Improving the Global Tourism Course Curriculum with Regard to Study Abroad Preparation:
Initial Observations on One Student’s Experience at a Dutch University

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Abstract
This paper presents initial observations on how the Global Tourism Course (GT) curriculum at Nagasaki International University can be improved with regard to preparing students to study abroad. The information is based on the experience of one student who is at the time of writing currently studying tourism-related courses in English at a Dutch university. The authors present information about the initial two-months of this student’s study abroad and how this will guide the authors’ upcoming research visit to the Netherlands later in the school year.

Key words
study abroad, curriculum, English as a foreign language, active learning

1. Introduction
With increasing globalization, study abroad is becoming a more common option for university students. Furthermore, international experience is considered an important component of mastering a foreign language and developing intercultural skills. Preparing students for this can be challenging. To
have a successful experience, students need to understand both the language and local cultural norms (Kruse and Brubaker, 2007). As such, it is beneficial for faculty and staff to be acquainted with the educational environments and expectations of the places where students study abroad.

In 2012, our university began an English-intensive specialization tract within the Department of International Tourism called the Global Tourism (GT) course. The course is open to all incoming students in the department. One requirement of the course is that students must study abroad at a university in an English speaking country in the second semester of the second year. Leading up to this point, students engage in three semesters of intensive preparatory English study.

In 2014, our university began an academic exchange partnership with a university of applied science in the Netherlands which offers courses in the areas of tourism, leisure, and hotel management. As the programs are offered in English, it is a great opportunity for Japanese students majoring in tourism to study content courses in an international learning environment. However, the program presents unique challenges for our students in terms of the language level as well as style and content of learning. This raises several questions. How prepared are our students to study there? What can we learn from studying their curriculum to make our program more effective? What can we do to better prepare students who wish to study at that university specifically?

This preliminary study is a first step to begin to answer those questions. The purpose is to lay the groundwork for an upcoming research visit to the Dutch university during which time more information will be gathered about their style of education. In this paper, we will introduce the structure of the GT course, focusing on the pre-study abroad preparatory curriculum. Following this, initial findings of one student’s experience studying Hotel Management at the university in the Netherlands will be discussed. The paper concludes with ideas of possible areas of further investigation during our upcoming research trip and possible directions for considering curriculum improvement.

2. Global Tourism Course

The GT course is a four-year specialization tract situated in the Department of International Tourism, Faculty of Human and Social Studies at our university. Students in GT undertake intensive English training, which is followed by studying abroad as a foreign exchange student. After this, students take upper-level tourism classes conducted in English or Japanese. In the final year, there is the option for students to complete their undergraduate thesis in English. Throughout the course of study, students’ English level is tracked by using the CASEC test. This is an English proficiency test developed by the STEP EIKEN Corporation. It provides several types of scores, including a TOEIC equivalency score.

The curriculum of the first three semesters of the GT course has been designed to help students develop the language and academic skills necessary to have a successful study abroad experience. Each semester builds on the previous one. The first semester introduces the basic principles of active communication in English. In the second semester, greater emphasis is placed on develop-
ing English for academic purposes and preparing for the IELTS. In the third semester, students are introduced to basic research methods while tackling more advanced academic topics. In addition to the goals of each class, a general goal during the first three semesters is for students to improve their TOEIC score by 50 points per semester as measured by the CASEC.

The curriculum consists of a set of four required classes: Writing Skills I–III, Reading Skills I–III, Practical English I A–III A, and Practical English I B–III B. Classes are held twice a week for 90 minutes, except Practical English III A and III B which are held once a week. Each class has its own specific objectives which increase in complexity over the course of three semesters. Moreover, students are provided opportunities to apply their skills through active learning and project-based learning assignments.

The Writing Skills class begins with the fundamentals of English composition and culminates in an academic research paper. In the first semester, students are guided through the basics of composing a five-paragraph essay about their personal experiences. Emphasis is placed on forming coherent ideas and correctly formatting text on the computer. In the second semester, students focus on topics related to the IELTS writing tasks. Greater emphasis is placed on summarizing information and creating strong arguments about academic topics. In-class and out of class writing are used to balance fluency with accuracy. In the final semester, students learn the basics of research writing, such as using outside sources, citation techniques, and avoiding plagiarism. In addition to learning academic writing, students also keep a blog to which they must post three times a week. The blog allows students to develop writing fluency and express their ideas in a freeform way.

The Reading Skills class balances academic reading skills with reading for fluency and pleasure through an extensive reading program. In class, students develop academic reading skills, such as understanding text structure, identifying main and supporting ideas, and vocabulary training. Topics revolve around issues in Japanese society and increase in length and complexity each semester. Outside class, students are required to read graded readers. Extensive reading has been shown to have a positive effect on reading speed, reading fluency and vocabulary development (Nation, 2009).

Practical English A focuses on speaking, listening, small group work, and presentations. Every week, students use an online learning tool to complete video-based assignments. These consist of watching short online videos, learning vocabulary and expressions, speaking lines from the videos with correct pronunciation, then completing an online comprehension quiz. Moreover once a week for 20 minutes, students discuss the content of one of the videos via Skype with a personal online tutor. Another way in which speaking skills are developed is through a weekly video journal. GT course teachers provide feedback regarding fluency, grammar and pronunciation. This is also an effective way to track speaking ability, which would otherwise be an ethereal skill. Presentations take the form of poster and slideshow presentations, role-plays, and video projects which often require students to cooperate or provide constructive feedback to each other. Empha-
sis is placed on clearly and confidently presenting information through a balance of visual, oral, and physical (e.g. body language) forms of communication. Finally, group discussions about academic and societal topics occur often in the third semester. Students are encouraged to openly consider and contribute opinions amongst the group.

Practical English B focuses on academic norms and skills, debate, virtual exchange, and vocabulary training. In terms of academic norms, students are exposed to the standards and expectations of the universities in which students are likely to study abroad. Thus, we train students on some of these soft academic skills (based on our experience) that our students have not internalized fully before entering university: day planner and notebook management, in-class note taking, making use of teacher feedback, giving peer feedback, active and timely communication with the teacher, and speaking up during class. In terms of hard academic skills, students are instructed in the process of debate and how to form an argument. The third semester, revolves around research methods which are used to support writing and presentation projects in other classes. Through online virtual exchange, our students are grouped with students from universities in the USA, UK, and Columbia. They must overcome the obstacles of language, culture, time, and distance to share ideas and complete projects together. Finally, sustained vocabulary training also occurs in this class to further develop students’ language and communication skills.

Students who study abroad have the option of two types of programs: English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or academic. Students in the academic program take regular classes alongside local students at their host institution so long as they meet the English language requirement. Students who do not meet the language requirements of their host institution may enroll in the host university’s pre-sessional EFL program.

This study focuses on one GT student who is (at the time of writing) currently studying in an academic program at a university in the Netherlands for one semester. The student achieved a score of IELTS 5.5 in February of 2016. Although the Dutch university recommends a score of IELTS 6.0 (or CEFR B2) for students to enter into the academic program, they agreed to accept our student since the student still had six months and one more semester of the GT program to complete before leaving Japan. Through gaining a general understanding of this student’s experience it is hoped that we can identify aspects about the style of education which can lead to improvements to the GT curriculum for preparing students to study abroad in an academic environment. The research conducted in this study has been conducted in accordance with the standards of, and approved by, the Research Ethics Committee at Nagasaki International University.

3. Initial Observations

Since entering the program in the Netherlands, information from the student has been gathered in three ways: monthly reports, a questionnaire, and interview. The monthly reports are an official requirement for all students who study abroad and are submitted to our university’s International Center. At the time of writing, three monthly reports had been received. The questionnaire was administered in early November, roughly two
months after the student began the program. The interview was conducted via Skype in the middle of November.

During the interview, the student reported ways in which the GT program had prepared them for study abroad in an academic course in the Netherlands. One such area was small group work. Each class in the Netherlands requires some element of group discussion or project work. The student felt they had been able to participate sufficiently, citing some specific activities in the Practical English IIIA course. One activity was TED Talks discussions, in which students watched a video for homework and discussed it during the following class. Another activity was the group academic research presentation, in which students worked together to research a topic and present it in English. By observing small group work and speaking with teachers in the Netherlands, we hope to learn about how we can better prepare students in the future.

Another helpful aspect that the student mentioned about the GT curriculum was writing. In the Netherlands, the student has been required to write essays and reports, both for homework and in class. These assignments must incorporate research and properly formatted citations. The GT writing classes progressed toward developing these exact skills over the course of three semesters prior to student leaving for study abroad. Nevertheless, the student has experienced some problems with writing full length research papers which require summarizing and discussing ideas at length. We hope to learn more about what is required of students during our visit and solidify the curriculum of our writing class.

Finally, the student described extensive reading, vocabulary, and self-study skills as important aspects of being prepared to study abroad. The student mentioned that over three semesters in the GT reading class, their reading speed and fluency improved. The result is that they are now able to handle reading larger amounts of texts for academic study. During our visit, we hope to learn more about the amount and nature of required reading at the Dutch university. In the GT course, academic texts were quite short (only a few pages) whereas graded readers were usually quite long. Thus it appears that the student felt comfortable reading assigned academic readings in textbooks and handouts. Vocabulary and self-study were covered in the Practical English B classes. Although the student acknowledged that their vocabulary level is still below that of their peers, the student believed that the vocabulary acquired during the GT course has benefited them. Moreover, homework assignments in the student’s Business English class in the Netherlands have consisted of self-study of grammar and vocabulary. Therefore, the student has found these to be no problem. In the Practical English B class, the teachers have made a special point to find ways to improve students’ vocabulary study skills. This area is of great interest to teachers in the GT course.

There are some aspects of the study abroad program which have been quite challenging for the student which we also wish to learn more about. The student disagreed somewhat that they had sufficient English language ability to meet the course demands. The student mentioned specifically that the pace of the classes was beyond the student’s
level, making it difficult to follow and understand. Furthermore, the student also disagreed somewhat that they possessed sufficient subject knowledge upon entering the course. Since students in the GT course have a large part of their schedule devoted to classes in English, opportunities to study tourism-related courses are limited until after they have returned from study abroad. Despite these challenges, the student agreed that they had able to participate in class activities in the Netherlands. Originally, the student hoped to enroll in the hotel management program in the Netherlands. However, after attending the first two weeks of classes which were required for that program, the student deemed them to be too difficult. In particular, the student mentioned that the level of English and speed of the classes made them difficult to follow. Moreover, the content of the classes was not in line with the student’s interests. Besides some knowledge of economics, it was reported that the content of some classes related to hotel management, such as Operations Management, was unfamiliar to the student.

Upon visiting the university, our final goal is to better understand the curriculum and how future students might be better prepared. We intend to do this by discussing the various program options available to our students with the faculty and staff. This will consist of finding information about course content and any relevant pre-required knowledge or experience. Another aspect is to gain a general understanding of the most pertinent linguistic and academic skills required of exchange students in the academic program.

References