

L2 Learning Motivation of Japanese High School Students Experiencing Study Abroad during COVID-19 -from the Perspective of Motivational Flow-

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1. Introduction

According to the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports Science & Technology (MEXT, 2017), more than 70% of Japanese high school students mentioned that one particular reason why they want to study abroad is to improve their command of a second language (L2). Pinar (2016) summarized the relations regarding L2 learning and study abroad across the globe and different time settings since the 19th century and stated that study abroad gives students the opportunities to immerse themselves into the L2 environment more so than language classes. However, the Japanese Student Services Organization (JASSO, 2019) reported “intercultural understanding” and “having a wide perspective” accounted for 30% of their study abroad gains, i.e., “language improvement” was, surprisingly, not necessarily their biggest improvement. The data does not necessarily reflect this proposition to the extent anticipated. In studying any foreign language, motivation to learn is often a key issue, and one worthy of investigation in the context of L2 learning.

Additionally, since January 2020 when the COVID-19 began to spread, it has had the greatest impact on study abroad in recent history. Students who studied abroad in various countries during this period were forced to return to their home countries amid their dreams. In the pandemic, students who studied abroad at universities were able to earn credits by taking online courses, while the situation for high school students from Japan who studied abroad has not been clarified a lot.

Based on interviews with high school students who encountered the COVID-19 while studying abroad, this paper summarizes the long-term changes in their motivation for language learning based on Directed Motivational Currents (DMC), including the presence or absence of each component of DMC, suggestions for a new model of study abroad for high school students based on these findings, and future needs for students who think of study abroad after pandemic.

2. L2 learning motivation research regarding study abroad from Japan

In Japan, due to globalization and English education curriculum changes, it has

shown a significant increase in the number of both incoming and outgoing students in schools of Japan. One of the researches provided a general process of decision making how Japanese high school students decide to study abroad in the US (Iwamoto, 2017). The process by which high school students decide to participate in an exchange program to the US is based on (1) international career vision and (2) western-oriented vision. The international career vision is triggered by the respect of those who have studied abroad, and high school students consider studying abroad to take the first step into an international career themselves. As the first step to an international career, they consider learning English to be the biggest priority. The group of western-oriented vision is Japanese high school students who prefer western English-speaking countries and who wish they could spend some of their high school life in western English-speaking countries based on their past positive experiences regarding western culture.

Moreover, according to Koyanagi (2002), it was found that there are more varieties of study abroad purposes among Japanese people staying in Melbourne Australia, which include the Academic & Career model, Drop-out model, Curiosity model, and Escape model. As for the Academic & Career model, those who strongly want to improve their English or focus on what they want to study (e.g., international relations, economics, and law) come to this group. The Drop-out model is the case for those who could not do well in the Japanese education system as their relatives (i.e., parents) wish them to do so, which is strongly impacted by parental support. The Curiosity model is those who just have challenging spirits or higher curiosity to the western lifestyle. Those who are in the Escape model rather want to escape from Japanese society and the age tends to be higher.

These studies show how Japanese students think of their careful choice of long-term study abroad considering all academic and career life. However, it has not yet been empirically studied how students who experience study abroad develop their motivation and continue their L2 learning.

2.1. L2 learning motivation framework: DMC

Researchers who are in the field of L2 learning motivational studies proposed a relatively new framework called a Directed Motivational Current (DMC). A DMC is defined as an “intense motivational pathway which occurs when a variety of time and context-related factors come together in an individual to prompt a firm decision to pursue a goal/vision which is considered personally significant, highly relevant to one’s desired identity and emotionally satisfying (Dörnyei et al., 2014, p. 27)”.

A DMC provides a “motivational drive which energizes long-term, sustained behavior (such as language learning), and through placing vision and goals as critical

central components within this construct, it offers real and practical motivational potential” (Muir & Dörnyei, 2013, p. 357). A DMC rather focuses on the flux of motivation and tries to account for the intense L2 learning motivation for a certain period (Muir & Dörnyei, 2013). Based on Japanese high school students’ study abroad condition, this method can find the results of whether students have aspects of a DMC or not. Five different characteristics consist of a DMC (Dörnyei et al., 2015), which are enumerated and extrapolated upon below. Explanations and examples for each component of a DMC are made based on Noguchi (2017) as shown in Table1.

Table 1

About components of DMC

(1) Specific and significant goals	Students who learn L2 within the DMC framework do so with specific goals. Studying L2 with ambition, whether that be for career development or personal fulfillment, can lead to strong motivation, which maintains stability in the long run. e.g., My dream is to become an international lawyer in Japan, and I wanted to study abroad to improve my English skills during my high school period.
(2) Identifiable triggering factors and launch	The DMC provides that long-term stability is triggered by a starting point – a purpose for which they desire to learn manifests. The importance of the trigger can define the significance of (1) Specific and significant goals. e.g., During my short-term study abroad, I had a hard time because I could not speak English very well. Thus, I decided to study abroad while I was a high school student.
(3) The structure of the process	Another essential factor of DMC is its flow and trajectory. When experiencing the flow of DMC, it has been found that personalities are strongly interconnected, which also can cause individual differences especially in terms of language skill development even if they are in the same environment. e.g., I joined a soccer club while I was studying abroad and made good friends by having a lot of conversations. I could not understand what my host family was saying, but eventually, it became easier and easier.
(4) Positive emotionality	The enjoyment of L2 study is also a critical factor in continuing students’ motivation in the DMC framework. e.g., During my study abroad, I was exposed to new words and phrases every day, and I really enjoyed learning English especially when I could use them.
(5) Attenuation and aftermath	When achieving a particular goal via DMC, L2 learners with DMC tend to “burn-out” and fail to maintain their motivation. It is also thought that “When a DMC is coming to an end, many students would benefit from finding ways to channel their highly individual original desires into more formalized learning structures.” (Dörnyei et al., 2015, p. 135) e.g., I was able to improve my English skills a lot and now I do not want to learn any complicated grammar because it is not necessary to have a real conversation.

Noguchi (2017) studied how Japanese EFL learners (Japanese junior high school students) can form DMCs while learning English, and what factors influence DMC's

experience. It was found that there are learners who could identify some Japanese junior high school students who experience DMCs. In addition, it was found that cross-cultural experiences in childhood and the presence or having a future dream had a significant effect on forming DMCs. In particular, being able to have a concrete image of a future in which they will be able to use English actively can be a strong impetus for their long-term English study. On the other hand, tests and examinations had significant effects on the decline of DMCs.

2.2. DMC in study abroad context

It is also possible for students who experience long-term study abroad to have DMCs to complete their study abroad (Muir & Dörnyei, 2013). In the field of L2 learning, a period of study abroad experience can become a prolonged-DMC thanks to such a structured learning process (Dörnyei et al., 2014). However, it should be noted that a DMC experience is relatively rare to happen due to various factors (i.e., curriculums, timetables, and exams) in the study abroad context (Muir, 2020). The foundation of the motivational process in study abroad involves initial preparation and staying in the L2 nation. When initial motivation can last long enough during study abroad, it may be effective to sustain individual motivation in the DMC framework. “While not all students may feel that they have the resources or support structures available to them to be able to do so, this indicates that for some students, such an opportunity may allow them to capitalize on the drive generated during their time spent in the host country and transform it into a DMC on arrival back home” (Muir, 2020, p. 375) i.e., even when they come back to their home country, this study abroad experience can be triggering factor to emerge another DMC-like experience.

3. Research questions

Research questions in this paper are as follows:

- Q1. Are the components of DMC observed among those who studied abroad during pandemic?
- Q2. How did the motivation to learn L2 change among students who studied abroad during the pandemic?
- Q3. What sort of motivation do Japanese students have for their study abroad?

At its core, the proposed research will clarify the future of study abroad from the crisis/pandemic.

3.1. Research subjects and methods

The interview was taken for eight students who went abroad during COVID-19 (Table 2). From the ethical point of view, the consent of participants has already taken.

The participants were all from the same boy's high school located in Kansai area of Japan. They are all from a course that incorporates at least one semester of study abroad into the high school curriculum. They sojourned abroad across the globe while using different study abroad programs. They were all supposed to study abroad for a year. However, due to COVID-19, they came back to Japan in March, 2020.

Table2

Participants who studied abroad during COVID-19

Participant	Grade	Which country (length of stay)	Types of Programs
A	11	Canada (Sept. 2019-Mar. 2020)	School Exchange program
B	11	Canada (Sept. 2019-Mar. 2020)	School Exchange program
C	11	Austria (Sept. 2019-Mar. 2020)	YFU
D	11	America (Sept. 2019-Mar. 2020)	YFU
E	11	Australia (Jan. 2020-Mar. 2020)	School Exchange program
F	12	Germany (Sept. 2019-Mar. 2020)	YFU
G	12	Germany (Sept. 2019-Mar. 2020)	YFU
H	12	Austria (Sept. 2019-Mar. 2020)	YFU

The interview for each participant was conducted in between December 2020 and January 2021. For this study, a 90-minute online (or phone) interview mainly regarding their trajectories of L2 learning motivation and study abroad experience for each participant were conducted. The whole interviews were recorded with an IC recorder or Zoom or other attached function. The whole interviews were fully transcribed in order to analyze their L2 learning motivation. By hearing their experiences, the scripts were all categorized based on the components of DMC in order to identify their motivational change.

4. Results of interview

From here, the results from interview are described based on the DMC framework. The content of interviews is used to mention key characteristics of DMCs. There are eight participants who studied abroad during COVID-19 as shown in Table 3.

Table3*DMC components among those who studied abroad during COVID-19*

Participant	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Specific and significant goals	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Identifiable triggering factors and launch	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Structure of the process	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-	-
Positive emotionality	✓	-	-	-	-	-	✓	✓
Attenuation and aftermath	-	-	-	✓	-	✓	-	-

✓: Included

-: Not included

4.1. Specific and significant goals

Many of them mentioned that one of the purposes of the study abroad was to improve their second language skills, especially English since they thought study abroad is advantageous for university entrance exams. The second frequent reason mentioned the most was the interest in foreign culture/western music. However, only Participant A in this group had a specific and significant goal.

「中学2年生のときから、A大学にいきたいなあっていうのがあって。そのためには、英語力をつけなければならないと思ってました...」 “From the second year of junior high school, I have wanted to go on to A University ...” (Translated by the author)

Although Participant A does not have a specific job which he wants to do, he has a clear goal to accomplish.

Since four participants went to non-English speaking countries, they remarked the reason why they decide to study there. It was found that the main incentives in these non-English speaking countries come from their intention. Since many Japanese high school students are interested in English-speaking areas, they do not want to do the same, but rather act differently. They intended to go abroad. However, Participant H mentioned that he had more interest in going to America, but he could not do so due to a lack of English skills. For the rest, they mentioned that general interest in overseas from his childhood, widening his horizon, and interest in being multilingual (German and English).

4.2. Identifiable triggering factors and launch

Since all participants pointed out their purpose of going abroad, all of the participants had a specific event that made them decide to study abroad. For example, Participant B had previous international experience.

「CISV という団体に小学生の頃から参加していました。11歳の頃から、異文化に興味関心があって将来は海外に留学したいと思っていました。」 “I participated in the activities of the Children's International Summer Villages (CISV) since elementary school. From the age of eleven, I had wanted to study abroad in the future.” (Translated by the author)

Participant A and Participant E also had short-term study abroad experiences, which made them have an interest in study abroad. Participant A mentioned that

「...実際に中学3年生の時にオーストラリアのパーズの方に夏休み2週間留学しまして。その時にそのオーストラリアっていわゆる多文化共生社会みたいなどこあるじゃないですか。そこでなんかすごい興味を持って...。」 “...I went to Perth, Australia for two weeks during summer vacation when I was in the third year of junior high school. Then, I started having a strong interest in such a multicultural society...” (Translated by the author)

Another participant mentioned his confidence in English as a triggering factor. Participant D mentioned that:

「僕はアメリカで生まれて、4歳までアメリカに住んでいたんですけど、留学前は英語を全く話せませんでした。ただ2人兄がいて、二人共中学生の時に英検1級に合格してて、家族の中で僕だけが英語を話せなかったことが、留学を志すきっかけになりました。」 “I was born in the U.S. and lived there until I was four years old, but I did not speak any English before study abroad. On the other hand, my two older brothers had passed the first level of the Eiken Test when they were in junior high school, and I was the only one who could not speak English in my family, which made me want to study abroad.” (Translated by the author)

For those who went to non-English speaking nations Germany or Austria, there were no significant triggering factors. However, they mentioned that they had an interest in study abroad while taking classes (Participant G and Participant H). Participant F was recommended by his English teacher to study abroad in the future when he was a junior high school student.

4.3. Structure of the process

To reflect on each learner's behavior during study abroad, their relationship with their host families and friends was asked. Simultaneously, their L2 learning experience during study abroad was asked. For those who studied abroad in both

English-speaking countries and non-English-speaking countries, at the first, it was difficult to get used to the class or new environment. For instance, Participant B explained about his lifestyle during his study abroad and how he was encouraged to use and to learn English.

「授業だけでなく、地域のボランティア活動やサークル活動にも参加しました。また、ブラジル人やイタリア人を中心に様々な国籍の人と仲良くなって、非英語圏の人と英語でコミュニケーションをとるなかで、英語学習へのモチベーションが上がりました。」“In addition to classes, I participated in local volunteer activities and club activities. I made good friends with people of many nationalities, especially Brazilians and Italians, and the communication in English with non-English speaking people motivated me to learn English.” (Translated by the author)

However, it is not always a positive experience. For example, Participant C described his dramatic change in L2 learning during his study abroad.

「最初は、留学中にドイツ語を勉強することにあまり乗り気じゃなかったんですね。英語は話せるから大丈夫だろうと思っていました。学校の英語の授業はある程度理解できたけど、言葉のレベルには全くついていけないって感じでした。元々、ドイツ語でもコミュニケーションは必要ないと思っていたんですけど、5ヶ月を過ぎたあたりから、ちょっと変わってきて、友達と話すのにドイツ語をちゃんと話せるようになったほうが良いなって思っ。授業だけじゃなくて、社会人向けのドイツ語補習校のようなどころにも通うようになりました。そしたら最後らへんとかホストファミリーとスラングを使いながら会話を楽しめるようになりました。」“At first, I was not very encouraged to learn German during study abroad. I thought it would be ok because I can speak English. Although I could understand some of the lessons in English at school, I felt like I could not really keep up with the level of the language at all. Originally, I didn't think I needed to communicate even in German, but that started changing around after five months. I realize I need to study the language to enrich my communication/language skills. In addition to classes, I started going to a kind of supplementary German language school for working people. Finally, I came to enjoy conversation with my host family with the use of some slang.” (Translated by the author)

Participant A and Participant D also mentioned that they try not to communicate with Japanese friends or even parents living in Japan. The purpose was that they tried not to use Japanese and not to reminisce about life in Japan. It was a self-made decision or told by a study abroad agency not to do it.

4.4. Positive emotionality

To understand participants' emotional state during study abroad, participants were asked to indicate their feelings about their life and study during study abroad. Overall, those who could sustain their positive emotion for L2 study in a whole study abroad period were only Participants A, Participant G, and Participant H.

Those who went English speaking countries and non-English-speaking countries, participants (except for Participant D) were not very afraid of their lives overseas at the beginning. Rather, they were more optimistic. Participant F mentioned that

「ドイツでドイツ語話せなくても、英語でなんとかなるでしょうみたいな感じだったんですよ」“If I don't speak German in Germany, I'll probably be fine if I speak English!” (Translated by the author)

Once they arrived at the host country, they mentioned they realized they have to stay there for a year. During their study abroad, for those who went English speaking countries, many of them indicated that conversation with friends/host family became more enjoyable. Participant A remarked that

「授業やホストファミリーと一緒に語学を学ぶことは、私にとってとても有意義なことでした。滞在中は、ホストファミリーとの関係も良好で、ラグビーのクラブチームにも参加し、6月にはカナダのある州の代表選手にも選ばれました。」“It was very meaningful for me to learn the language in class and with my host family. During my stay, I had a good relationship with my host family, and I also participated in a rugby club team and was selected as one of the representative players in one of the provinces of Canada in June.” (Translated by the author)

However, for those who went non-English speaking more students tackled several issues during study abroad. Many of them had a positive experience with their host family. However, a couple of participants had troubles with their host families.

For example, Participant F mentioned that

「最初のホストファミリーと喧嘩をしちゃったんですよ。なんかドイツでの生活に馴染めなくて、主に文化とか生活習慣に慣れることができなかった感じですね。実際海外に出た時、周りからあまり相手にされていない気がしました。」“I quarreled with my first host family. I was not able to adjust to life in Germany, mainly because I could not get used to the culture and lifestyle. When I went abroad, I felt like I wasn't really welcomed by the people around me.” (Translated by the author)

4.5. Attenuation and aftermath

All of them had to come back to Japan around March 2020 due to the pandemic. The host school or organization told them to do so. The participants told their feelings during this interview. Indeed, seven of them uttered that they actually did not feel they accomplished the program. Only Participant D and F mentioned that they were very satisfied with their programs. Participant D mentioned that:

「留学に関しては、もう良いかなって思ってます。帰ってきて振り返ってみると、やっぱり大変だったなあと思いました。英語力は十分ついたと思うし、帰ってきてから特に何もしていないです。入試のために IELTS だけ受けようと思っています。」 “As for study abroad, I don't think I need to do it anymore. When I came back, I thought it was too hard. I think my English skills have improved enough, and I haven't done anything special since I came back. I'm thinking of taking IELTS for the entrance exam.” (Translated by the author)

Another Participant F also mentioned a similar burn-out experience after study abroad. This needs consideration since this is rather talking about burn-out experience from study abroad. However, this is also interesting point to mention:

「今は英語とドイツ語を両方勉強するようにしていますね。これから先に留学したいかどうかは今はまだ正直考えられないですね。少し軽いトラウマみたいになっているので。(原因はホームステイ先)」 “Now I am trying to study both English and German. Whether I want to study abroad in the future or not, I honestly can't think about it right now. It is a bit like a trauma for me (due to host family issue).” (Translated by the author)

For those who left September, they could feel their language improvement to some extent however, for the one who went to Australia (Participant E), he was very shocked after coming back to Japan.

Participants except for him were still motivated for further studies for future university entrance exams. For example, Participant H mentioned that:

「帰国後は、大学受験のための勉強しか考えていませんでした。帰国後の進路を考えたとき、CA になりたいと思って、大学を調べて、B 大学に行きたいと思うようになりました。元々、英語はそれほど得意ではなかったんですけど、今はゼロからスタートして、入試のために英語を勉強しています。海外の大学にも留学して、英語力もアップさせたいと思っています。」 “After returning to Japan, I was only thinking about studying for the university entrance exam. When I thought about my career path after I came back, I

decided that I wanted to become a CA, so I looked into universities and decided that I wanted to go to B University. Originally, I was not that good at English, but now I am starting from scratch and studying English for the entrance exam. I would like to study abroad in university to improve my English skill as well.” (Translated by the author)

Many of them were willing to go to prestigious universities in Japan. Participant B mentioned he was interested in applying to universities in English-speaking countries.

Those who went to Canada had choices to take online classes after coming back to Japan.

Only Participant B tried to take the online class in this case. However, he had a time conflict due to jet lag. In many cases, he could not attend classes lot. As a result, he just received weekly assignments and submitted them every week. After a couple of weeks, he decided to take classes in a Japanese high school.

Many of those who studied abroad during COVID-19 still regret that they had to come back to Japan especially in terms of language learning, they wish they could finish their programs. Participant B remarked that:

「留学中のあと 3 カ月のところで英語力が伸びたなあとは感じたけど、もっと長くいればもっと伸びたと思っています。カナダでは、友達と外に出ていると罰金を取られるという事態に陥りました。最後に友達に会えずに帰らされたことがとても残念でした。」 “I felt that my English had improved in the last three months during study abroad, and I am sure that I could have improved even more if I had stayed longer. In Canada, I was also in a situation where I was fined once if I were being outside with my friends. I was very disappointed that I was forced to go home without seeing my friends at the end.” (Translated by the author)

However, at the same time, it was found that many of them are very eager to study abroad in the future as well. Every participant is willing to study at Japanese universities or overseas colleges in the future by making use of the study abroad experience. Consequently, their motivation for L2 study especially English study has not yet diminished.

5. Discussion

5.1. Discussion: DMC constructs found or not?

The occurrence of DMC in study abroad is likely to be possible under these

conditions. First of all, concerning (1) Specific and significant goals, it is possible to maintain a relatively stable motivation for language learning in study abroad by having not only general reasons for study abroad, such as language improvement and cross-cultural understanding but also individual dreams and significant goals. It is also believed that having a dream or a big goal will keep their motivation for language learning relatively stable. It is safe to say that this is the most important factor in the DMC experience. To further facilitate this, there are (2) Identifiable triggering factors and launch factors. To achieve (1) Specific and significant goals, the factors that led to the choice to study abroad for a long period in high school are also important in promoting their motivation to learn the language.

In terms of (3) Structure of the process, the motivation of the students to study L2 is greatly influenced by the environment in which they can feel the daily improvement of their language skills by interacting with the local students and host families. In (4) Positive emotionality, which is also directly related to study abroad life, it was found that it was important to pay attention to changes in human relationships, thoughts about language learning, and interactions with people in the study abroad environment, and to always maintain a positive attitude toward language learning.

Finally, regarding (5) Attenuation and aftermath after returning to Japan from studying abroad, it seems that it is relatively easy for Japanese high school students to shift their motivation for L2 study after returning to Japan because they continue their studies in preparation for the university entrance examination. This is also thought to be greatly influenced by the life during study abroad and the change in awareness of L2 study (mainly English study) in more academic situations after returning home.

5.2. Discussion: changes in motivations for studying L2 in COVID-19

In interviews many of those who went abroad mentioned that they were still motivated to study L2. Since they were back in Japan and had to start studying English considering university entrance exam, some of them showed their focus on English more.

They are eager to study abroad when they have any chances in order to improve their L2 skills. For those who went abroad during pandemic mentioned that due to COVID-19, they regretted that they could not complete their programs. Fortunately, they are still willing to study abroad in the future. Both of those who studied abroad during pandemic and before pandemic mentioned they thought that study abroad was a wonderful opportunity for them to experience a new world and to improve their L2 skills.

All participants who already experienced study abroad mentioned that they

would not agree with the online study abroad system for future high school students. “If I want to take classes in English, I can take them anytime. It is not just about the course, but I have to be surrounded by the actual L2 environment. I have to spend time by actually living there.” These points were indicated by participants commonly.

5.3. Discussion: variation in motivation classification for studying abroad in high school

The high school students who studied abroad for a long period can be mainly categorized into Academic & Career model and Curiosity model according to Koyanagi's (2002) categories. There are also two new types found.

In this case, there were four participants A, B, D, E who fit into the academic and career model. It is clear that many students strongly desire to improve their language skills, especially their English skills, when they study abroad, and that many of them want to improve their English skills to prepare for their future dreams or university entrance exams shortly.

Participant E was the only one who fit the Curiosity model. It seems that students who are interested in other cultures and consider studying abroad to satisfy their curiosity are relatively few in terms of long-term study abroad. On the other hand, when looking at the questionnaire, it was seen that more students are interested in studying abroad to broaden their horizons, to live in a foreign country, to experience different things, to make friends, and to understand different cultures.

In addition to this, there was a tendency among the students who did not go to English-speaking countries. They wanted to do something different from other students who generally go to English-speaking countries (Participant C and F). It seems possible to include “Anti-mainstream model” as a new category. On the other hand, there is a student who had originally planned to go to an English-speaking country but was unable to do so due to a lack of language skills (Participant H). This also can be another type of “Forced Dropout model” for Japanese high school students who study abroad.

6. Summary

This qualitative analysis revealed that there are individual differences regarding their level of motivation based on the components of DMC in the context of study abroad. In the entire process of study abroad, the author interviewed the students and measured the flux of their motivation to learn the language based on their experiences using the DMC. In addition, the author conducted a study of students who had to return to their home countries due to pandemic in an attempt to suggest the impact of such a pandemic. This is the first time in history that such a disaster has forced

students to return to their home countries as study abroad becomes more widespread. Despite this, all the participants who had studied abroad this time believed that the opportunity to study abroad would be back in the future, and they expressed their desire to some extent to continue to study abroad whenever they have the chance.

From this study, L2 learners who would like to study abroad in the future after this pandemic have to understand there is such a risk during their study abroad experience. This study reaffirmed the meaning and intention of study abroad in the pandemic. Based on this research, more students will be able to understand what it means to study abroad and what they want to learn, and that more people will be able to fully consider the option of study abroad.

7. Acknowledgements

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