say things like, "Are you back again?" But when I said, "I want the credit, so I need some help," . . . many of the teachers gave me some help. [. . .] A lot of teachers were extremely kind.

10. Use the writing center and other academic support systems, such as tutoring services, student to student mentoring systems, and language or culture exchanges, as well as getting advice from classmates and friends.

S 10 : There was a Writing Center and I used it as much as I could, and I learned the American way of writing reports there.

S 8 : . . . they have what's called a Writing Center. They have a lot of international students whose written English is not up to that of native English speakers, so at the Writing Center, you could have your papers checked by American students before submitting them. . . . [that] meant that you could submit papers in a more natural English. So where universities have such a service, I'd advise completing your paper a few days before the deadline and having it checked first, rather than working on it by yourself right up to the deadline.

S 9 : [The Writing Center at "C University"] wasn't just for international students like us, but for American students as well. They would check the content, and whether you had a proper structure, with introduction, body and conclusion. So it wasn't so much to check grammar but rather to make sure that your work was properly organized. [. . .] If there is some facility where you can go to have your papers checked, you should definitely use it on a regular basis.

S 11 : There was a person [like a tutor] who used to teach at the university, and I visited him every week for an hour or so, and asked him questions about the ongoing assignments. Besides that, I used to ask questions of native speaker friends about reports and about some sentences I couldn't understand.

S 6 : . . . by chance there was also a postgraduate student in my class and luckily he tutored me privately. I had to make desperate efforts, but I had a fulfilling life.

S 10 : There were some students who were interested in Japan, so I taught them Japanese. In return for my teaching Japanese, they would take a look at my papers for me. Also other American friends I was close to corrected my papers.

S 3 : At ["B University"] they had very cheap English lessons taught by volunteers who were studying how to teach English as a foreign language. . . . they were in fact teachers and a little older than us students. They helped us in all sorts of things, not only with problems with the language.

S 2 : There was an office for the international program, and they assigned American students to the international students to help us if we had problems. It was like having an advisor, and I could email or telephone, and ask advice, so I had someone I could eas-

ily turn to.

S 9: I didn't know how to pick up points through my reading, and I found that out through my roommate and the International Office. I went to ask them a lot of things.

Most universities also offer a counseling service, which might be able to help students who are dealing with severe culture shock, but this resource was not mentioned by the interviewees.

Although all the resources listed in above are available to students on request, students must initiate the process, which may require a mental shift for those brought up outside of North American culture.

11. Ask for help and be assertive if you wish to succeed.

Japanese studying in North America quickly discover that the culture expects and rewards assertiveness and initiative. Interviewees remarked again and again that they had to speak out and make their needs known to others in America, otherwise they would get no help. They seemed surprised at this because it is in marked contrast to Japanese society, where people are supposed to intuit the needs of others without those needs having to be expressed directly. However, in America the saying is, "The squeaky wheel gets the grease." Assertiveness is also necessary for speaking out in the classroom and expressing one's opinion.

S 1: In Japan, people notice, so they know when someone's having difficulties. The place I went to, I was often the only foreign student. Although everyone knew I was from overseas and stared at me, no one spoke to me. So I plucked up courage and said, "I've just arrived and this is my first semester. I can't understand, so would you help me?" Then they were all very happy to help me. So it was a big shock for me to discover that unless you work at it, no one does anything for you. In Japan, there's always someone who picks up on the fact that you're having difficulty, and they speak to you, but that never happened in America.

S 6: If you want to take advantage of people around you, then first of all you have to start actively. Nobody will give you the necessary help if you don't try first, and in America the more you try, the more people around you will help. All the responsibility for action is on you, and this is not only for study, but for everything you start. Otherwise nothing will get started, I think.

S 4 : I was poor at speaking on the phone, [because] I didn't have much confidence in my English, so I had to go in person and see people in order to talk. I think it is important for you to go in person to school offices in order to talk with those concerned. [. . .] My experiences taught me that problems could be solved through such efforts. I have a feeling that such face to face communication will turn out to have good results in America more often than in Japan.

12. Speak out and speak English.

Interviewees remarked that in cross-cultural communication, being open and outgoing is a key attitude for success. They also warned of the danger of the urge to withdraw that sometimes affects students after two or three months in a foreign country.

S 4 : I believe it is better to try to speak as much as you can. In my case, sometimes I kept silent because I was afraid I might lose face if I said something strange. However, now I think I should have spoken out on everything more often, even though it might have been off the point or strange sounding. I think your willingness to talk with American people is more necessary than English language ability itself. I hesitated to speak out among Americans. However, I saw many foreign students whose English abilities were not as good as mine speaking a lot with American people, so it seems to me that language ability is not so important as you might expect. For instance, a Japanese friend of mine whose score on the TOEFL was really low was able to have good human relationships with the people there because of a willingness . . . to make jokes. I believe even those with poor speaking ability will be able to have good communication with Americans with an attitude like that of my friend.

S 10 : In class, you're afraid people will think you're stupid if you speak out, or you wonder whether you'll be able to ask your questions properly because it's in English. [. . .] Then I realized it was okay to ask. I realized I should ask more questions, and I'd probably be asking the questions the American students want to ask. I don't think I should be timid because I'm an overseas student. Quite the contrary ; it's okay because I am a foreign student.

S 7 : However difficult you find it, you should speak in [English] with the resources you have acquired. It's okay to keep using a

dictionary. People who struggle like that will be more favorably regarded by the local people around them.

In interview material not quoted here, some students warned of the dangers of getting too involved with a Japanese group while studying abroad. Although a group of Japanese friends may cushion the effects of culture shock, over-dependence on such a group can also prevent international students from forming bonds in the host culture and improving their language skills.

13. Get to know roommates or students in your classes and get help from them.

S 8 : At the beginning, I found it hard to take notes. . . . we were studying things in English that I would not even understand in Japanese. Therefore, at the end of class I used ask an approachable-looking student to lend me his or her notes, and also after every class I used to go to the teacher's room and ask questions.

S 1 : There were students who were sitting close to my seat, who'd say "Hi!" to me when we met, and I thought it would probably be okay if I spoke to them. So after the class I'd catch up with them and say something, and ask them for help.

S 3 : At the beginning, I used to get my roommate to help me by asking what the reading passages were saying. But gradually I got used to it. . . .

14. Get permission to tape record your teachers' lectures.

S 3 : I used to take a small tape recorder to class and record the lecture.

S 6 : I tried to read the textbooks beforehand, but I could not understand the class just from reading the textbooks. So I brought a cassette recorder to class in order to record the lecture, . . . and I listened to the lecture again after class while reading the textbooks. This was very helpful.

S 7 : I used to record classes on a cassette tape recorder not so much because they were difficult, because they were classes that I was interested in and I particularly liked the teacher and the material. Of course you have to get the teacher's approval each time. [. . .] Then after class I would use the tape to fill out the notes I'd taken in class, and I found it a great help.

S 10 : I was very concerned about my listening ability, so I was

very afraid that I might miss something the teacher said in class. I bought a tape recorder and asked the teachers if I could record the classes.

15. Learn to skim and scan readings.

S 2 : There was always a vast amount of reading, and that was very tough until I learned the trick of scanning. If you translate every word into Japanese to understand it as you read, you'll absolutely never keep up. In the first semester, I was hardly able to read the English as English, and skim through it to pick up the main points. Only after the second semester started did I realize how tough reading had been before.

S 9 : I didn't know how to pick up points from my reading, and I found that out through my roommate in America, and the International Office.

16. Adjust your expectations about classes, grades etc.

S 1 : There's a big gap in the level of the classes. Obviously, you're not going to be able to do well, and you feel shocked when you see your marks, but you have to keep in mind that you've come from a different country.

17. Engage in activities other than study (music, social life, etc.).

S 6 : From the viewpoint of intercultural learning, going out is also important. Not only studying in class, but going out with friends would be good.

S 4 : I guess I could have done extracurricular activities instead of just studying. I put my studies first. . . . Now I think I should have done more activities not related to study even though I would have had to give up some of my classes in order to do that.

S 11 : If I could have had more chances to play music, play guitar, that would have been better. But I also think that I did everything I could at that time. As you know, because of classes and assignments, time was limited, and if I think about that now, I can say that I would have preferred to use more time for [music].

S 10 : I was extremely tense throughout the first semester because I didn't know what to expect and classes were pretty tough from the start. I took a lot of classes and had no free time to go out anywhere to have fun, and hardly made any American friends in the first semester. So in the second semester I decided to relax a bit because I'd worked so hard in the first. . . . instead, I went

out more. Because of that, during the second semester, my speaking ability improved quite a lot.

S 7: Don't focus all the time on the tough aspects, but try to enjoy your studies as much as you can, and then I believe you'll have a very memorable stay overseas.

18. Be determined to succeed.

S 1: If you keep at it, you can receive some help, and you can get information. I think it's most important to act from your own will and determination.

S 3: I thought I had to be a hard worker . . . I never felt so lonely that I could not study.

S 9: I was only going to be there for a limited time, so I thought I'd spend my time well. There was that sort of determination in me. I think it's important to go with that sort of ambitious feeling, that determination.

19. Be flexible. This is one of the key qualities for success in intercultural communication and in any new situation.

S 8: The classes are really tough. I think at first people suffer from that gap, but gradually in that situation, you have to find our own way through with the abilities you have in yourself to adapt to the circumstances. Being nimble enough to adapt your lifestyle there is, I think, something you need for overseas study. . . . I hope when [overseas students] get to America. . . , they won't give up but will be flexible enough to lead fulfilling lives as overseas students.

Conclusion : the Benefits of Study Abroad

Interviews with eleven students who studied in North American universities elicited a wealth of insights into the many differences between the academic life in their home country of Japan and in the host culture. Through their own experiences and with the help of others, including instructors, advisors, volunteer tutors, international program staff, and fellow students, the Japanese *ryugakusei* developed a wide set of strategies for successful adjustment to academic life in North America. Future study abroad students can benefit from the experiences and insights of the interviewees who contributed to this research project.

In closing, here are the thoughts of two of the interviewees about

what their study abroad experience meant and how it changed them.

S 4 : I could have confidence in my learning abilities : for instance, when something I said during class had an influence on the people there, which then created a new topic for discussion ; when I said something important in class ; and when I got high marks in my studies. I was relieved to know I could compete with other students from around the world. [. . .] Without experiencing this kind of trip as an undergraduate student, I could not have the courage to go to graduate school in the States or to work overseas. But now that I have confidence in myself, I think I have more choices for my future.

S 11 : Probably it's a kind of confidence that I spent a year in a place where only English is used and I went to the university and studied. . . . I could say that something has surely changed inside of me.

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